

11 October 2019

Early Learning Association Australia Submission: Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities

Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) is a peak body which works in partnership with early learning providers and parents to deliver our vision of excellence in learning for every child. Our diverse membership base of over 550 service providers managing services at nearly 1,200 locations includes early years management organisations, independent kindergartens, local governments, long day care services, government and independent schools and out of school hours care programs.

ELAA welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission on behalf of our members to the Parliament of Victoria's Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities.

Overview of the Early childhood education and care service system

The early childhood education and care (ECEC) service system encompasses a range of providers, including not-for-profit providers; and for-profit providers which now make up over 50% of the sector.

There are a diverse range of delivery models, including:

- kindergarten
- long day care
- family day care
- in home care
- out of school hours care / holiday care.

In addition, specialist cultural services are provided by organisations such as FKA, VICSEG and the Victorian Inclusion Agency.

The ECEC service system is highly regulated, structured around the rights, safety and wellbeing of children encompassing:

- federal and state funding responsibilities
- a National Quality Framework
- national and state curriculum frameworks
- a national approach to legislation and regulation
- Child Safe Standards (Victorian; but soon to be national standards).

There are seven quality areas of the National Standards which services are assessed against. Quality Area 6 examines Collaborative Partnerships with Family and Community, which encompasses family engagement with services, support for families and parents' views including culture, values and beliefs being respected as well as their collaboration with other organisations and service partners. As indicated by Figure 1, relative to other quality areas, quality area 6 is a strength of the sector.

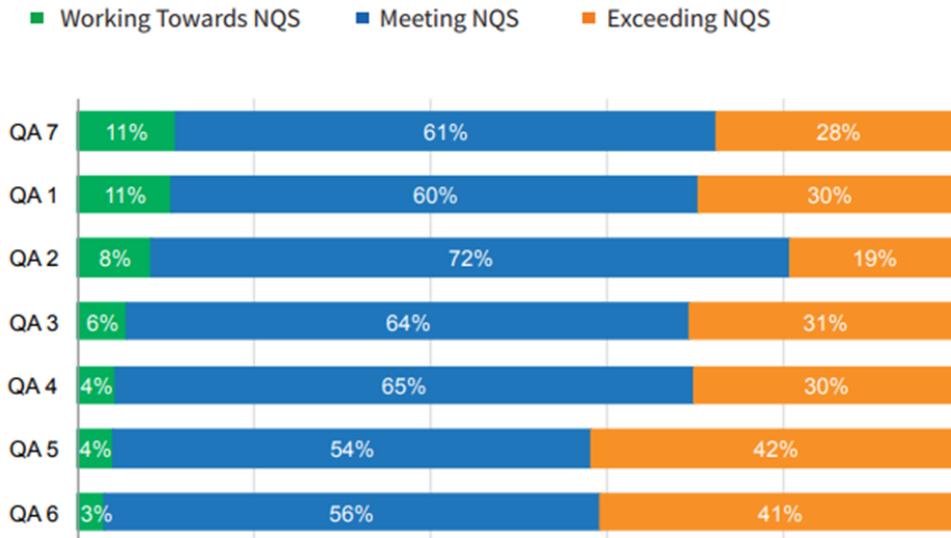


Figure 1: Comparison of quality area ratings of Victorian Services (ACECQA 2019)

Participation and the role of two years of preschool

25.3% of Australian children speak a language other than English (Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 2018). The participation of children from a non-English speaking background in preschool is low relative to their representation in the community¹, however, Victoria children from a NESB participate at a high rate in Child Care Benefit approved services² (Figure 2). Taken together it would seem superficially at least, that the representation/levels of participation across the sector are about right.

