

18 October 2019

Committee Manager  
Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Committee Members,

## **Victorian Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities**

Uniting Vic.Tas welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities by the Victorian Legal and Social Issues Committee.

Uniting Vic.Tas is a not-for-profit, community services organisation that has worked alongside local communities across Victoria and Tasmania for over 100 years. We deliver a broad range of services in the areas of child and family services, disability, mental health, crisis and housing and homelessness, financial well-being, alcohol and other drugs, early learning and employment.

Uniting supports children and their families, providing early childhood education and family services to strengthen the wellbeing of families and their local communities. We are one of the largest providers of early learning services in the state, with 60 early learning services across Victoria and Tasmania. We have the depth and scale to understand the broader need for affordable, accessible, culturally responsive and family-centred services in areas such as health, early years of schooling, local community programs and child and family services. However, for the purposes of this inquiry, we have focused on the critical role that early learning services play in giving CALD children the best start to life. For us, this means creating possibility, opportunity and hope for CALD families.

The attached submission reflects our expertise and experience in enhancing early childhood engagement for CALD communities. In accordance with our commitment to give voice to the lived experience of consumers, this submission draws on input provided by mothers from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In developing this submission, we also sought the feedback and advice of our front-line staff in our Early Learning Services working in high settlement areas.

We hope that these practical insights highlight both the challenges and enablers of engaging with CALD communities and demonstrate the need for stronger government investment in services that are welcoming, inclusive, respectful and culturally safe for CALD children, families and communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to this important inquiry. We would be pleased to provide further input on any of the areas covered in this submission.

Yours sincerely,



Vicki-Anne Herman  
**Executive Officer, Early Learning**



# Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

**Submission by Uniting Vic.Tas**



**Uniting**

# 1 Uniting's experience

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## 1.1 Our experience

Uniting Vic.Tas (Uniting) is a not-for-profit, community services organisation that has worked alongside local communities across Victoria and Tasmania for over 100 years. We deliver a broad range of services in the areas of child and family services, disability, mental health, crisis and housing and homelessness, financial well-being, alcohol and other drugs, early learning and employment.

Uniting supports children and families to create, learn and grow through our high quality learning services. Our passionate, skilled educators nurture children to be confident and creative learners. We see every child as an individual with their own interests and personality.

Uniting supports children and their families, providing early childhood education and family services to strengthen the wellbeing of families and their local communities.

Our 60 early learning services across Victoria and Tasmania have service models that seek to meet family and community needs. Our early learning, family day care, occasional care, kindergarten, out-of-school hours care, and vacation care services help strengthen families, enabling parents to work while balancing their parenting responsibilities. Our Kindergarten Inclusion Support and Preschool Field Officers provide further support for children with additional needs, promoting and strengthening a best start to learning.

## 1.2 Our guiding principles

Our guiding principles for early learning services include:

**Inclusion:** Each child, their family, and caregivers deserve to be active participants in learning, influence the learning environment, and feel a sense of belonging in their community.

**Child as a citizen:** We recognise each child as a citizen and value their rights in our services and in the wider community.

**Equity:** We actively support all children, families, and caregivers to access opportunities to thrive and participate in society.

**Learning:** Learning is more than teaching. We create experiences and environments for all children to learn about themselves, other people, and their world.

**Quality:** We strive for continuous improvement and take action to deliver consistently high-quality education and care.

## 1.3 Our vision

As the largest early learning provider in Victoria, we understand the integral role that early learning can play in enhancing CALD community connectedness, inclusion and sense of belonging. **Giving children the best start to life is at the core of our work.** This means creating possibility, opportunity and hope for all children and families. It also means providing supportive pathways into our early childhood services for CALD families early in settlement.

Our vision for CALD children and families is that they are enabled and empowered to participate fully in Victoria's social, cultural and economic life. To achieve this, services across the spectrum - from health services, early childhood education and care, early years of schooling, local community programs through to child and family support services - need to be affordable, accessible, inclusive, culturally responsive and family-centred. This means providing both accessible and responsive universal services, as well as specialised services tailored to CALD community needs.

From an early learning perspective, we see continued investment in early learning, through recent initiatives such as funded 3 year old kindergarten, as central to improving social, educational and economic outcomes for this population.

We believe that improving early childhood engagement must be underpinned by what CALD children, families and communities identify as important in their lives. Correspondingly, it is Victoria's services that must make the effort to understand and respond to the needs, preferences and wishes.

A genuine and effective approach to improving early childhood outcomes for CALD communities will require Victorian Government commitment to implementation of the practical actions that emerge from this inquiry. We know that much of this information is already available through Victorian Auditor General's Office (VAGO) reports and community consultation processes on numerous state multicultural policies. Now it is time for investment to match these policy commitments. Failing to do so risks diminishing community trust that the Victorian Government is listening and prepared to act to make a genuine difference.

## **1.4 Input for this submission**

Our submission draws on the experiences of CALD families, backed up by early learning service staff. At Uniting we advocate for, with and alongside our consumers to help confront injustice and effect real change for vulnerable people and communities. We know that quite often it is the power of people's personal experiences that have the most impact in this work. We are grateful to the people who share their personal stories with us. And we often hear from them about how empowering and positive the experience is for them.

We hope that the consumer feedback featured in our submission will help the Committee to understand the lived experience and suggestions that CALD families propose to enhance early childhood engagement.

## 1.5 Key recommendations

This submission makes a number of broad recommendations to enhance early childhood engagement for CALD families, which are outlined below. These recommendations are complimented by some very practical and pragmatic actions featured throughout the submission that our staff and consumers have proposed.

