

Submission to the Inquiry into early childhood engagement of CALD communities

October 2019

Submitted to:
Victorian Legislative Assembly, Legal and Social Issues
Committee
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Overview

AMES Australia provides this submission to the Victorian Legislative Assembly, Legal and Social Issues Committee in support of the inquiry into early childhood engagement of CALD communities.

AMES is a statutory authority of the Victorian Government and provides a comprehensive range of settlement services to support newly arrived migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Victoria. AMES also works with the community, business and Government to develop sustainable and effective settlement solutions for the whole Victorian community. AMES evidence-based *Settlement Framework for Social and Economic Participation* addresses successful settlement of newly arrived migrants and refugees through four key domains: Employment, Education, Health and Wellbeing, and Safety and Security.

AMES experience lies in working with migrants and refugees from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and directly, or indirectly, their families. This submission draws on our extensive experience working alongside CALD communities—including direct consultation with mothers from migrant and refugee backgrounds around the terms of this inquiry—and our appraisal of the available research evidence. AMES contribution to this inquiry focuses on early childhood engagement from the perspective of CALD families settling in Australia with young children, including the experiences of primary carers, often CALD women, in accessing and participating in early childhood services.

In summary, we recommend to the Legal and Social Issues Committee:

- 1. That resources be allocated to building awareness amongst CALD communities about the benefits of early childhood services for children's learning and development. This could be achieved through community information sessions and the development of multi-lingual language resources*
- 2. Enhance the sector's ability to support CALD families as they adjust to the Australian education system through a strength-based approach that builds on the cultural strengths of families engaged in early childhood services*
- 3. That early childhood services invest in building a multi-lingual and multicultural workforce to maximise the inclusion of CALD communities while reflecting the diversity of the Victorian population*
- 4. Promote AMES dual-delivery model for vocational courses, such as Certificate III in Early Childhood Education, within the VET sector to support migrant and refugee students' English language development, completion of vocational qualifications, and transition to employment within the early childhood sector*
- 5. That free child care or subsidised child care be extended to other government-funded education and training programs tailored to newly arrived CALD communities, with the intention of improving access and learning outcomes for participants and their children*
- 6. That subsidies available for child care and other early childhood services be increased to enable parents to participate in the workforce, especially families from refugee backgrounds and other disadvantaged groups*
- 7. Promote opportunities for CALD women who are providing unpaid child care and may be experiencing isolation to participate in activities outside of the family unit; whether they be social or employment related*

8. *That evidence-based models for early childhood engagement within CALD communities be promoted within the sector, such as the National Community Hubs Program, and Mother and Child English Language Program.*

We expand on these recommendations in the remainder of this document. We would welcome the opportunity to assist the Committee further in its inquiry, including representations to public hearings where relevant.

Awareness of early childhood education amongst CALD communities

Neuroscience has shown the early years of life, particularly birth to eight years, are critical for children's learning and development. Access to early childhood programs and services can provide young children with a foundation for future learning and achievements and has shown consistent positive short and long-term effects across the world including in the US, Europe, Canada and New Zealand. However children who are under-represented in preschool programs include those from some CALD communities as well as other disadvantaged cohorts.¹

Victorian families from CALD backgrounds can access a range of early childhood services, including maternal health nurses, child care, family day care, kinder, and playgroups. However, cultural barriers can discourage use. For example, the concept of child care services delivered by a government or private provider may be culturally unfamiliar to communities that have a traditionally communal and/or family approach to caring for and raising children. In addition, there is often low awareness of the value of early years learning in CALD communities. A recent interstate study, for example, found that 18.4% of refugee/CALD parents believed the first five years was not very important for children's future learning, compared with 3.7% of other parents.² As a result, children from CALD backgrounds are less likely to attend an early childhood education and care service before they start school.

In Victoria, early childhood services were incorporated into the Department of Education in 2008, when the Department's five-year *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* was launched. As part of its strategy, the Victorian government encouraged families facing socioeconomic disadvantage to access kindergarten by providing a fee subsidy. Included in the eligibility criteria were those entering Australia on the refugee and humanitarian program.