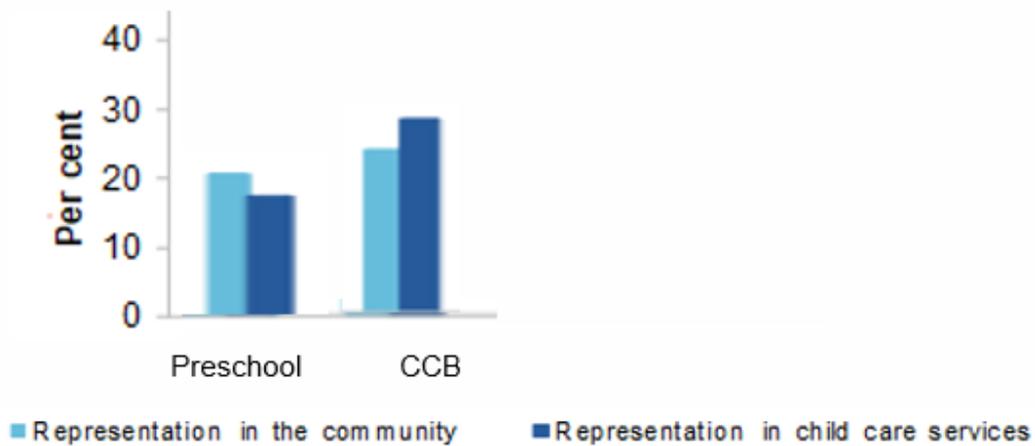


Figure 2: Proportion of non-English speaking background (NESB) children participating in preschool or child care benefit (CCB) services compared to their representation in community (Productivity Commission, 2019)

¹ The data for preschool participation is incomplete.

² The data includes participation of children up to the age of 12 years.

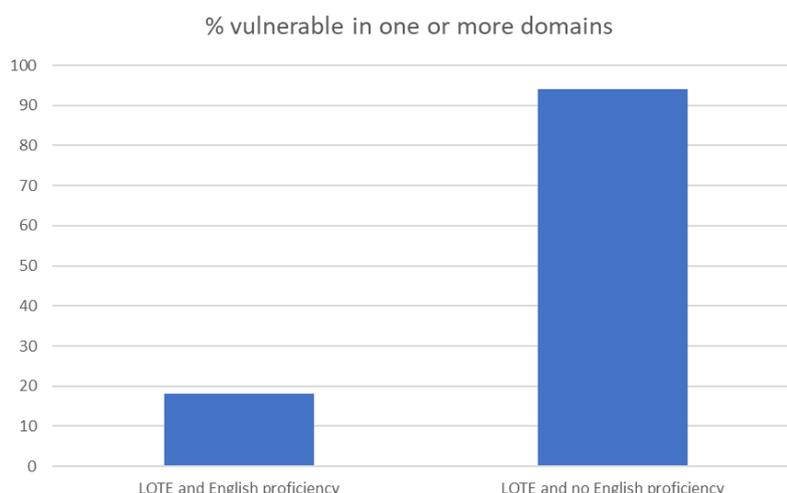


Figure 2: Proportion of NESB children enrolled in ECEC in Victoria 2017 (*Productivity Commission, 2019*)

The Australian Early Development Census demonstrates that almost one in five children start school with a developmental vulnerability in one or more domains³. Children who speak a language other than English and are not proficient in English are more than 90% likely to be vulnerable in one or more domains.

The science behind brain development shows that the two years before school are optimal for learning essential skills for life. Between the ages of three and five years, foundational skills critical for learning are established (Fox and Geddes 2016). Ages three to five years are considered the sweet spot for reducing disadvantage and enhancing readiness for school, setting a child up for life. Quality preschool education led by a bachelor-qualified teacher and warm, responsive language-rich interactions has been shown to be key to the development of children’s abilities (Tayler, 2016).

There is overwhelming evidence of the positive outcomes of an additional year of preschool:

1. Children who are behind in their learning can catch up to their peers and start school ready together
2. More parents enter the workforce, increasing Australia’s productivity.
3. Australia’s declining school performance in international benchmark testing will be turned around.
4. Children are more likely to go on to further education, to be employed and earn more.
5. The national costs of education, justice and health are reduced resulting in overall savings.
6. Increased net GDP of up to \$30 billion cumulative to 2050 (PriceWaterhouse Coopers, 2014).

The State Government’s roll-out of two years of preschool has the potential to make a significant contribution to addressing disadvantage experienced by many children, including those from CALD backgrounds, as well as benefiting their parents and the broader society.

School readiness funding (SRF) is also being provided to kindergartens to address educational disadvantage. SRF aims to building the capacity of services to address disadvantage and must be targeted to one of three areas: communication; wellbeing and access and inclusion based on the Victorian Early Years Learning and

³ AEDC domains are: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge.

Development Framework (the VEYLDF). There is a menu of items which can be chosen by services and some include a CALD emphasis such as

- cultural inclusion support packages
- learning English as an Additional Language in the Early Years
- library of bilingual books.