Theme	Key Recommendations
<b>Inclusion and participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support early learning services to build on activities that <b>bring families together</b> such as supported playgroups and parenting sessions with trained professionals.</li> <li>• Extend the <b>community engagement approach</b> adopted by Uniting's Komak Afghan Community Support Group to promote participation in early childhood services.</li> <li>• Invest in targeted <b>community capacity building</b> of CALD community leaders, elders, religious groups and community-led organisations to promote the benefits of early childhood education to CALD families.</li> <li>• Promote training of CALD volunteers to <b>support employment pathways</b> for bicultural workers in social services, health services and community development.</li> <li>• Support funded services to establish community participation frameworks that train and empower greater CALD <b>consumer engagement</b> in service development.</li> </ul>
<b>Community awareness and service navigation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider <b>streamlining kindergarten enrolment processes</b> to make the system easier to navigate.</li> <li>• <b>Promote the importance of early childhood education</b> to CALD communities through more translated information, community events, information days, and school referrals.</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural competency and trauma-informed care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide financial support for <b>celebrating cultural activities and events</b> at state-funded services as part of government service agreements.</li> <li>• Invest in greater effort to strengthen children's cultural connections and <b>language acquisition</b> of parent's first language in early childhood services and school.</li> <li>• More opportunities for <b>training and professional development</b> in cultural competency, trauma-informed care and countering racism, across all sectors.</li> <li>• Better oversight and <b>benchmarking</b> of services to drive quality improvements.</li> <li>• <b>Operationalise multicultural policy</b> principles into practical actions that are well-funded, monitored and reported on regularly.</li> </ul>
<b>Workforce diversity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a <b>CALD workforce strategy</b> for the implementation of 3 year old kindergarten to expand the bicultural workforce.</li> </ul>
<b>Language services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop strategies to <b>improve availability of language services for early learning centres and kindergartens</b>, particularly during peak enrolment times, in rural and rural areas and for new and emerging languages.</li> <li>• Allocate yearly budgets for all types of children's services to develop <b>translated, culturally appropriate resources and tools</b> to help with communication, acceptance, belonging and education.</li> </ul>
<b>Flexible funding and accessible service models</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that <b>government program guidelines allow flexibility</b> for the time needed to establish trusting long-term relationships with CALD families, drawing on best practice examples such as the Cradle to Kinder program.</li> <li>• Extend <b>outreach services and drop-in clinics</b> at playgroups, kindergartens, childcare centres, settlement services, and public housing to improve accessibility of universal services (e.g. health care), language programs and enrolment support.</li> <li>• Expand initial investments in <b>integrated service models</b>, such as community hubs, multidisciplinary team approaches and co-located services, that provide holistic care and improve accessibility of universal services for CALD families.</li> <li>• Improve avenues for service <b>collaboration and partnership</b>.</li> </ul>
<b>Equitable access to services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider <b>increasing financial subsidies and supports</b> for CALD families to attend playgroup, kindergarten and childcare.</li> <li>• Develop strategies to <b>address unmet demand for kindergarten spaces</b>, especially in areas with a high density of CALD children.</li> <li>• Consider <b>practical barriers</b> faced by CALD families in accessing services as part of service design and planning for early childhood services.</li> </ul>

## 2 Introduction

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### 2.1 Context

The 2016 Census shows that 33% of the Australian population were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Around 49% of Australians had either been born overseas or one or both of their parents had been born overseas. Over 21% of people speak a language other than English at home, with over 300 languages identified.

Several audits by VAGO have highlighted the ongoing systemic barriers to service access and engagement faced by culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Victoria. These include VAGO reports on:

- *Effectively Planning for Population Growth* (2017) which found that, in areas of rapid growth, the government struggles to meet its policy objectives of providing universal access to both maternal and child health services and kindergarten services.
- *Access to Services by Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers* (2014) which found that this population face challenges accessing state services due to financial and eligibility barriers, lack of transport, language barriers and inadequate support to navigate services.

There have been a series of recent Victorian Government investments in CALD children's engagement. Key programs include:

- School Readiness Funding which provides an evolving menu of supports:
  - » Cultural inclusion support packages
  - » Programs and services that target speech, language and literacy
  - » Allied health supports (e.g. speech pathologists, psychologists, occupational therapists)
  - » Programs and services that inform educators and families about trauma-informed practice, secure attachment and mental health
  - » Resources and programs to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of children
  - » Support for CALD children, and families
  - » Tools for parents to support their child's development
- Early Start Kindergarten and Pre-Purchased Kindergarten Places Initiatives
- Supported Playgroups
- Best Start Early Years Initiatives
- Language programs:
  - » Funding for bilingual preschools
- 3 Year Old Kindergarten subsidies

Despite these efforts, there are areas for significant improvement in young children's involvement in health services, early childhood education and care, early years of schooling, local community programs, and child and family support services.

### 2.2 Diversity of experience among the CALD population

People from CALD backgrounds are not a homogenous group, rather, the experiences of CALD children and families arriving in Victoria vary widely. Some clear distinctions can be made based on different visa pathways, trauma histories, time and mode of arrival and the level of family and community support available upon arrival in Australia. Some distinctions include:

- Australian citizens or migrants on permanent visas who settled in Australia and have had children in Australia
- Migrants on Skilled Working Visas and their families (e.g. on Partner Visas)
- People arriving through the family reunification programs
- Overseas students on temporary visas, who have difficulty accessing services, including maternity services, when they have children in Victoria

- Refugee families and refugee minors on permanent humanitarian visas
- Refugee women and their children on permanent Women at Risk Visas
- Refugees on Temporary Protection Visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas
- Parents and children seeking asylum on a range of bridging visas, lapsed visas or no visa
- Children born in Australia to parents who are seeking asylum yet currently have no legal status as Australian citizens.

Some populations have experienced significant trauma as part of their pre-arrival experiences and this can have ongoing impacts throughout settlement. For example, prior to arrival, refugees and people seeking asylum may have experienced some or all of the following: forced displacement, prolonged periods in refugee camps or marginalisation in urban settings, exposure to violence and abuse of human rights, loss and/or separation from family members, deprivation, periods of extreme poverty, severe constraints on access to health, education, employment and income support, and prolonged uncertainty about the future (VAGO, 2014). As a result, the settlement needs for refugees and people seeking asylum can be significant and complex. Post-arrival stressors relating to the refugee determination process and experiences in detention centres also have well-documented impacts on health, mental health, and wellbeing including for children (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004).

In the context of this inquiry, it is important to note that anyone on a temporary visa will have restricted access to government services such as income support, concessions, hospital services, primary care (e.g. Medicare ineligible), the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and other supports requiring permanent residency or citizenship (Liberty Victoria, 2018). These restrictions impact the ability of CALD families and children to participate in Victorian society.

Time of arrival is another critical factor - as recent arrivals face additional challenges of prioritising multiple settlement needs, such as learning English, looking for work and appropriate housing as well as enrolling children in school. This group often rely heavily on their community volunteering support to help them to settle in Victoria, especially if they do not have existing family connections in Australia.

