

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

ECCV Submission

October 2019



The Voice of Multicultural Victoria

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Introduction

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) welcomes the opportunity to provide a Submission to the Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.

ECCV is the peak advocacy body for 240 member organisations, including ethnic and multicultural organisations, and eight regional ethnic community councils across Victoria. For over 40 years, we have been the link between multicultural communities, government and the wider community.

ECCV has a strong history in advocating for the rights of multicultural communities, informing industry practice and influencing Government on a range of policy issues including health, employment, cultural responsiveness, equitable access and the wellbeing of families and children.

We believe that it is important to focus on a variety of systemic, institutional and community perspectives, and intersections between them, in identifying the key barriers, showcase good practices and recommend areas of improvement that will lead to better educational and developmental outcomes for CALD children.

Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

In the process of compiling this submission, ECCV consulted with our member organisations and individual CALD families with children 0-8 years of age. Our key points were informed by six in-depth individual interviews with parents, and seven interviews (either face to face or by phone) with service providers, including one based in regional Victoria. We distributed an electronic survey which targeted CALD parents with children aged 0-8 and living in Victoria, and received 25 responses.

ECCV also actively contributed to the Victorian Council of Social Services' (VCOSS) stakeholder consultation regarding the Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities.

Key Findings

All families participating in consultations used some form of early childhood services. The majority of parents we spoke to were born outside Australia, and had children who were either born overseas or in Australia. Most spoke English well, and were already engaged in services.

For parents in our consultations, access to early childhood services was extremely important. They valued the sense of progress and development that they observed in their children. They also felt supported and appreciated the social aspect of being engaged in these services for themselves and their children.

Most parents commented on the complexity of the early childhood system in Australia. The system of childcare subsidies and other family payments administered through Centrelink was regarded as particularly difficult to navigate.

Whilst families of children who were born in Australia were linked to a maternal child health service at the time of birth of their child, families of children born overseas often did not access this service. Families who had their child born in Australia, but then moved to another area, did not necessarily follow up with getting re-connected with the maternal child health service for that area.

Some parents included in our consultations (in interviews and survey) mentioned feeling powerless, and being treated with disrespect or suspicion by some early childhood services. They often felt that they had not been actively listened to, and some thought that their child might have missed out on support that could have been accessed if communication had been more effective and appropriate.

Parents also identified many benefits of and positive experiences with early childhood services. Programs such as playgroups assisted many parents, especially mothers, to feel less isolated and develop bonds with other mothers and children. Migrant and refugee mothers established connections particularly with other migrant and refugee mothers, even when they spoke different languages or came from different countries. Language-specific playgroups worked better in some areas and contexts, whereas multicultural and language-

diverse playgroups worked better in others. Whilst the benefits of language-specific groups were acknowledged, especially in early years of settlement and in high-migrant concentration areas, our consultations revealed also a lot of support from participants and program coordinators for mixed groups.

With regard to services working with families who are particularly vulnerable or at risk, such as recently arrived families of refugee backgrounds, families on bridging visas etc., consultations revealed that the major barriers are linked to a lack of knowledge and information in navigating early childhood systems; financial hardship (for example, Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) payments make it very difficult to afford care); language barriers and sometimes cultural values or values linked to religion in engaging children in structured early childhood or pre-school education have been mentioned by service providers.

Service providers reported using warm introductions, cultural considerations, use of interpreters, advocacy, and networking of family service and settlement workers with early childhood services, to improve engagement of CALD families included.

More training around inclusive practices and more holistic school curriculums were also mentioned as areas for improvement.

Bicultural workers were often seen as an imperative to successful engagement. Although interpreting services were often used by service providers to overcome some of the immediate barriers, inclusion of bicultural workers in some family and/or early childhood services created much better engagement outcomes.

Key Recommendations

ECCV recommends that:

Area 1. Equity of access to universal services with additional support available

1. Continuous and systematic work towards achieving a truly universal early childhood service system, which is affordable and meets the needs of families, is needed before, or at least simultaneously with the discussion on engagement of children and families in these services.
2. The impact of legal limitations and affordability of services for families and children who reside in Victoria on temporary visas, including international students and families on bridging visas, needs to be acknowledged, and steps taken to address the risks of cumulative disadvantages. Many children of 'temporary' residents actually grow up in Victoria during their early years, and may become permanent residents and Australian citizens in the future.

