Submission

—

Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities

Contents

Introduction

The Victorian Multicultural Commission welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Parliament inquiry into early childhood engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

The Commission is an independent statutory body, established in 1983 and now constituted under the *Multicultural Victoria Act 2011*, that strengthens cultural diversity in Victoria through consultation, advocacy, celebration and promotion.

Victoria is home to one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world and Australia's fastest growing state at an annual increase of 2.1 per cent (Australia's population grew by 1.6 per cent), with a population of 6,566,2000 as at 31 March 2019.

Migration to Victoria has resulted in increasing diversity. Net overseas migration was the major contributor to the state's population change and net interstate migration gains for Victoria were the second highest recorded in the year ending 31 March 2019. [1]

At the 2016 Census, 49.1 per cent of Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas. In 2018, Victorian Government schools' population included 197,742 students with a language background other than English, with the main languages identified as Arabic, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Chinese.[2]

As the main link between communities and government, the Commission holds consultations, forums and roundtables with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities to understand the issues they face. We then work together to identify and recommend potential solutions to government, to make laws, policies and public services more inclusive and accessible.

The Commission is informed by its eight Regional Advisory Councils across Victoria – three metropolitan councils and five regional councils. Each Council comprises up to 50 members drawn from the local area to represent their community. Members are local residents, local government councillors and officers, local businesspeople and service providers from non-government organisations.

In consultations with multicultural communities, the Commission has learned that the main barriers to early childhood engagement are systemic.

We outline these barriers in this submission to assist with overcoming them and to support service planning and delivery to multicultural children and their families. We also highlight existing programs and service models that address these barriers.

We also recommend the Committee consider the findings of the Australian Government Department of Education and Training's Australian Early Development Census National Report 2018 relating to children with a language background other than English. [3]

Cultural barriers

The Commissions recommends that early childhood services prioritise support systems and mechanisms for families who are newly arrived and have a language background other than English in order to facilitate early and ongoing participation of CALD families.

Understanding of the Australian context

The Commission supports VICSEG's observation that there can be a significant disconnect between the values and accepted parenting norms of mainstream children's service system and newly arrived migrant families.

Australian culture and service delivery is predominantly premised upon the notion of a westernised empowered actor operating with agency – the customer driven concept of 'choice'. However, 'choice' may be an unfamiliar concept in some cultures, especially those with more community or collectivist focused cultures.[4]

For example, in collectivist cultures, relying on the family as the main source of support is normative. Family issues are generally kept within the family because it could compromise the families social standing in the community.[5]

Fathers can be particularly challenging to engage because of traditional gender roles which are clearly defined, such as raising children delineated as being a predominantly female activity.[6]

In the first instance additional supports are necessary to support parents in their role as the child's first teacher. This could be provided via information sessions conducted in community settings such as libraries (e.g. story time), community play centres and recreation centres. Connecting parents to their own community or faith groups also provides support.

Having interpreters on hand to assist with communication and interaction would ensure optimum engagement, as well as providing translated materials and storyboards wherever appropriate to broaden the reach of the information being conveyed.

Perception of mainstream services

Culturally diverse families can be reluctant to engage with services due to concerns that they may be stereotyped or judged.

The Commission also understands that some CALD communities may also have a fear of authorities and their association with early childhood services, including child protection, police, courts, taxation, immigration and housing departments. Increasing numbers of families arriving in Australia through humanitarian settlement schemes are coming into contact with the child protection system.[7]

The confidential nature of interactions with the family—not withstanding mandatory reporting requirements—need to be conveyed in order to build trust for early engagement to succeed. Connections with trusted community leaders can assist with ensuring the family, and particularly the parents, are supported more broadly outside of school settings, which is particularly important for 'small' communities.

Awareness, relevance and accessibility

The Commission recommends that:

- information is translated into the languages most prevalent in the local government authority area of the services outlet

- service providers employ outreach workers to reach newly arrived families in order to begin the trust-building relationships necessary for early engagement to succeed

- service providers engage ethnic media to share information

- service providers engage representative or peak community organisations to assist with developing culturally appropriate information and to act as the first point of call to accessing services.