Recommendation 1: *That resources be allocated to building awareness amongst CALD communities about the benefits of early childhood services for children's learning and development. This could be achieved through community information sessions and the development of multi-lingual language resources.*

¹ O'Connell, M, Fox, S, Hinz, B & Cole, H 2016, *Quality Early Education for All: Fostering, Entrepreneurial, Resilient and Capable Learners*, Mitchell Institute, Melbourne, <<http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/QualityEarly-Education-for-All-FINAL.pdf>>

² Winter P and Luddy S (2010), *Engaging Families in the Early Childhood Development Story: Research Findings from a Survey of Parents of Children from Birth to Age 8*.

Improving CALD families school readiness

Evidence indicates that all children benefit from high-quality preschool education, but the gains are greatest for children from disadvantaged family backgrounds who are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in language and cognitive skills when they enter school.³

Preschool education supports children from CALD backgrounds to engage in an English language learning environment from a young age. In AMES experience, CALD families accessing these services often places children in mixed language groups where English is the shared language. Storytelling and singing songs are activities which help to expose children to English and prepare them for mainstream schooling. When parents are engaged in these activities alongside their children, such as in playgroups, research has shown that both the parent and child can benefit. Parents from CALD backgrounds have identified benefits that include the ability to develop stronger English language skills and a stronger understanding of “Australian culture”.⁴ Preschool education also exposes CALD children and their parents to a social environment that is often outside of their immediate community.

However it is important to recognise that some CALD communities may need time and support to adjust to ‘norms’ and expectations within the Australian education system. AMES understands that due to culturally-specific approaches to parenting, some CALD communities can initially feel a sense of unease or ‘shame’ when their children misbehave and are disciplined while under the care of a carer or educator, or are uncertain about leaving their child with a ‘stranger’.

Recommendation 2: *Enhance the sector’s ability to support CALD families as they adjust to the Australian education system through a strength-based approach that builds on the cultural strengths of families engaged in early childhood services.*

Cultural diversity in early childhood services

Maternal health nurses and other post-natal services available to CALD communities are strengthened when families have access to bi-lingual or bi-cultural workers within the hospital or community health setting. Some communities are unfamiliar with the range of services available to them, and AMES experiences shows that they can benefit greatly from being able to trust and talk to someone in their own language who can guide them and help to alleviate any confusion, and provide families with significant support during the early childhood years.

In group learning environments for pre-school children, many CALD communities highly value their child’s carer or educator sharing the same cultural and linguistic background as their own. Cultural diversity in early childhood services can help to improve access for CALD families, and can help children to learn or retain their parents’ heritage language and culture. Smaller groups, such as family day care, provide a similarly rich learning environment for CALD communities. For example, the *Supported Playgroups* program run by the Victorian Cooperative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) caters for families of different cultural backgrounds, giving them the confidence and security of attending a welcoming play environment. AMES consultations have also identified that CALD communities also value their child’s carer or educator having strong English language skills and an understanding of ‘Australian culture’.

³ https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/A-review-effects-of-ECE_AA.pdf

⁴ Hand, K., Baxter, J., Sweid, R., Bluett-Boyd, N., & Price-Robertson, R. (2014). *Access to early childhood education in Australia*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Recommendation 3: *That early childhood services invest in building a multi-lingual and multicultural workforce to maximise the inclusion of CALD communities while reflecting the diversity of the Victorian population.*

Facilitating course completion and employment

AMES delivers Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care incorporating specialist English language support for migrants and refugees. All courses are delivered by dual qualified teachers (that is with both the vocational qualification and a TESOL qualification) or by a teaching pair with the combined qualifications. This contextualised English language learning supports the development of both English language competency and vocational skills to ensure that CALD women can successfully complete the course (approximately 90% of enrolments in Child Care and Aged Care vocation-specific courses at AMES are women). This has proven to create an efficient and effective learning environment whereby qualification completion are evidenced, and contributes to building a multicultural workforce within the sector that better reflects a diverse Victorian population.