3. Equity of access, with special support where needed, is the premise upon which other activities and engagement efforts should be built. Equity of access includes access to services determined by cost, location and time, as well as access to resources, such as good quality food, which are fundamental for children being able to be engaged, to learn and thrive.
4. Specific statistical data relating to CALD children, including a breakdown of visa categories, is essential to better understanding progress towards agreed outcomes and outputs for CALD children, as well as to build up high quality research and evidence in this area.

Area 2. Facilitation of culturally responsive services, focus on trusting and respectful relationships and creation of culturally safe spaces

5. Services should focus on building trusting and respectful relationships with families and children. Some prerequisites for such work have been established through the Australian and Victorian Early Years Frameworks, National Quality Standards and other strategic State and Commonwealth documents. More clarity is needed, however, in measuring benchmarks and outcomes.
6. Cultural competence training should be readily available, and required, in the early childhood service sector. The training should focus on particular contexts in which staff in early childhood education are engaged. More focus on the idea of cultural safety, to change the emphasis from service provision to the needs of community, would be welcomed.
7. Clear guidelines for staff and services, inclusion of anti-racism and anti-discrimination among the early childhood services' core values and creation of culturally safe spaces in which children, families and early childhood services' staff can interact in a positive way, is the key to early childhood engagement in the context of CALD communities.
8. The early childhood education sector could better use the potential their existing staff bring to the sector. Staff should be supported in their professional development, including, for example, gaining additional language teaching qualifications to promote more bilingual education.

Area 3. More efficient information sharing and education of parents through integrated services, including empowering parents and children

9. Children participating in early childhood services should be empowered through celebration and promotion of their individual histories, backgrounds and languages and through an integrated focus on belonging and inclusion. There needs to be a consistent and rigorous effort made within early childhood settings, particularly those promoting early years learning, to work towards the outcomes outlined within the Early Years Development Framework which are related to children feeling welcomed, respected and their unique identities being acknowledged.
10. Place-based models of service provision, including community development principles and work with community representatives and individual families that has proved successful in engaging CALD families and children in early childhood services, should be further supported and sufficiently funded.
11. Integration of services and clear and timely referral pathways, in combination with place-based model of service provision, are used for prevention and early intervention. For such work to be able to occur in (for instance) a school community hub setting, staff needs support and training to develop the knowledge to respond to issues, including crisis intervention.

Background

The benefits of early childhood education for pre-school children have long been recognised in the majority of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, including Australia. Children who are involved in early childhood programs, particularly kindergarten programs at 3 and 4 years of age, have been found to progress and transition to school more easily. Their academic and social-emotional skills have been measured as generally exceeding the skills of children who have not been involved in pre-school programs.¹ OECD data shows that, after accounting for socio-economic differences, children who attended early childhood education for at least two years performed better on average than other children at age 15.²

Involvement of children in early childhood education has also been found to have an overall economic benefit for Australia, with predicted addition of A\$6 billion to GDP due to increased female workforce participation by 2050, up to A\$10.3 billion of benefit for children receiving a quality education and care program and A\$13.3 billion of increased participation of vulnerable children by 2050.³

Whilst \$2.34 billion in costs have been associated with the provision of early 15 hours per week of early childhood education in the year-before-school, with costs split between government (79 %) and parents or carers (21 %), \$4.74 billion per annum nationwide have been accounted in benefits associated with providing this one year of early childhood education.⁴

Overall participation in early childhood education the year before school is high in Victoria (93.4 %). Over the years, however, children from CALD backgrounds have been found to have lower rates of involvement in early childhood services in comparison to children who are from non-CALD backgrounds. Lower attendance rates have been particularly noticeable in the pre-school context, and with regard to formal services such as long day childcare, playgroups, maternal child health and kindergarten programs. Some of the major drivers for this lower attendance rates have been discussed in academic publications and have been subject of reports and strategies. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of understanding of the particular reasons for these barriers to engagement for CALD children and their families.

¹ Sharon Goldfeld, Elodie O'Connor, Meredith O'Connor, Mary Sayers, Tim Moore, Amanda Kvalsvig, and Sally Brinkman, "The Role of Preschool in Promoting Children's Healthy Development: Evidence from an Australian Population Cohort", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 35 (2016), 40-48.

Kathy Sylva, Edward Melhuish, Pam Sammons, Iram Siraj-Blatchford, and Brenda Taggart, eds, *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the effective pre-school and primary education project* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

² Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Attendance in Early Childhood Education and Care Programmes and Academic Proficiencies at Age 15: Lessons from PISA* (OECD, 2017), 25.

³ PwC, *Putting a Value on Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia* (2014), 4.