This inquiry could focus its attention on exploring how to improve CALD community engagement in rural and regional areas, given the recent Commonwealth immigration policy shift towards regional settlement. The Australian Early Development Census (2018), for example, reveals the developmental vulnerability of children in rural and regional communities generally, which can be exacerbated for CALD communities who are already negotiating competing settlement priorities. We know that there are well-documented approaches supporting successful settlement, service integration and community engagement that have emerged in rural and regional areas such as Shepparton, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong and Nhill (for social and economic impacts see Deloitte Access Economics & AMES Australia, 2017). Lessons learned from this work could be used to strengthen and improve outcomes more broadly.

### **Factors that Support Rural and Regional Settlement**

Since 2010, approximately 160 Karen refugees have resettled in Nhill, a small agricultural town in north western Victoria. An analysis of social and economic impacts of rural resettlement in Nhill by Deloitte Access Economics and AMES Australia (2015) found that employment was critical to rural settlement along with other contributing factors such as:

- Strong leadership in the host community
- A host community which is well prepared for the new settlers
- Initial accommodation for the new arrivals
- Support for the new families
- Management of the degree and complexity of 'cultural adjustment' on both sides
- Strong leadership in the community that is settling
- Potential settlers prepared for the new environment.



## 3 Early Learning service perspectives

Uniting consulted with staff from some of our Early Learning services in areas of high CALD settlement to get their perspective on the practices and actions required which would improve early childhood engagement of CALD communities. These themes are summarised below:

### 3.1 Inclusion and participation

#### 3.1.1 Parental participation in early childhood learning

Our staff stress the importance of providing the space and opportunity for families to come together at kindergarten and childcare to make connections with staff and create networks amongst themselves. These opportunities promote trust, engagement and community connection, as families develop friendships and support each other outside of the service. Engaging parents in early childhood learning activities also helps alleviate any anxieties about what their children do at school, understand the value of early learning and engage socially.

**Practical actions:** Staff at our early childhood services offer opportunities for families to participate in education sessions, experiences and activities. Some practical activities include:

- Engaging CALD families in facilitated/supported play groups (see below)
- Inviting families into the kindergarten program to foster friendships among families
- Inviting an entire family in for a meeting (e.g. immediate, cousin, aunt and uncle)
- Supporting parents to attend training with service providers offered by some councils (e.g. Darebin Council's Parent Education Group)
- Providing parents with opportunities to engage with other families in parenting sessions led by professionals to address issues raised in parent-teacher meetings (e.g. sleep, nutrition)
- Inviting families in to share aspects of their culture, come in for cooking experiences, share dancing and/or music and read to children in different languages
- Participating in statewide activities such as the Victorian Premier's Reading Challenge
- Setting up regular local activities such as a weekly drumming workshop for children.

#### Best Practice example: Supported playgroups

The supported playgroup model focuses on supporting the development and wellbeing of both children and their parents, together. Supported playgroups are facilitated by a paid facilitator who is a trained early childhood educator and aim to support families with particular needs or vulnerabilities by providing opportunities for parents to meet and share experiences, and for children to play, learn and socialise (Jackson, 2013). Supported playgroups offer an option for families who may not be able to effectively engage with, feel included in, and benefit from parent-led community playgroups, including CALD families (Warr et al., 2013; Berthelsen et al., 2012; Mulcahy et al., 2010). Some supported playgroups operate as mobile services to enhance the service's ability to reach families who are marginalised from mainstream services (Plowman, 2008). Uniting currently runs supported playgroups in rural and regional locations such as Sale and Ballarat.

Our staff suggest that activities which are well-planned, structured and communicated can help create trust and give families the confidence to attend. In Dandenong, our Komak Afghan Community Support Group provides a model of CALD community engagement with young people and their families (see below), which could be applied to early childhood services.

#### Key recommendations:

- Support early learning services to build on activities that bring families together such as supported playgroups and parenting sessions with trained professionals.
- Extend the community engagement approach adopted by Uniting's Komak Afghan Community Support Group to promote participation in early childhood services.

### **Best Practice example: Komak Afghan Community Support Group**

Uniting's Komak program is a culturally sensitive community strengthening and resilience building program for Afghan communities in the South East of Melbourne. It was developed in consultation with the Afghan community. Komak is available to all the people in the Afghan community, including Hazara, Pashtun and Tajik families. Young people, their peers, families, community leaders and professionals are encouraged to reach out to the program.

Komak is building protective factors for young people and supporting families to better connect to services including: improving job access; mental health and alcohol and drug services; strengthening leadership in young people and women; increasing women's social participation; providing sports and recreation; engaging fathers; building relationships with religious and community leaders; and enhancing sector cultural competence.

A secondary consultation service is provided through Komak to local agencies assist them to deliver culturally appropriate services to the Afghan community. Since initial funding the program has gained recognition and community members are engaging with the program activities. Community leaders are starting to engage more substantially with the work of the program and the program has been refunded following a positive external evaluation. The program hired Afghan workers from the local community, drawing on existing community and stakeholder networks to reach into the community and to find appropriate candidates.

### **3.1.2 Community engagement and employment pathways**

CALD community leaders, elders, religious groups and community-led organisations often have direct contact with newly settling families, and play a key role in creating trust, educating communities about the value of early childhood education and providing practical advice on services available (Foundation House, 2016).

Yet, community leaders and word-of-mouth community networks are not currently being well-supported to promote the benefits of early childhood education to CALD families. The Victorian Government funds community grants through the Capacity Building and Participation Program to boost participation, inclusion and contribution of multicultural communities. However, these grants have a broad remit and largely miss opportunities to prioritise building community capacity to educate families about the value of early childhood engagement.

Our staff report that established CALD communities are often engaged in volunteering their support for new arrivals settling in Victoria. Services, particularly in rural and regional areas, also rely on established CALD communities for support. However, these activities are generally not financially remunerated or widely acknowledged by CALD communities as volunteering.

In our view, volunteering provides an opportunity to create employment pathways for CALD families, but more targeted effort is required to promote training and employment of bicultural workers in social services, health services and community development. Along with improving employment outcomes for CALD communities, enhancing workforce diversity would also promote greater service participation (see page 18). Our staff suggest building on community connections by supporting established communities to set up cultural play groups or language groups to help introduce recently arrived families into the Australian education system.