This year SRF was introduced across 19 local government areas (LGAs) and it will be expanded to all remaining LGAs over the next two years.

Issues and Opportunities

Issues and opportunities which our members have identified are outlined below.

Awareness of the benefits of ECEC

There is anecdotal evidence that there is a low level of awareness of the benefits of early childhood education, particularly among new and emerging CALD communities. Linked to this is helping families understand the nature of the service relationship, including enrolment processes, the requirements for vaccinations and ongoing communication between the service and the family. Having a better understanding of the expectations assists with the process of engagement and supports services to be experienced as welcoming by parents, families and children. Without the understanding, or in some cases, the means to communicate, families miss out on important information such as how they can be involved in the program and expectations with regard to participation, learning support and continuity between the home and the service.

Integrated services

Trusting relationships with services often takes time, and more particularly where there are cultural and language barriers. Minimising the transition at different life stages helps to ensure vulnerable families stay engaged and connected. Integrated services can assist with growing a sense of community and belonging, for example:

- co-location of preschool and primary school
- co-location of preschool with a range of other child and family services, such as preschool, welfare or health services
- community hubs include homework club, literacy for parents, vegie garden, kindergarten.

Interpreting and translation services

Interpreting and translation services, critical at peak periods, such as at enrolment and when planning for and discussing the transition to school with parents, are often not available. Whilst interpreting services for commonly used languages are generally accessible for formal meetings, it is difficult and sometimes not possible to secure an interpreter for other languages and they are not available for less formal circumstances.

In some cases, parents arrive in Australia ahead of their children and are able to speak English. Interpreters to assist children to speak and understand English whilst settling in and to help them build relationships with their peers and with educators would help set these children off to a better start.

One ELAA member has taken steps to bridge the communication and comprehension gap by developing an internal system which details the languages that permanent and casual educators speak and understand, and their availability to support programs across the week. This local initiative has benefited many children, parents and educators; however, the capacity to provide this level of support is not be possible for most services.

Translating standard Department of Education and Training information would support the engagement process, including factsheets about:

- the documentation needed for enrolment, including information about evidence of immunisations

- funding for a second year of kindergarten
- the National Quality Framework and curriculum.

The Victorian Government can increase the engagement of families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in early childhood education by increasing support for cultural support services and interpreting services and developing factsheets in community languages.

Workforce development

A diverse workforce is key to engaging the community. More effort needs to be made to attract and retain staff from local communities. With the roll-out of three-year-old kindergarten from next year, the government needs to consider how to ensure a diverse workforce and support services to engage and develop staff from a CALD background.

Educators and early childhood services need to be flexible to adapt to changing demographics. Support to build the capacity of the workforce to engage across cultures is needed, so educators are confident enough to ask questions about people's culture and to share and learn together with families. In addition, staff need training to recognise and work with children and families affected by trauma such as refugees who have experienced torture and war.

Calculation of SRF funding

The amount of SRF funding for each service is based on the level of disadvantage measured through the Student Family Occupation Education (SFOE), where families are required to report on their current occupation and education. Many migrant families report the education levels they have achieved in their country of origin which may not be recognised in Australia and which is not reflected by their lower skilled occupation. The means to address this disparity need to be developed to ensure services receive what is necessary to address local disadvantage.

Benchmarking

In the development of this submission, it has become apparent that readily available data or benchmarking is not available to look at driving improvements in educational outcomes for children with a CALD background and the engagement of their families across early childhood education.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

ELAA makes the following recommendations on behalf of its members:

1. Grow awareness of the benefits of ECEC, particularly among new communities.
2. Support families to understand the nature of the service relationship and the respective responsibilities, such as enrolment processes and vaccinations
3. Ensure interpreting services are available in peak periods and share innovative practices around day-to-day communication with families who do not speak English
4. Support services to attract and retain staff from local communities.
5. Develop an early childhood workforce strategy which includes strategies for ensuring a diverse workforce
6. Building workforce capacity to engage across cultures
7. Support early childhood educators to recognise and work with children and families affected by trauma such as refugees who have experienced torture and war
8. Develop benchmarks to help drive improvements in the educational outcomes of children with a CALD background and the engagement of their families across ECEC services.

If you have any questions, please contact Lisa Minchin, ELAA Advocacy and Grants Lead, on:

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Lisa's days of work are Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

Sincerely,



David Worland

Chief Executive Officer

Early Learning Association Australia

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