⁴ PwC, *A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic Analysis of Universal Early Childhood Education in The Year Before School in Australia*, The Front Project (2019), 5

According to the 2016 Census, 28.4% of Victoria's population was born overseas, and almost 50% of Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas.⁵ Some Victorian LGAs have more than half of their residents born overseas (for example, Greater Dandenong has 57.7% of its residents born overseas).

26% of Victorians also spoke a language other than English at home.⁶ There have been dramatic increases in the use of some particular languages in the home between the last Census years (2011 and 2016). For example, Mandarin experienced an almost 85% increase in the 2011-2016 period, while use of Punjabi grew by 80% and use of Urdu by a staggering 109.8%.⁷ It has been estimated that slightly more than 15% of Australian children speak a main language other than English at age 4 to 5 years.⁸

We really are a multicultural society, but our early childhood service system still does not reflect this diversity.

The 2017 *State of Victoria's Children* report suggests that whilst the vast majority of Victorian children are healthy and happy and the necessary supports are in place to enable them to thrive, 'a significant minority of Victorian children experience poor developmental, health and learning outcomes'.⁹

Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) outlines a number of factors affecting 4 year old children's participation in pre-school programs, including a combination of families' household income, parents' level of education, as well as other factors such as parents' employment status, whether children have older or younger siblings, and whether they speak a language other than English at home.¹⁰

⁵ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Victoria's Diverse Population: 2016 Census* (Victoria, 2017), 1.

⁶ DPC, *Victoria's Diverse Population*, 1.

⁷ DPC, *Victoria's Diverse Population*, 6.

⁸ Sarah Verdon, Sharynne McLeod, and Adam Winsler, "Language Maintenance and Loss in a Population Study of Young Australian Children", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 29, no. 2.

⁹ Department of Education and Training, *The State of Victoria's Children Report: A Focus on Health and Wellbeing 2017* (Melbourne, 2018), 7.

¹⁰ Diana Warren, Galina Daraganova and Meredith O'Connor, "Preschool and Children's Readiness for School", *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, Annual Statistical Report 2017*. Accessed 10 September, 2019, <https://growingupinaustralia.gov.au/research-findings/annual-statistical-report-2017/preschool-and-childrens-readiness-school>.

ECCV's response to the Inquiry

When it comes to early childhood engagement and barriers to accessing services in CALD contexts, it is important to keep in mind that diverse CALD communities have diverse needs. A child who is born in Australia to migrant or refugee parents will likely have a different experience accessing early childhood services than a child who was not born in Australia. A child born in one part of the country, who then moves with their family to another part of the country, will also likely have a different experience of engagement than a child who has had a more continuous or stable settlement trajectory. Families who are struggling with accessing services due to the nature of their visa and legal limitations related to certain visa statuses, will again have a different experience of early childhood engagement than families who do not experience these barriers. Children with disability will have different needs and will need to be supported in different ways than children who do not have a disability.

It is important to acknowledge that a child's CALD background alone does not create a disadvantage in accessing early childhood services. In fact, a child's CALD background can positively affect their development as well as their families' engagement practices. A combination of formal education and service provision through early childhood services and informal education that children receive in CALD contexts can be extremely valuable for children and can impact their cognitive and social-emotional development trajectories in positive ways. However, when a child's CALD background intersects with a combination of other factors, such as a family's lack of paid employment or underemployment, poverty, housing stress, discrimination and racism, limited knowledge of the English language, trauma and loss, family separation and difficult migration history, this can create disadvantage, which increases vulnerability for children and adds barriers to their engagement.

In relation to this, it has been argued that the earliest years of life are a particularly effective time to make changes in the lives of children living in low socio-economic circumstances.¹¹ For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may experience a 'lack of positive cognitive and non-cognitive stimulation' in the home learning environment,¹² the relative value of attending high quality early childhood education (ECE) is therefore particularly high.

There are three broad areas that need to be addressed to facilitate positive engagement of CALD children and families in early childhood services. The outlined areas cover systemic and institutional factors, and factors affecting individual families.

¹¹ Jens Ludwig and Deborah A. Phillips, "Long-term Effects of Head Start on Low-income Children", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1136, no. 1 (2008), 257-268.

Janet Currie, "Early Childhood Education Programs", *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 15, no. 2 (2001), 213-238.

¹² James J. Heckman, "Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children", *Science* 312, no. 5782 (2006), p. 1900.