Gender dynamics in different cultures was another key issue identified by staff that requires additional consideration. For example, women in some cultures may not be used to going out alone and helping support these women to take children to kindergarten or school is a significant cultural change that requires more community education and capacity building.

#### **Key recommendations:**

- Invest in targeted community capacity building of CALD community leaders, elders, religious groups and community-led organisations to promote the benefits of early childhood education to CALD families.
- Promote training of CALD volunteers to support employment pathways for bicultural workers in social services, health services and community development.

### 3.1.3 CALD community engagement in service design and development

Funded services could be strengthened with more inclusive governance structures and mechanisms to support listening to, understanding and responding to CALD community voices in a long-term and strategic manner. Co-designing programs that meet CALD community needs and preferences will enhance trust and engagement. Currently, government consults with CALD communities through, for example, annual consultations by the Victorian Multicultural Commission but it is unclear whether issues identified are fed into government decision-making processes about resourcing or policy and program development.

Consumer voice is at the core of the work we do. We would like to see government work with funded services to train and empower CALD community participation in the decisions that affect them. Purposeful community engagement requires long-term government investment.

**Key recommendation:** Support funded services to establish community participation frameworks that train and empower CALD consumer engagement in service development.

## 3.2 Community awareness and service navigation

CALD families, particularly recent arrivals, can be quite isolated and do not have the supports that they would have in their country of origin. Our staff are concerned that families who are not proficient in English and lack family or community support face challenges in relation to:

- Knowing what services are available, how to access services, understanding eligibility criteria for entitlements (e.g. for approved hours) and being aware of costs.
- Understanding how to navigate early learning services and the processes involved (e.g. applying for the childcare subsidy or enrolling in kindergarten).
- Completing paperwork required to enrol in services (noting that staff are not funded to help with the paperwork of CALD communities, yet this burden often falls to them).
- Navigating phone systems and knowing when to return phone calls from external agencies, especially for appointments. To external agencies this may appear as disengagement, when it actually relates to services system not adapting to the needs of CALD families.
- Knowing what to chase up and how. For example, a staff member recalled conducting home visits with a local pre-school field officer to understand why some family's applications for NDIS had not proceeded, only to find out that applications were held up waiting for information that parents were not aware of, further delaying their NDIS entry
- Understanding different council processes when moving between local council areas.

Translated resources, community events, information sessions with bicultural workers and local school referrals were identified by staff as crucial for promoting early childhood services. In our experience, families may skip early learning and go straight to school as this is where they know they "have to go". Schools can help referring and promoting early childhood services to improve participation for younger siblings, extended family and community members.

#### Key recommendations:

- Consider streamlining kindergarten enrolment processes to make the system easier to navigate.
- Promote the importance of early childhood education to CALD communities through more translated information, community events, information days, and school referrals.

## 3.3 Cultural competency and trauma-informed care

*"Enablers? Having their beliefs, values, language and culture recognised and respected within the community and including within a kindergarten or childcare service..."*

Uniting early learning worker

As the *Belonging, Being, Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (2009) states: "Children are born belonging to a culture, which is not only influenced by traditional

practices, heritage and ancestral knowledge, but also by the experiences, values and beliefs of individual families and communities.” Respecting diversity means valuing and reflecting on practices, values and beliefs. There are several ways our staff identify that cultural competency can be improved, outlined below.

### 3.3.1 Cultural events and activities

*“Child and family culture is shared and embedded into our program throughout the year. [It’s] not just a token ‘Cultural Day’, children and family don’t turn on and off their culture or religion for one day – it is their life.”*

Uniting early learning worker

Our staff stress the importance of embedding cultural activities and events into learning programs to promote inclusive services, create a sense of belonging and feeling valued and deepen community understanding of diverse cultures. Our child care and kindergarten services promote families having their beliefs, values, language and culture recognised within the service and the broader community is integral to the service ethos.

**Practical actions:** One of our services reports promoting diversity and inclusion by:

- Ensuring families see their culture at the service (e.g. flags, pictures, artefacts, food).
- Inviting families in to share aspects of their culture, come in for cooking experiences, share dancing, dress-ups, books and music and read to children in different languages.
- Having a multicultural and diverse program which acknowledges and respects many different cultures, values, celebrations and beliefs.
- Building respectful relationships, inviting families to participate in service events and sharing cultural celebrations acknowledging cultural origins of the families at their service.
- Providing foods from different cultures and respecting family’s food choices (e.g. halal).
- Hosting a weekly Mandarin and Italian program.
- Facilitating strong links in the local community with cultural groups (e.g. the Vietnamese Women’s Group) and through the local Neighbourhood House.

Financial support for activities like these often come from service budgets, as funding for cultural activities and events is not part of government service agreements. While community grants programs are run through the Victorian Multicultural Commission, these do not help services wanting promote diversity through cultural festivals and culturally important days.

#### Key recommendations:

- Provide financial support for celebrating cultural activities and events at state-funded services as part of government service agreements.
- Invest in greater efforts to strengthen children’s cultural connections and language acquisition of parent’s language of origin in early childhood services and school.

### Equity and Diversity

The University of Melbourne *Evidence Paper on Equity and Diversity for the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (Saffigna et al., 2016) found the following implications for practice:

- Early childhood professionals play an important role in supporting and enhancing equitable learning and development outcomes for all children.
- Early childhood professionals need to form respectful partnerships with families and communities to provide the best support for children’s learning and development.
- Development of first language and cultural identity are crucial in the early years of life.
- Children’s sense of belonging and identity is enhanced when they have a sense of place and connection to their environment.
- Early childhood professionals’ attitudes toward diversity affect children’s wellbeing, self-esteem and academic outcomes. Professionals take responsibility for identifying and removing barriers to equity and inclusion.

### 3.3.2 Professional development and accreditation

A survey of early childhood educators by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2015) found that 72% of respondents faced challenges in educating about cultural diversity. Key challenges included lack of knowledge about different cultures; lack of confidence in teaching about cultural diversity (especially in settings where there are fewer cultures represented); and ability to incorporate teaching about cultures without being inauthentic or tokenistic.

The ethos and workplace culture of early learning and school settings is critical for creating welcoming and inclusive environments. Our staff report that changing the mindset and attitudes to learning of Early Years Directors and School Principals plays a key role in changing culture in early learning centres and schools. The School Readiness Funding is helping support cultural change but more targeted effort is needed to ensure that discriminatory practices and cultures are identified and resolved.