- In 2018-19 **83.7% of learners completed their course in Early Childhood Education and Care at AMES** – 27% higher than the Victorian state average
- In this period AMES **facilitated 183 work placements** for participants of vocational courses and most students are offered employment after they complete their work placement

Recommendation 4: *Promote AMES dual-delivery model for vocational courses, such as Certificate III in Early Childhood Education, within the VET sector to support migrant and refugee students' English language development, completion of vocational qualifications, and transition to employment within the early childhood education sector.*

Access to education and employment opportunities

Free child care through the AMEP

Migrants and refugees who have low levels of English on arrival in Australia are eligible for 510 hours of English language tuition in the federal Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). In some cases, clients arriving under the Humanitarian Program are eligible for an additional 200 hours. To ensure that the program is accessible to all eligible clients, free child care is provided.

Subsidised child care services within AMEP provide a significant benefit to clients who are focussed on learning English and settling in Australia. Without this service, we believe it is likely that many clients with child care responsibilities would be unable to effectively learn English, gain information to assist in initial orientation, meet other people, build their social networks and develop a sense of belonging that enhances overall settlement. Provision of child care also provides significant benefit to the children who are exposed to opportunities for early learning, preparation for schooling in Australia and in most cases the opportunity to spend time in an English speaking environment.

AMES experience shows that there has been significant uptake of subsidised child care services:

- In 2016-17 when the AMES Consortium delivered the AMEP in Victoria, **1,585 child care places were provided for 1,351 AMEP clients** – an average of 1.17 child care places per client.
- The AMES Consortium currently delivers AMEP in regional Victoria and in 2018-19, **132 child care places were provided for 71 AMEP clients** – an average of 1.85 child care places per client.

Unlike in AMEP, however, the lack of access to subsidised child care in other forms of adult education and training (such as programs funded in Victoria through Skills First) may prevent CALD parents from fully participating and maximising their learning outcomes.

Recommendation 5: *That free child care or subsidised child care be extended to other government-funded education and training programs tailored to newly arrived CALD communities, with the intention of improving access and learning outcomes for participants and their children.*

Enhancing workforce participation

Accessible child care is an important component to CALD communities' workforce participation. Newly arrived migrants and refugees often lack family support and social networks to identify possible child care options as part of plans to enter the workforce.

Child care can be expensive for newly arrived migrants and refugees. In AMES experience, those who arrive in Australia with low levels of English often commence work in entry level employment, on low pay scales and in insecure work conditions. While often this initial work does not utilise skills it is viewed as a first step in the Australian labour market and a way to gain Australian work experience. Paying for private child care services at market rates thus represents a significant burden on CALD households' cost of living.

Current child care subsidies (maximum of 100 hours per fortnight per child) are hard to manage for working families from CALD backgrounds. Average hourly fees for all child care service types increased by 5.8 per cent between September 2017 and September 2018⁵ and there can be additional costs involved such as administration fees. With some families having no access to family support, the high cost of child care may therefore impact on CALD workforce participation. Our consultations have identified that this can be extremely frustrating for newly arrived migrants and refugees who want nothing more than to contribute to Australian society. Some find a way around this, for example by one parent choosing to work night shifts, so that either parent is always available to care for the children.

Recommendation 6: *That subsidies available for child care and other early childhood services be increased to enable parents to participate in the workforce, especially families from refugee backgrounds and other disadvantaged groups.*

CALD mothers and unpaid child care

As also evident in the Australian born population, primary care of children within CALD families often falls on the mother. ABS data shows that:

- **38% of unemployed women born overseas provide unpaid child care**, compared to 24.2% men
- **A majority of women on permanent visas** - skilled, humanitarian, or family - who are not in the labour force (ie. not working or looking for work) **provide unpaid child care**

⁵https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2019/April/New_Child_Care_Subsidy

- **Even amongst migrants who are employed, there are high rates of unpaid child care provision—particularly higher for women—across all three permanent visa groups⁶**