1. Equity of access to universal services with additional support available

It should be ensured that every child in Victoria, regardless of their family context, socio-economic position or financial capability, location or cultural and linguistic background, can access quality early childhood services. Not every child needs the same level of support in accessing these services. Whilst actions must be universal, the intensity and scale of support needs to be proportionate to the level of disadvantage to facilitate equitable access to services.¹³

Currently there is still no universal equity of access for children in Australia or in Victoria. In fact, Australia is ranked in the bottom third of the 35 OECD countries regarding the cost of childcare, as well as food insecurity, levels of bullying experienced by year 4 students and low and declining immunisation rates.¹⁴ All these factors significantly affect children's and young people's health and wellbeing.

2. Facilitation of culturally responsive services, focus on trusting and respectful relationships and creation of culturally safe spaces

Service providers should focus on building trusting and respectful relationships with communities and individual families, and include bicultural workers in their service provision wherever possible. Representation of community members in service provision and in designing and co-designing services targeting CALD communities should be regarded as a norm. Early childhood service provision should also be grounded in cultural competence and cultural safety training, and guided by understanding of individual factors affecting families and family histories, particularities of their migration and settlement experiences, and openness towards different cultural practices and parenting styles.

3. More efficient information sharing and education of parents through integrated services, including empowering parents and children

Many families settling in Australia need to adjust to substantially different family contexts and expectations around parenting within nuclear families. The information that they are given should take into consideration individual histories and circumstances and be tailored to their experience. *Empowerment comes from the place of knowledge, and from the assurance that one is being valued and trusted.* Questions of identity and belonging, which are foregrounded across a variety of policy documents related to early childhood learning, as well as multicultural policies in Victoria, should be incorporated into early childhood services more rigorously.

¹³ Michael Marmot and Ruth G. Bell, "Fair Society, Healthy Lives," *Public Health* 126, no. 1 (2012): S4-S10.

¹⁴ Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth, *Report Card 2018, The Wellbeing of Young Australians* (Sydney, 2019), 6.

Area 1: Equity of access to universal services with additional support available

Systematic focus on equity and universal services is the basis to successful engagement with CALD communities. Individual community-based and grassroots work can hardly be successful if it is not underpinned or combined with a framework which actively works towards removing systemic barriers to access and engagement.

In Victoria, access to kindergarten programs for 4 year-olds is deemed nearly universal, with the majority of children of this age having either free or low-cost access to 15 hours a week of early learning through play.¹⁵ Despite some evidence of the positive developmental outcomes for children being involved in early childhood education earlier, at 3 years of age, there is not yet universal access to such program for 3-year-old children. Recently announced changes to the planned funding of 3-year-old kindergarten programs in Victoria, with a roll-out of five publicly funded hours per week by 2022 and up to 15 hours per week by 2029, might change this in the future.¹⁶

Cost

The cost of early learning programs is currently still one of the major barriers to accessing early education learning and programs for families. Many CALD families struggle with low income, underemployment or no paid employment. Additionally, many newly arrived families, especially refugee families, also struggle with unstable housing or homelessness, lack of resources, and lack of knowledge of the system of support in Australia.

For some families, this can be compounded with other issues such as difficult migration histories involving trauma and family separation. All these factors increase the likelihood of financial hardship.

Recommendation 1: Continuous and systematic work towards achieving truly universal early childhood service system, which is affordable and meets the needs of families, is needed before, or at least simultaneously with the discussion on engagement of children and families in these services.

One of the agreed outputs of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education for 2018-2019, agreed between the Commonwealth and individual states, was to implement 'accessible quality early childhood education programs which meet the needs of parents and communities at a cost which does not present a barrier to

¹⁵ Early childhood education in Australia has been undergoing a significant re-structure. Since 2008, the Australian Government has provided \$2.8 billion to states and territories to increase preschool participation through a series of National Partnership Agreements on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education.

Diana Warren, Meredith O'Connor, Diana Smart, and Ben Edwards, *A Critical Review of the Early Childhood Literature* (Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2016), 4.

¹⁶ "Kindergarten for Three-year-old Children", Victorian Department of Education and Training, accessed September 5, 2019, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/three-year-old-kinder.aspx>.

participation, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged children'.¹⁷

Whilst subsidies for early childhood education programs such as kindergarten are available to Australian citizens, permanent residents and those who hold certain kinds of humanitarian, asylum seeker or bridging visas, they are not available to many CALD families and children who reside in Australia as temporary migrants on a variety of visas. This includes children of some people who are seeking asylum and are residing in Australia on particular types of bridging visas, as well as international students and temporary workers who face prohibitive childcare and kindergarten fees. Although tuition fee exemptions apply for some school-age children of international students living in Victoria, most still need to pay international school fees for either private or public schools in Victoria (although some fee reductions can apply).