The workforce needs better training in cultural competency and trauma-informed care to provide safe and inclusive environments that make families feel comfortable to participate in services – across all sectors (e.g. health, maternal and child health, early childhood education). There are many practical guidelines for educating about cultural diversity, whether specific such as the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Building Belonging: A Toolkit for Early Childhood Educators on Cultural Diversity and Responding to Prejudice* (2016) or embedded within broader approaches such as *Belonging, Being, Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (2009).

**Practical actions:** From an early learning perspective, our staff report a need for more training in local areas tailored to specific cultural, linguistic or religious groups, as well as opportunities for professional learning about the impact racism has in society and in early learning, and how to counter that by implementing anti-racist pedagogy.

**Key recommendations:** Victorian workforce capability development needs to enable:

- More opportunities for training and professional development in cultural competency, trauma-informed care and countering racism, across all sectors.
- Better oversight and benchmarking of services to drive quality improvements.

### 3.3.3 Transforming policies into practice

Over the years, the Victorian Government has developed multiple policies and laws to promote responsiveness to CALD communities in its state funded services. Recent examples include:

- Victorian Government's (2018) *Multicultural Policy Statement: Victorian and Proud of It*
- Legislation such as the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic), the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (Vic) and the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001* (Vic)
- Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) *Designing for Diversity: Policy and Service Design Resources* (2018), *Delivering for Diversity: Cultural Diversity Plan* (2016-2019), and *Victorian Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health Action Plan* (2014-18) and *Language Services Policy* (2017)
- Family Safety Victoria's (2019) *Everybody Matters: Inclusion and Equity Statement*
- Department of Education and Training's (DET) *Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Policy* (2011) and *Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Workplan* (2019).

However, these policy principles need to be translated into practical actions if they are to drive structural change. For example, every department must have a cultural diversity plan in place and annually report on it. Yet, without proper evaluation of measurable outcomes, there is no way of knowing how well these plans have been promoted to and enacted by state services.

**Key recommendation:** Operationalise multicultural policy principles into practical actions that are well-funded, monitored and reported on regularly.

## 3.4 Workforce diversity

### 3.4.1 Bicultural workforce

*"A diverse workforce is imperative for true engagement of CALD communities."*

#### Uniting early learning worker

In our experience, CALD families want to engage with services where they see themselves and their community represented. Our staff report that having bicultural educators and tertiary students at our services who share culture and language with CALD families can enhance relationships, participation and engagement. Bicultural workers often act as "navigators" who can welcome all cultures because they understand everyone's settlement challenges. Bicultural workers can also engage with community and religious leaders to help build confidence and trust and develop communication pathways about education and health programs.

We believe the expertise and knowledge of the bicultural workforce is not currently well-leveraged and much needed advice on how to improve education and early childhood systems for CALD families is not collected or utilised.

The introduction of 3 year old kindergarten will expand the early learning workforce. This represents a strategic opportunity to train and employ bicultural staff to improve the diversity of the early childhood education workforce, especially if this can incorporate potential for rural and regional placements.

**Practical actions:** Some actions we also suggest to expand the bicultural workforce include:

- Whenever possible recruiting staff who speak the home languages of families, as well as educators who speak multiple languages. Greater attention could be given to the recruitment of staff exploring different approaches such as bilingual workers, students and volunteers in early learning services.
- Funding more kindergartens and childcare services with teachers that speak more than one language and use this as a bilingual program.
- Actively seeking out bicultural/ multilingual tertiary students to add value to education programs and to connect with and communicate with children and families in their first language, and then promoting their employment pathways to help expand the workforce.
- Funding bi-lingual story-time at local libraries on site and for librarians to visit kindergartens (note that this occurs in some municipalities but not consistently across Victoria).
- Improve the bilingual support to kindergartens by fka Children's Services, as requests can take some time to coordinate or bilingual support may not be available. Also, the time available has reduced significantly over the years.

**Key recommendation:** Develop a CALD workforce strategy for the implementation of 3 year old kindergarten to expand the bicultural workforce.

## 3.5 Language services

Language barriers were a key issue identified by our staff in relation to CALD community engagement in early childhood services. CALD communities can sometimes feel self-conscious about their English language skills and fear engaging with services due to feeling concerned about language barriers they may face.

The interplay between English language acquisition and child development presents specific challenges. For example, a staff member reported that it is difficult to ascertain if children have a speech and language delay because it is not as obvious (due to language barriers), so sometimes referrals to a speech pathologist are held off while services wait to see if the 'delay' is just common additional language acquisition or if it is indeed a speech issue.

A number of Victorian policies<sup>1</sup> state that services should engage accredited interpreters when people seeking assistance are not proficient in English, and provide printed translated material, when required. The *Multicultural Victoria Act 2011* requires all Government Departments to report annually on the use of interpreting and translating services by their departments and progress under their cultural diversity plans to address provision for culturally sensitive service delivery to Victoria's communities.

### 3.5.1 Interpreting services

Our services report using accredited interpreters at information sessions and throughout the year, when necessary. However, we note that language services are not readily or easily available to early learning centres and kindergartens.

As VAGO (2014) reports, there are longstanding factors in the language services industry, such as low remuneration and inadequate job security, which make it difficult to attract and retain interpreters. Use of interpreters is also problematic due to lack of appropriate interpreters, limited time of interpreters, limited interpreter budgets and lack of awareness by communities that they are entitled to an accredited interpreter (Foundation House, 2016).

From our experience, there are gaps in availability of accredited interpreters, particularly:

- During peak periods such as school enrolment time
- In rural and regional areas, which impacts ability for ad-hoc and opportunistic conversations
- For new and emerging languages where there may not be any interpreters qualified.

**Practical actions:** To get negotiate the complexities of interpreter provision, our staff express a preference for hiring employees from CALD communities, who spoke community languages but also understood the needs of their community. However, some staff also stress the importance of communicating verbally and non-verbally with all families to ensure everyone that enters our services feels a sense of belonging. This can be done through images, photographs, gestures, facial expressions, body language and simplified language.

**Key recommendation:** Develop strategies to improve availability of language services for early learning centres and kindergartens, particularly during peak enrolment times, in rural and rural areas and for new and emerging languages.