Access to information

English language skills vary enormously among migrant communities. While some people have little English, others have conversational English. However, even migrants with fluent English can struggle to understand professional jargon.

Producing information in multiple languages facilitates the dissemination of information about services availability, purpose and customer base suitability. This includes translated materials and interpreter services being utilised at all points of contact.

Peak or community organisations, including the Victorian Multicultural Commission, and ethnic media services, such as SBS languages and community radio programs (e.g. 3ZZZ) can provide additional platforms to disseminate information to their already engaged CALD audiences.

Relevance of information

The translation of information should be considered as a starting point. The ways in which services are promoted can have a significant effect on whether families perceive the service to be relevant to them.

Potential clients from multicultural communities need to believe that the service itself will be delivered in a culturally and linguistically appropriate fashion.

Depending on country of origin, there may be a lack of knowledge or understanding of services that are more widely available. For example, certain services may only have been available to the privileged in their countries of origin.

Multicultural, especially newly arrived, communities may also perceive that early childhood services are geared to mainstream Australian families and as a result may be less likely to use the services. For example, if staff are not from diverse backgrounds and brochures do not depict a diverse range of families, some question the relevance of the service for them.[8]

Thus, brochures or other information should indicate that the service is available in community languages and should point out how it can be accessed.[9]

It is also important that marketing design is correctly reflects target communities. For example, the flyer at Appendix I was designed to engage Vietnamese people but used a graphic depicting Chinese cultural dress. This can have an adverse effect on engaging CALD communities. The use of community organisations or the Victorian Multicultural Commission can assist with ensuring culturally appropriate design.

Additional supports for refugee and migrant families

Early engagement of migrant families is necessary, not only to ensure that they are able to adequately access settlement and early childhood services, but to support them to become active, contributing members of the local communities in which they live.

The Commission has identified that often newly arrived refugee families, for example, do not know what services are available. Similar findings by the Refugee Council of Australia identify that refugee families often do not know the services that could benefit their individual needs, or indeed what the Australian social services can offer.[10]

Many families, especially more recent arrivals from African and Middle Eastern countries have common experiences of trauma, dislocation and loss—many are victims of war and torture. These groups are particularly vulnerable, though resilient and resourceful. The building of trust is needed to support settlement and child and family development, learning and health and wellbeing.

For refugees and humanitarian entrants to be able to make a fully informed choice, they need additional support, including appropriate access to professional interpreters and sufficient casework support to help them navigate not only settlement but mainstream services.

Providing outreach workers, preferably bilingual, who could attend at local public community events, engage local community leaders and become a link between parents and the early childhood system, would provide greater reach and help to develop a responsive, accessible and engaged system.

Other structural barriers

Through our previous consultations, community members also advise that:

- Depending on location it may be difficult to get to the service by public transport – this is particularly an issue in regional and rural Victoria. For example, Council members in Shepparton advise that local bus services are sparse throughout the day and routes are quite limited.

- The cost can also be a barrier and not just in terms of the cost of a service, but also in time taken out of employment to attend, travel time and transport.

Cultural competence

The Commission recommends:

- that cultural competency training is rolled out to all staff engaged in early childhood services, especially those at interface and first point of contact

- that service providers promote greater engagement of children from CALD backgrounds in kindergarten through culturally aware outreach strategies

- that service providers employ people from CALD backgrounds in their workforce

- strategic partnerships with community and multicultural organisations to assist with developing cultural competency and ensure culturally-appropriate services can be delivered timely and responsively, as well as providing feedback on the effectiveness of programs and services.

Intercultural capability

The cultural competence and intercultural capability of an organisation is vital to its success in servicing multicultural communities.

Cultural competence is essential for government departments and community organisations working with immigrant families and young children. It enables workers to value diversity and plan for it and manage the different needs and respond to the cultural contexts of the communities they serve.