Recommendation 2: The impact of legal limitations and affordability of services for families and children who reside in Victoria on temporary visas, including international students and families on bridging visas, needs to be acknowledged, and steps taken to address the risks of cumulative disadvantages. Many children of 'temporary' residents actually grow up in Victoria during their early years, and may become permanent residents and Australian citizens in the future.

Furthermore, subsidies for 4 year-old kindergarten that significantly reduce fees or eliminate them altogether, are available only to low-income families holding Centrelink Concession or Health Care Cards. This includes families on certain types of asylum seeker, humanitarian or bridging visas and some other children who are identified as being at increased risk of vulnerability – including children who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or who have been in contact with child protection.

Cost may therefore still act as a barrier to inclusion, even to funded kindergarten or primary school programs for some children.

Location

Location of services and logistical challenges have been identified as another significant barrier to engagement of CALD children. Inability to physically access services or difficulty in doing so has been identified as an issue by the majority of consulted service providers working with CALD families, particularly newly arrived, as well as individual CALD service users. The lack of or infrequency of public transport, inaccessibility of private transportation, and the lack of networks of family and friends who could ease logistical challenges have all been cited as factors contributing to the location of services being a barrier.

¹⁷ Department of Education, *National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education - 2018 and 2019* (Canberra, 2018), 4.

We heard of examples where it would take the mother more than two hours to take her children on public transport to attend a playgroup, which lasted for two hours. This very quickly became too big a barrier for the mother as it took too much of her time and she was unable to attend to all other commitments. She therefore stopped attending the playgroup.

Place-based models which tend to offer a combination of services, including early childhood education and other relevant family services, have been successful in easing some of the barriers related to location and logistics. These place-based models have been making a considerable effort to bring the services closer to users. For example, community hubs based at schools and developed through a National Community Hubs program have been successful in some emerging areas of high migrant population across the country, including in Victoria.¹⁸

One of the hubs we visited in an outer northern suburb of Melbourne, which acted as a pilot to the National Community Hubs program, developed a rich web of community connections and established space where multicultural families met, communicated in their first languages as well as across languages. The hub partnered with other services to offer English language tuition, social service and health and wellbeing information, and training programs for parents. Childcare was also regularly offered during times when parents (the majority of them migrant and refugee mothers of CALD backgrounds) participated in training programs. The hub has been heavily supported by the school in which it runs. The programs are delivered by a bicultural worker who speaks Arabic, as do many mothers and children participating in the group. It is supported by another bicultural worker. The school also includes a kindergarten, so many parents who bring children to the hub's playgroups also bring their other children to the kindergarten and the school. In this way, transitions from playgroup to kindergarten to school are smoother for children and for parents.

As the running of community hubs in the National Community Hubs program depends on a variety of local factors, and combination of individual funders, in practice hubs can differ considerably, and whilst they work well in some communities, this may not be the case for all hubs in all communities.

¹⁸ Community Hubs Australia program, funded by the Scanlon Foundation, Commonwealth Government and a combination of state, local and philanthropic funding, has been recently extended to include 106 community hubs by 2020, 42 of them in Victoria. The programs offered through the community hubs include playgroups as well as programs for parents which focus on English language learning and employment training. Internal evaluations and reports linked to the National Community Hubs program show positive outcomes. For example, on average 5,300 families visited the hubs each term in 2018. Hubs families came from 118 nations and spoke 80 languages. 89% of hub attendees visited the hub at least once a week. According to the available data, two thirds of hub parents with a child under the age of five have not taken their child to any other learning service outside the hub.

Time

Time of available early childhood education can also act as a barrier to CALD families, who often do not have a large network of family and friends who they can draw upon for support. For example, a comment was made from a parent that council-run kindergartens are designed for families in which one parent does not work.

'I did not like 3 year kinder organised by the council because it was too short and I had to make a lunch box. it is totally made for parents staying at home. Otherwise you cannot really manage pick ups and drop offs while working.'

'Not long enough opening hours, a lot of stress to get a childcare place.'

(Service user consultation)

15 hours of funded kindergarten program per week, usually spread over 2-4 days, is not structured according to the requirements of most working parents. It also does not allow parents to be meaningfully involved in other activities leading to paid employment.