### 3.5.2 Translated resources

*"It's really important for people to feel they are welcome and that they belong that there is opportunity for them to see themselves or at least see diversity reflected in promotional material."*

Uniting early learning worker

In our experience, access to translated documents required when enrolling children into early learning services creates a barrier and potential delays for children attending early learning services. An example of this is the requirement to provide evidence of immunisation status.

Kindergarten enrolment information and forms are complex and not often provided in English. We note the lack of customised documents that are translated, available in simple English and tailored to the cultural needs of CALD communities. Yet, funding for services to develop translated resources is not embedded within service agreements.

We also note that while many adults are able to speak and understand clearly in their language, they may not be as confident in reading as due to their immigration journey and interrupted education, making translated documents irrelevant. Our staff stress the importance of using visual communication (e.g. images and photographs) and learning basic words in families home languages support the children to have a sense of belonging and inclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *Using Translating Services: Victorian Government Guidelines on Policies and Procedures* (2017); and *DHHS Language Services Policy* (2017).

Promotional material about services needs to be representative of the community, according to our staff. Images and photographs of CALD communities in promotional materials would help people to feel welcome and that they belong because there is opportunity for them to see themselves or at least see diversity reflected in promotional material.

**Key recommendation:** Allocate yearly budgets for all types of children's services to develop translated, culturally appropriate resources and tools to help with communication, acceptance, belonging and education.

## 3.6 Flexible funding and accessible service models

### 3.6.1 Flexibility of programs and services

*"We spend a lot of time with families to support them through the enrolment process, navigating the kinder program and making referrals.... Often families will have several children or one child will do two years of kindergarten so the longer families are with us, the stronger our bonds grow and the deeper our connections run. This is really important as families feel safe and supported and feel comfortable to come to us with their concerns.... A lot of this work is done additionally to the allocated work time."*

Uniting early learning worker

Our early learning staff tell us that building trusted relationships with CALD communities takes time. Yet, the additional effort they put into meaningful interactions with CALD families is not well recognised or incentivised in how staff are remunerated.

We note that School Readiness Funding is enabling kindergartens to fund supports that help parents understand and see the value of early childhood education for their child's development. Our staff recommend services use some School Readiness Funding to employ/work with fka Child Services to make sure interpreters are available during key times, information sessions, parent-teacher meetings, and pick-ups and drop-offs to pass on key information about children's learning.

Ensuring government program guidelines allow for the time needed to establish trusting long-term relationships is important. This can create unintended harm for parents who build trust in a service only for the service to end abruptly and then must establish relationships with new providers as their children grow. An example of a holistic program that allows time to build trusted relationships with families, from pregnancy through to children reaching kindergarten age, is the Cradle to Kinder program (see detail below).

**Key recommendation:** Ensure that government program guidelines allow flexibility for the time needed to establish trusting long-term relationships with CALD families, drawing on best practice examples such as the Cradle to Kinder program.

#### **Best Practice example: Cradle to Kinder program**

Our Cradle to Kinder program, funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, provides intensive support to vulnerable young mothers, their families and children, providing antenatal and longer-term case work support, beginning in pregnancy and continuing until the child reaches 4 years old. It provides holistic support to promote safety, stability and positive development for the young children and their parents. We deliver the Cradle to Kinder program in multiple locations across Victoria including North East and Western Metropolitan Melbourne, Brimbank-Melton and Gippsland.



### 3.6.2 Outreach services to improve accessibility

Outreach services can improve accessibility by going to the locations where CALD communities already spend their time. Our staff suggested multiple opportunities for extending outreach services to improve early childhood engagement for CALD families.

**Practical actions:** Key outreach opportunities recommended by staff include:

- Outreach of health services (e.g. Maternal and Child Health, paediatricians, dental services and immunisation programs) to playgroups, kindergartens and childcare centres would improve service access and facilitate opportunistic health promotion. For example, at one of our early learning services a community dentist does regular outreach visits to check children's teeth and is available to all children irrespective of residency status.
- Language programs that families can attend while their children are being cared for at kindergarten or childcare would support parent's language acquisition.
- Outreach of enrolment support at settlement services (e.g. our new Settlement Hub in Shepparton), asylum seeker services (e.g. our Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre) and English Language Schools would help connect into families needing support earlier in settlement.
- Early learning staff undertaking home visits with Pre-school Field Officers together to follow-up appointments with other support services (e.g. Orange Door and NDIS).
- Health services to undertake home visits and set up information/drop-in clinics directly in public housing sites to help newly settled families know of what services are available. Outreach into public housing also enhances participation in Neighbourhood House activities.
- Activities that offer multiple functions may help engage busy families who do not have the time just for social activities. Homework clubs, Neighbourhood House classes and English Language School classes, for example, offer opportunities for both learning and social engagement but also require adequate childcare support so parents can learn.

**Key recommendation:** Extend outreach services and drop-in clinics at playgroups, kindergartens, childcare centres, settlement services, and public housing to improve accessibility of universal services (e.g. health care), language programs and enrolment support.

### 3.6.3 Integrated, multidisciplinary approaches

We see a clear need for more integrated approaches that reduce the number of services CALD families have to attend to get the support they need over time and improve continuity of care. Finding soft entry points into services is critical, as these services will have already built community trust. Integrated service models, such as community hubs, multidisciplinary team approaches and co-located services, can help CALD families access services in one convenient location and give families the opportunity to enhance social connectedness, which is important for CALD women who experience isolation if they do not have family in Australia.

A Murdoch Children's Research Institute (2017) report on *Exploring the Impact of Community Hubs on School Readiness* revealed that common hub features include relationship-building practices, family engagement, an early focus on transition, flexibility and adaptability, and coordination. There are different community hub models to consider such as the Scanlon Community Hubs, the 'Our Place' community hub (see below) and our Shepparton Settlement Hub (see below). We note that community hub models require significant planning, buy-in from partners, long-term commitment and infrastructure investment in co-location of services.

#### **Best practice example: Uniting's Settlement Hub in Shepparton**

Uniting recently opened a new Settlement Hub in Shepparton to provide a space for people from newly arrived communities to access holistic, co-ordinated support including intake and assessment, case work, access to mainstream services and the opportunity to participate in needs-based group activities. Run out of Uniting's Maude Street building, and funded by the Commonwealth Government, the Settlement Hub is acting as a go-to point for new arrivals, assisting them in developing key skills and providing access to services.