Intercultural capability is necessary not only to settlement support but to ongoing child and family development, learning, health and wellbeing in a multicultural Australian society.

Further, intercultural understanding is essential to encourage a pluralist, just and inclusive society. Keeping information current is also appropriate because culture is dynamic and therefore it is inaccurate to portray particular groups as having fixed characteristics.[11]

In addition to dedicated training, a culturally diverse workforce significantly improves the cultural competency of an organisation. Service providers should facilitate and encourage people from CALD backgrounds to be qualified, trained and employed in early childhood programs. For example, cultural liaison officers from diverse background can act as the initial point of contact for support or referral services.

Preparation for formal learning environments

In order to ensure that children from language backgrounds other than English are prepared for learning in an English-speaking learning environment, earlier engagement in the early childhood education and care system is critical.

This is particularly important for children with experience of trauma, though, the Commission acknowledges that the children who might benefit most are also from families that may be hard to reach.

The Commission supports the Department of Education and Training's subsidisation program providing free access to four-year-old kindergarten for concession holders and refugees and its planned expansion of this offering to three-year-old kindergarten.

This is an effective means of improving engagement with CALD communities, however, this must continue to be supported by outreach efforts that are culturally responsive.

Effective transition support

As the Department of Education and Training notes, much of the discussion about transition to school still focuses on a child's skills.

The Commission supports the Department of Education and Training's claim that trustful relationships are at the core of positive transition experiences into school learning environments.

The trust and relationships built through early childhood engagement must be maintained beyond early childhood services, with a holistic approach to service design that supports families to transition throughout a child's education, from early childhood to primary school and beyond.

Effective transition support for CALD families must also be contextualised and responsive to the needs of the child and their family. This could be supported by their own community leaders, community organisations and other trusted sources.

Consumer-driven design

The Commission recommends that:

- programs and services be delivered in languages other than English, with CALD consumer input into design and delivery

- administrative data systems be configured to collect statistical data at first point of contact and include identifying triggers for disaggregated data, to inform and enable the development of programs for multicultural families.

- leverage structural supports, such as the Victorian Multicultural Commission, to facilitate design and implementation of programs and strategies to regularly engage parents in their child's development.

Understanding the impact of a child's English language ability

Early childhood learning in an English-speaking learning environment can be particularly beneficial for children who have a language background other than English and who speak another language at home.

Research demonstrates that, although oral/conversational English can be learned relatively quickly (within two to five years), proficiency in English (language skills to facilitate full engagement with the academic curriculum), can take much longer to obtain (on average four to seven years). [12]

For children who are bilingual (proficient in two languages, English and one other) there are recognised cognitive advantages.

A growing body of research that examines developmental outcomes for children who have language background other than English has identified that bilingualism may also have benefits for early reading skills.[13] This can be an asset when children are trying to meet the demands of learning in a predominantly English-speaking environment.

Other children with limited English proficiency however, have been shown to experience increased stress (e.g. through discrimination, stigma, difficulties accessing curriculum), which in turn may contribute to poorer behavioural and psychosocial outcomes.

The evidence shows that these children also tend to be rated less favourably by their teachers on measures of social, emotional, academic and behavioural outcomes.[14]

Identifying systemic barriers

Data is paramount to developing outcomes-based policy and delivering tailored services that are inclusive, accessible and meet the needs of service users.

To establish the client base in the first instance, and to better inform the needs of diverse communities, requires the use of disaggregated data. This involves taking collective or aggregated administrative information in order to gain increased knowledge by disaggregating the data – for example, by gender, ethnic background, language, geographical location and age group. [15]

Disaggregating data assists in identifying barriers to accessing the system at strategic points, which can then be utilised to inform intervention strategies to assist families from diverse backgrounds.

For example, maternal and child health administrative data would provide the early childhood system with the information necessary to identify children and families from CALD backgrounds as well as recent migrant families.