Kindergarten programs integrated in long day care centres are proving to be an increasingly popular option for working parents in a number of states, including Victoria,¹⁹ as they offer extended hours of care that are more in line with parents' working lives. However, they in turn of course attract a higher cost.

'I loved working hours of the child care center (6am to 6pm). This allowed me to work full time and earn enough for the family.'

(Service user consultation)

The question of equity does not relate only to access to services, but to the quality of experiences. There is a whole range of factors which influence children's educational experience. For example, the quality of resources children have access to (including fresh and good quality food); perceptions of difference they are exposed to and whether they are exposed to forms of discrimination; and disparities in their immediate surroundings all impact on equity.

Recommendation 3: Equity of access, with special support where needed, is the premise upon which other activities and engagement efforts should be built. Equity of access includes access to services determined by cost, location and time, as well as access to resources, such as good quality food, which are fundamental for children being able to be engaged, to learn and thrive.

With regards to measuring the achievement of benchmarks and monitoring of progress under the National Partnerships – particularly on outcomes and outputs relating to

¹⁹ Diana Warren, Meredith O'Connor, Diana Smart, and Ben Edwards, *A Critical Review of the Early Childhood Literature* (Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2016), 6.

accessibility of affordable, quality early childhood education programs for all children, including vulnerable and disadvantaged children – separate statistics are currently available only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Specific data for CALD children is not available through the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection.

Recommendation 4: Specific statistical data relating to CALD children, including a breakdown of visa categories, is essential to better understanding progress towards agreed outcomes and outputs for CALD children, as well as to build up high quality research and evidence in this area.

Area 2: Facilitation of culturally responsive services, focus on trusting and respectful relationships and creation of culturally safe spaces

Mistrust in services, borne out of previous experiences in countries of origin as well as in Australia, can be a substantial barrier to engagement for some families. Visible representation of migrant and refugee individuals and communities in the delivery of services can have positive outcomes in terms of engagement and building trust. Integration of services, offering a diverse range of services ‘under one roof’ and close to where communities live can also contribute to building trusting and respectful relationships.

Recommendation 5: Services should focus on building trusting and respectful relationships with families and children. Some prerequisites for such work have been established through the Australian and Victorian Early Years Frameworks, National Quality Standards and other strategic State and Commonwealth documents. More clarity is needed, however, in measuring benchmarks and outcomes.

In ECCV’s consultations, parents highlighted the lack of respect they experienced across early childhood services. Some parents told us that in contact with some early childhood service providers, they felt like their opinions and their parenting practices were disregarded or invalidated. For instance, some had been negatively judged by healthcare professionals in discussions around parenting practices, such as sleeping arrangements for babies and young children, and breastfeeding. Others felt intimidated by the system of growth charts used by the maternal child health service, which felt rigid and not particularly sensitive to the diversity amongst children.

Recommendation 6: Cultural competence training should be readily available, and required, in the early childhood service sector. The training should focus on particular contexts in which staff in early childhood education are engaged. More focus on the idea of cultural safety, to change the emphasis from service provision to the needs of community, would be welcomed.

One parent with multiple children who went through the childcare and kindergarten systems and was at the same time also a childcare worker, suggested that there were many assumptions made 'that other practices of other countries are inappropriate, they are looked upon as not valid or worse [than Australian]'. This parent also commented that assumptions have been made based on how parents/mothers dressed, and as a 'visible' Muslim woman wearing hijab, she felt discrimination in the way that she was perceived as a mother and a woman, as well as an educator. She said that whilst the staff at the kindergarten in which she worked were supportive, she experienced parents being surprised or mistrustful of her being a room leader and sometimes feeling uncomfortable leaving their children with her. On the other hand, other staff often frowned upon children's hygiene or things that were put in CALD children's bags and linked these to cultural factors and/or their family circumstances. The communication about such issues typically happened in the absence of a child's parent.

The mother also commented on the use of language other than English; she said that she communicated with some children who spoke the same community language as her in that language. Whilst many other educators and families were supportive of this, she was sometimes rebuked for doing so by other staff, including staff who had the same cultural/linguistic background.

Recommendation 7: Clear guidelines for staff and services, inclusion of anti-racism and anti-discrimination among the early childhood services' core values and creation of culturally safe spaces in which children, families and early childhood services' staff can interact in a positive way is the key to early childhood engagement in the context of CALD communities.

Cultural competence training often focuses on verbal communication. However, we heard from parents in our consultations that it is often the non-verbal communication that makes them feel either welcome or unwelcome. They were for example affected by the way that staff or other parents looked at them when they entered the service or the way that they used their body language in communication. Conversely, inviting and welcoming body language was mentioned as an effective tool for breaking down some barriers.