**Key recommendation:** Expand initial investments in integrated service models, such as community hubs, multidisciplinary team approaches and co-located services, that provide holistic care and improve accessibility of universal services for CALD families.

### **Best practice example: Doveton Community Hub 'Our Place'**

The Doveton College model, 'Our Place', is a placed-based model with early learning, primary and junior secondary schooling at its core (McMahon, 2017). These are wrapped around by services such as adult learning, community and volunteer programs, allied health services and outreach provision. It is a learning precinct entwined into a community hub. Early learning, health and wellbeing services for children and families, and adult engagement, education and employment services are all integrated through a single entrance into the school and a co-designed service model that put people at the centre. This makes a difference because of the relationships the school builds with families, their focus on meeting community aspirations, and the sense of belonging families' experience.

### **3.6.4 Service referrals and partnerships**

We believe that strong relationships and regular communication between services must underpin Victoria's approach to improving early childhood engagement of CALD communities. Yet, there is currently a need to improve avenues for collaboration, partnership and communication amongst service providers.

Our staff report the critical role of linking families into Maternal and Child Health nurses, to support onward referral to other essential services. When services communicate effectively with each other, families are able to follow the Maternal and Child Health process and access the services they require. Some other services we identify as essential for partnership approaches include settlement services, community support workers, child and family services, local services (e.g. libraries, councils, community health centres), early intervention services and allied health services. We view timely referral into early intervention services and allied health (e.g. speech pathologists, occupational therapists) as particularly critical for CALD families early in settlement, as detailed in the Best Start program below.

**Key recommendation:** Improve avenues for service collaboration and partnership.

### **Best Practice example: Best Start program**

Best Start is an early intervention program that we deliver through formal partnership of local agencies to improve the outcomes for children by supporting parents and caregivers to create a positive environment for children through engaging with their local early years services and schools. We provide Best Start program in locations such as Gippsland.

## **3.7 Equitable access to services**

### **3.7.1 Affordability**

There are financial barriers to accessing kindergarten and childcare for CALD communities, who may already be experiencing disadvantage in relation to the additional costs of setting up their home, often with limited existing savings to draw from, and may have no access to benefits. Many CALD families are working really hard, long days and not able to spend as much time with their children as they would like. We have noticed CALD families (like the broader population) are spending more time on devices and engaging less in conversation and in play. Families reading to their children has also dropped dramatically over the past few years.

**Practical actions:** Some actions to improve affordability of early childhood services include:

- The hours could be extended for Kindergarten Fee Subsidies for families to attend kindergarten and childcare.
- Provide more of a rebate and more hours of Childcare Fee Subsidy for CALD communities, including financial subsidies for families who are not eligible for Health Care Cards.

- Increase incentives to attend playgroups, kindergarten and childcare (e.g. free childcare, playgroups, meals, vouchers and programs).
- Providing additional support when CALD families are looking for or have found a service.

**Key recommendation:** Consider increasing financial subsidies and supports (see the Kindergarten Inclusion Support example below) for CALD families to attend playgroup, kindergarten and childcare.

### Best Practice example: Kindergarten Inclusion Support

To help families access the support they need, we have partnered with the Victorian Department of Education and Training to establish a Short-Term Assistance service as part of our Kindergarten Inclusion Support program during 2019. This free service assists state-funded kindergartens in Victoria to access additional support for children and to plan for their ongoing inclusion. This program ensures all children living with a disability or developmental delay can make the most of their kindergarten year.

### 3.7.2 Kindergarten and maternal and child health services

*"Accessing early learning services can be a difficult due to the requirements of navigating the processes of applying for childcare subsidy and eligibility criteria around entitlements to approved hours."*

Uniting early learning worker

Currently, funded kindergarten is planned and delivered by a mix of public and private providers. Participation in kindergarten is voluntary but encouraged, given its widely recognised benefits for child learning and development (VAGO, 2017). In our experience, there is huge unmet demand for kindergarten spaces that needs to be addressed to improve equity of services and reduce the risk of exacerbating under-participation by CALD families. There are also intense demand pressures for early childhood services, especially in areas with high density of children, such as in public housing sites.

Other agencies have reported similar issues:

- In areas of rapid growth, VAGO (2017) questions whether the government can meet its policy objectives of providing *universal access* to both maternal and child health services and kindergarten services. VAGO (2017) also warns of the long-term consequences of children missing out on these services, for both health and education.
- Maternal and Child Health are less accessible to CALD families due to language barriers and cultural responsiveness, resulting in families discontinuing use of the service (KPMG, 2006).
- The Productivity Commission (2016) reports gaps between the number of non-English speaking children aged 3-5 years old in the community and number of non-English speaking children enrolled in a preschool program.

It is also important to note the significant sector sustainability issues. Salaries and education requirements in the early learning sector are quite low, which can further impact CALD communities as staff may lack the skills and training to meet the needs of CALD children.

**Key recommendation:** Develop strategies to address unmet demand for kindergarten spaces, especially in areas with a high density of CALD children.

### Best Practice example: Access to Early Learning program

The Access to Early Learning (AEL) program, funded by the Department of Education and Training, supports vulnerable children to attend three year old kindergarten. AEL is an early intervention prevention model that is designed to support sustained participation of vulnerable children and their families in quality universal education and care; strengthen home learning environments; and build capacity in the local service system. The program provides in-home learning and supports the kindergarten teachers in their work with vulnerable families. We currently provide AEL in the high settlement area of Dandenong.

### 3.7.3 Practical barriers

The VAGO (2014) report on *Access to Services for Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers*, found that the CALD population face systemic barriers to accessing services which relate to isolation, lack of transport, financial barriers, language barriers, lack of familiarity with service systems and lack of social networks.

Similarly, a number of practical barriers were reported by our staff, and others. These include:

- Families having limited access to cars for transporting children and few driving licenses early in settlement, especially for women (Foundation House, 2016). Families, therefore, need to live in close proximity to the services they use regularly to be able to participate, which is not always possible if living in rural, regional or outer metropolitan areas. Our staff report that a key protective factor here is when families support each other by sharing drop-off and pick-up of several children to allow others to work.
- The transitory nature of early settlement due to insecure housing arrangements is very disruptive to early learning services and can result in families missing out on government services (Foundation House, 2016). Our staff report that some families fear being relocated to another government housing facility, which will cause the family to struggle with transportation and be unsettling for their children.
- The time of the day of many programs may not be suitable to family routines and the timing structure may not be well understood by communities. Managing time for school, kindergarten and childcare drop-off and pick-up is difficult in the context of competing family, work or settlement commitments, such as attending English language classes, full time employment or caring for younger/older children during various programs that may not be for their age/stage of development.