Evaluation of CALD engagement

There is a need for accurate quantitative and qualitative data to plan for policies that can respond better to the needs of multicultural families with children aged 0-8 years.

The absence of accurate data impacts the extent to which government agencies can assess the cultural responsiveness of their services.

Data on the experiences of early childhood engagement of families from multicultural and migrant backgrounds is currently limited. Some useful data sets are already available, including:

- the Australian Government Department of Education and Training Australian Early Development Census on school age children from a language background other than English;

- the Victorian Government Department of Education and Training statistical collection that includes *students in government schools with a language background other than English.*[16]

Effective support systems

The Commission recommends culturally-specific playgroups and community hubs as an effective model of support to improve early childhood engagement with CALD communities.

CALD Playgroups

Culturally-specific playgroups for newly arrived migrant families with young children are a valuable way to address the needs of CALD communities and play an important role in supporting vulnerable families and children.[17]

VICSEG, with support from the Department of Premier and Cabinet's Multicultural Affairs Division, delivers 40 playgroups to specifically engage CALD communities, including migrant and refugee families from Assyrian-Chaldean, Iranian, Syrian, Iraqi, Hazera, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladesh, Sri-Lankan Tamil, Nepalese, Philippine, South Sudanese, Horn of Africa, Chinese, Vietnamese, Chin Burmese and Karen Burmese backgrounds.

The playgroups are delivered in three models, responsive to the local community context – multicultural playgroups, culturally-specific playgroups and asylum seeker playgroups – with each group lead by a bilingual person.

Playgroups provide children with a supportive environment to develop social skills, adapt to Australian learning environments and build positive relationships.

They also provide valuable opportunities to parents to access social support, build their confidence and understanding of parenting in the Australian context and provide an additional way to access information and other mainstream services, such as mental health and family violence. In turn, this helps to build social cohesion and inclusive communities.

Community Hubs

The National Community Hubs Program is an effective model of connecting migrant families within the local community, and with local schools and mainstream services.

Supported by the Multicultural Affairs Division, the community hubs are currently established in 32 communities in Victoria, with high migrant and refugee populations, using existing family-friendly community facilities.

Early evidence show that the hubs are an effective method for addressing social isolation and community participation for families from CALD backgrounds, particularly for migrant women, as well as improving their understanding of the Australian context and the English language. [18]

For example, the evaluation indicates that the hubs help to build awareness and trust of mainstream services. For example, participating families have a greater understanding of services available, with the evaluation showing they are more likely to understand and access local health services.

The hubs have also been shown to improve the school readiness of children as well as the ability of schools to respond to the needs of families from CALD backgrounds. [19]

Conclusion

Early and effective engagement in a child's life delivers significant social, cultural and economic benefits – not only for the child, but also the family and community more broadly.

As Community Hubs Australia reported in its submission to this inquiry, "Early childhood education is important in preparing young children for kindergarten and school. Research tells us that children who are not appropriately prepared for school when they commence are less likely to do as well at school overall and are more likely to face challenges later in life, compared with their better prepared peers."

Strategic and systemic engagement of parents in early childhood is necessary – more engaged and informed parents can continue the support and learning facilitated in early learning environments in the home.

To increase and improve effective early childhood engagement with CALD communities, we need to improve the data we collect about service users, to strategically target resources and support to those who are underutilising the services.

Improved data collection would also support improved outcome measures on the engagement of CALD communities – which could be supported through longitudinal studies that assist and document the individual, family and community benefits of early childhood engagement.

We need trusted community leaders and representatives who can facilitate engagement and trust in mainstream service providers – but we also need to provide cultural competency training to the staff who provide those services, so that all early childhood services are inclusive and accessible.

Existing early childhood programs that address the needs of CALD communities, such as VICSEG's playgroups and the Community Hubs, are cost-effective options for that could be considered for future investment.

The Commission thanks the Victorian Parliament for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. We welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations further and to work alongside government, community organisations and early childhood providers to improve outcomes for children, their families and the Victorian community.

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