'While I was taking my baby and toddler to participate in the play group, I felt humiliated because the local mums would stop talking to each other when me and my children approached them. And got up one by one and moved to other corner to continue their conversations, week after week, term after term. When my husband joined us a few times, the situation would be different. These mums would all happily engage in conversations with him (he is a white Australian and I'm Asian, Taiwanese). I didn't want my children to grow up in this type of "social" gatherings when their mother was forever looked down by other mothers. I started multicultural play group with likeminded mothers who were on the same boat with me. And I continued the mission to mix new migrants with local communities in a regular play based learning setting until this date.'

(Service user consultation)

When designing cultural competence or cultural responsiveness training, service providers should ensure that:

1. Training is tailored to the specific needs and context of the organisation and staff and includes reflection and self-reflexivity to focus on the systemic, institutional and individual practices that inform one's attitudes and behaviours;
2. The concept of cultural safety, which diverts the focus from service provision practice to the needs of service users, is explored;
3. Cultural competence training includes suggestions for both verbal and non-verbal communication. Research indicates that about 70% of our communication is delivered non-verbally.

In 2018, ECCV provided feedback to the draft of the Child and Family Services Industry Plan 2018-2021 prepared by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CECFW), and strongly advocated for a targeted approach to enhancing cultural competency in child and family services, to enable better access for families and children from culturally diverse backgrounds. ECCV also advocated for increasing the number of bilingual and bicultural staff working in the child and family services industry who could form a significant part of an 'appropriately qualified and skilled workforce'.²⁰

With regard to early childhood education services, such as the ones available through 3- and 4-year kinder programs, ECCV recognises that the workforce in this sector is relatively culturally diverse, but believes that its potential could be better used and resourced.

Recommendation 8: The early childhood education sector could better use the potential their existing staff brings to the sector. Staff should be supported in their professional development, including, for example, gaining additional language teaching qualifications.

With regard to allied health services such as speech pathologists, occupational therapists, social workers and maternal child health services, more workers from CALD backgrounds should be involved in these services, and there should be more access to bicultural workers in these settings.

²⁰ Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *ECCV Response to CECFW Child and Family Services Draft Industry Plan 2018-2021* (Melbourne, 2018).

An example of a set of services focusing on community engagement, inclusion of bicultural workers (also called family mentors) and community development principles over the years has been offered by the Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG). VICSEG has been delivering supported playgroups (language-specific, language-diverse and asylum seeker playgroups), parenting groups and Learning Together programs, and has recently received additional Victorian State Government funding to run supported playgroups in newly arrived migrant and refugee communities. VICSEG was also actively involved in a 3-year project called Supporting Parents – Developing Children (ceased in 2014), which was funded by the Scanlon Foundation, the Commonwealth Government, and the Victorian State Government. The program was coordinated by the Hume City Council. 'Supporting Parents - Developing Children' comprised a mother-child English language program, bilingual story-time, playgroup enhancement and early years hubs.

Area 3: More efficient information sharing and education of parents through integrated services, including empowering parents and children

The current Victorian Early Years Development Framework recognises the need for children to feel welcomed, respected and for their unique identity to be acknowledged. It also requires of educators to 'maximise opportunities for all children to do well and learn from others, including opportunities to experience diversity and difference in ways that nurture positive attitudes, and care and respect for others'.²¹

Additionally, the framework recognises multilingualism as an asset and 'supports children to maintain their first language, learn English as an additional language, and learn languages other than English'.²²

For CALD families in early childhood education settings, more than just a celebration of Harmony Day, national symbols, cuisines and individual words in languages other than English is needed in order to empower them and validate their experience

Recommendation 9: Children participating in early childhood services should be empowered through celebration and promotion of their individual histories, backgrounds and languages and through an integrated focus on belonging and inclusion. There needs to be a consistent and rigorous effort made within early childhood settings, particularly those promoting early years learning, to work towards the outcomes outlined within the Early Years Development Framework which are related to children feeling welcomed, respected and their unique identities being acknowledged.

²¹ Department of Education and Training, *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework for all Children from Birth to Eight Years* (Melbourne, 2016), 12.

²² DET, *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*, 12.

Prevention and early intervention have been identified as key areas within a diverse range of policy initiatives and practical guidelines more recently. For example, the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 and the National Plan to Reduce Family Violence against Women and their Children 2010 -2022 both focus on prevention and early intervention.