When child care responsibilities are primarily falling on women in CALD communities, it can lead to issues of isolation for newly arrived CALD women who may miss out on opportunities to learn English, meet new people, and participate in the community. If unable to work due to child caring responsibilities, these women also can miss out on opportunities to resume their career in Australia or start a new one. In some CALD communities, there may also be a reluctance to leave the house due to language barriers or other fears. CALD women from refugee backgrounds who have experienced trauma or torture may suffer from separation anxiety if and when their child is no longer in their primary care, until they build up trust. There are several initiatives that are successfully addressing this issue, such as the National Community Hubs Program (see more below).

Recommendation 7: *Promote opportunities for CALD women who are providing unpaid child care and may be experiencing isolation to participate in activities outside of the family unit; whether they be social or employment related.*

Effective early childhood programs and services for CALD communities

Recommendation 8: *That evidence-based models for early childhood engagement within CALD communities be promoted within the sector, such as the National Community Hubs Program and Mother and Child English Language Program.*

National Community Hubs Program

Evaluation of the National Community Hubs Program (NCHP) demonstrate its effectiveness in engaging CALD communities in early childhood education. The NCHP focuses on:

- engaging families in culturally diverse communities
- connecting preschool children into playgroups and preparing them for school
- helping women and children learn and practice English.

In the first six months of 2019:

- children accessed playgroups and early years sessions 41,205 times
- children accessed language and literacy programs 10,172 times
- 45 hubs were able to support women with ‘childminding’ (see definition below)
- hubs employed 23 women as childminders.⁷

Childminding is central for Hub participants to engage with English language activities that focus primarily on adults. Childminding for pre-school aged children is a free service that Hub participants can utilise to support their participation in English programs. A childminder can be an employed Hub participant or professional, however the role does not require a formal child care certificate or qualification. In some Hubs children are minded in the room where parents are undertaking adult activities. This may be because of the limited space available to separate children from the adults, or it may be that the children or the parents are uncomfortable being separated.

⁶ ABS Census data 2016

⁷ NCHP Mid-year update 2019

In 2018 AMES was engaged by Community Hubs Australia to evaluate the adult models of English language learning delivery in Hubs. Four broad models were identified:

1. Informally learning English during activities with children
2. Informally learning English during activities in participant interest areas
3. Formally learning English in Hub classes in non-accredited programs
4. Formally learning English or other accredited programs

In model 1, adults acquire English informally or incidentally during programs directed towards their children. Playgroups are staffed by volunteer facilitators or possibly Hub Leaders themselves. Playgroup activities are designed to gently introduce the children to English and education and, indirectly, the parents. The playgroup activities are intentionally low-cost and able to be reproduced at home. English is used in speaking to the children and the adults, while Story-Time introduces children (and pre-literacy) adults to handling and interpreting printed materials in books. Activities include 'reading' picture books and singing songs in English with accompanying actions.

Mother and Child English Language Program

Supporting Parents-Developing Children (SPDC) in the City of Hume offered a suite of complementary programs designed to engage CALD mothers and their preschool children between 2011-2014. The Mother and Child English Language Program (MCELP) combined an accredited English class for mothers, following by a playgroup where mothers and children engage in a shared learning program. The programs are community-based in Hume and located in early years school/community hubs and other community settings. The English class is customised to focus on early childhood development and ideal for women studying in the AMEP as it allows them to become familiar with early childhood services in Australia whilst developing their language skills and achieving a formal qualification in EAL.

The English class is structured around themes that:

- support an understanding of early childhood development
- build mothers' knowledge of and ability to access local early years' services
- promote school readiness in children.

The playgroup is a semi-structured session that always includes a story, a song and an activity, facilitated by the playgroup leaders. The playgroup session has a theme that matches that of the preceding English class, so language development and vocabulary is reinforced. Mothers are actively engaged in the play with their children and playgroup leaders model a range of interactive behaviours and activities that mothers can 'take home' and use with their children in the home environment.