Place-based models of incorporated early learning services, which we recognise as an important development towards effective service provision and engagement in the context of CALD communities, also incorporate focuses on prevention and early intervention, transitions between levels of schooling, and incorporation of support for the family. This work should be further promoted and developed.

Place-based models of service provision can be very beneficial and empowering for CALD communities when genuine partnerships are established with communities. These partnerships need to be part of a whole-of-school structure, and in order to be sustainable, cannot rely only on the passion of individual teachers.²³

Recommendation 10: Place-based models of service provision, including community development principles and work with community representatives and individual families that has proved successful in engaging CALD families and children in early childhood services, should be further supported and sufficiently funded.

Service providers working with CALD families, particularly newly arrived and emerging, have pointed out in consultations that one of the key barriers to engagement is a lack of understanding of the Australian system of early childhood learning and existing support services.

CALD families who don't understand English and systems to be able to start to apply for child care. Lack of support from agencies (not enough agencies to assist CALD); lack of support in general from their own CALD communities but some do offer info about how to enroll children in care.

(Service provider consultation)

It is in fact difficult for many people, not just migrants and refugees, to find out what services exist and where and how to navigate them. There seems to be a lack of support for parents, and not enough integrated services to perform outreach and help to bring services (not only early childhood, but others) closer to people when they need them, and work in a culturally responsive and safe manner.

²³ Brenton Prosser, *Schools as Wrap-around Hubs' in Disadvantaged Communities*, Discussion Paper, Catholic Social Services, accessed September 15, 2019, https://www.cssa.org.au/our-work/research-work/discussion_papers/.

As mentioned earlier, some playgroups and community hubs are good examples of how integration of services can occur. Some of VICSEG's playgroups have for example incorporated regular visits from maternal child health nurses, as well as visits from Centrelink's and Victoria Police's multicultural liaison staff, especially at times of policy or regulatory changes. More of these information-giving opportunities in community settings are needed.

Recommendation 11: Integration of services and clear and timely referral pathways, in combination with place-based model of service provision, are used for prevention and early intervention. For such work to be able to occur in (for instance) a school community hub setting, staff needs support and training to develop the knowledge to respond to issues, including crisis intervention.

With regard to early intervention, particularly relating to delays in speech and language acquisition for children, responses from parents in our consultations were somewhat mixed.

Some parents expressed that they felt that their bilingual or multilingual child was being discriminated against by being sent to the speech pathologist for a developmental delay, when the evidence shows that speech development can be delayed in bilingual and multilingual children.

'The maternal health nurse sometimes only goes "by the books". Our child is learning two languages and is a bit delayed for speech (which is normal after talking to similar parents), and she wanted to take us to make autistic test, because he was too slow. On the other hand some other health nurses were more understanding'.

(Service user consultation)

Another parent, however, had an opposite experience of her child being diagnosed with autism late only because medical professionals based their opinion exclusively on the child being bilingual.

A concern around the particular needs of children with disabilities and/or children with special needs from CALD communities has also been expressed in our consultations. ECCV has been involved in extensive work in raising community awareness around disability and the NDIS in CALD communities. A large gap in knowledge of the system of disability support has been identified in this context, and ECCV has been involved in advocating for more support services to be integrated into the mainstream disability system.

We heard from some service providers involved in consultations that some children from CALD backgrounds with special needs or disability, especially from newly arrived communities with vastly different, or poorly serviced healthcare systems, have been falling through cracks in the system and not receiving appropriate help.

Conclusion

ECCV commends the Victorian Parliament for establishing the Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities.

For culturally and linguistically diverse families, especially recently arrived, settlement process can be challenging. Many families face a considerably different system to the one they experienced in their home countries; some families struggle with language barriers, trying to find employment, secure housing and attend to other basic needs. Many families, especially those who have refugee backgrounds, have also had a history of trauma and have experienced family separations.

Service providers can be successful in engaging these families in programs only by being informed about a broad spectrum of challenges and responding to the needs of families in the way that will be most beneficial and useful to them. Cultural responsiveness and cultural competence training programs built into organisations providing early childhood services in Victoria is an important factor that can facilitate better relationships with children and their families. Currently, there is much scope for such training to be implemented more widely. Working with bicultural workers and engaging directly with communities using approaches that promote respectful and trusting relationships has also proved crucial.

ECCV thanks the Victorian Parliament for considering our recommendations. We look forward to being involved in further work and discussions to ensure that Victorian children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have equal opportunities in access and are appropriately supported to achieve the best possible outcomes in the years ahead.

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