**Key recommendation:** Consider practical barriers faced by CALD families in accessing services as part of service design and planning for early childhood services.

## 4 Perspectives from our consumers

We conducted a Consumer Focus Group with 10 mothers at one of our child care and kindergarten services situated in a highly multicultural area of Melbourne. Participants had all lived in Australia for under ten years and included:

- 5 mothers from Ethiopia, each with between 2 and 4 children under 11 years old
- 2 mothers from South Sudan, with between 2 and 4 children, ranging between an infant and a teenager
- 1 mother from the Philippines with a 5 year old child
- 1 mother from Kenya with a 5 year old child and an infant
- 1 mother from Eritrea with 2 children under 6 years old.

The findings below mirror many of the themes raised earlier by our early learning staff.

### 4.1 The value of early childhood education

*Question: Why do you take your children to kindergarten?*

*"To be social, to engage with other kids and play."*

*"I like that he (her son) can learn the English language, make new friends and engage with people."*

*"We speak Oromo at home. Here they [the children] learn English and engage with others."*

*"It's about learning for the future."*

*"She [my daughter] loves drawing, meeting friends and making friendships."*

Consumer Focus Group Participants

All of the parents in the Consumer Focus Group were attending one of our child care and kindergarten services so their children could go to kindergarten, however, several parents also had children in child care. Most parents enrolled their children in kindergarten in the last year or two once their children turned 3-4 years old.

When asked about why parents take their children to kindergarten, education and preparing children for future school attendance were key motivations. Families place high importance on educating their children so they are prepared before they start school, or as one participant put it "learning for the future".<sup>2</sup> Many women were concerned about their children being ready for school and wanted to know that their child is progressing developmentally and meeting the teacher's educational expectations.

Another key reason for enrolling children in kindergarten related to ensuring children had opportunities to learn and refine their English language skills before they started school. Some mothers mentioned that their children only spoke their language of origin at home, but at school they focused on the English language. Parents expressed a desire for their children to begin learning to write in kindergarten.

Many women also discussed the value of kindergarten in helping their children to socialise, participate in fun activities and make friends and, in doing so, better support their social development. For example, a mother from the Philippines explained that kindergarten is helping her daughter to be more confident, independent and helping her grow.

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<sup>2</sup> In some African continent countries, schooling starts at 3 years old, so the expectation was that children begin school early to support better learning outcomes.

## 4.2 Gaps in social connection for parents

*Question: Do you socialise with other families at this service?*

*"No, we are very busy."*

*"Yes, we say hi sometimes and meet at the door... We are all busy."*

*"Yes, because most of us have kids in kinder and have different expectations."*

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Interestingly, the social engagement and sense of community that is perceived as so critical to why parents brought their children to kindergarten did not appear to extend to parents. Many parents cited being "very busy" and not having time to connect socially with other parents at kindergarten. Many mothers reported dropping-off their children and saying hello but did not specify broader engagement with other parents.

A few mothers mentioned that connecting with other parents would be helpful for understanding the educator's expectations, especially if they experienced language barriers that meant they did not feel confident asking questions of educators directly.

As discussed by our early learning staff, providing opportunities to engage parents and children together was seen as important, particularly for mothers regularly visiting early learning services. Some mothers expressed an interest in being involved in more learning activities, cultural celebrations and religious events at kindergarten with their children.

## 4.3 Importance of clean and welcoming environments

*Question: Why did you choose this service?*

*"The childcare is so clean and that's why I go here. Before I changed (Kindergarten) a lot."*

*"The teachers are really helpful, they explain how my child is developing."*

*"They help me fill out forms and everything I need."*

Consumer Focus Group Participants

For many mothers, having staff who were helpful and supportive with activities beyond childcare was important. For example, one mother discussed how when she first started the staff had helped her resolve some issues she was having with Centrelink. The kindergarten staff contacted Centrelink for her and helped her to fill out the forms. She found this additional support extremely helpful and it enhanced her positive experience with the service. Other mothers commented on the assistance they have received with things such as filling out forms.

A welcoming environment was also about staff remembering parents, taking time to ask how they were, and linking families into assistance to support them more holistically. These activities helped to create sense of trust and inclusion at child care and kindergarten services. A clean environment was also seen as important for some mothers.

## 4.4 Getting information and advice

*Question: Where do you go to get information? How did you find out about this place?*

*"For me, the internet, everyone is busy here, it's drop-off and leave..."*

*"I call my friends and family from my community."*

*"My friend told me about this place and then I came with my friend to check it out."*

Consumer Focus Group Participants

When asked about where they get information from the majority of mothers used internet searches through the search engine, Google, for advice. Women report searching for information in both English and language of origin, particularly when something was wrong with their child and they needed to understand the symptoms.

The importance of relying on family, friends and neighbours for information and advice was a key theme of the consultation. For example, word of mouth was critical in how parents decided which childcare and/or kindergarten services to apply for, as well as other deciding factors such as proximity to home and affordability. Some mothers had received referrals from other services (such as Maternal and Child Health nurses or other local childcare services when families moved). However, when deciding on an early learning service, most mothers gained information about services from friends, family and neighbours.

Some parents reported asking each other for information and advice about their children's development because they felt they lacked clear information early on about what to expect from kindergarten before their children started. Further, parents wanted advice on how to support their children outside the classroom with tasks like writing their name and other activities they engage in during kindergarten.

Better and more timely information on what children are learning in kindergarten would reassure and inform parents and help clarify educator expectations.

## 4.5 Language and cultural barriers for parents

*"We have no one to discuss issues at kinder with. If there is a problem, I don't feel comfortable to approach the teachers... It's a gap between me and the educator..."*

*"Our expectations are different to what's happening in kinder."*

Consumer Focus Group Participants

As described earlier, learning English was a difficult and slow process for some parents but was often much easier for their children. Women in the Consumer Focus Group were at varying stages of English proficiency. For example:

- A South Sudanese mother reported that she learnt to speak English in Australia, and this was particularly difficult in the beginning as she had not been to school prior to arriving in Australia. Her child now speaks only English but not Dinka like her mother.
- A Kenyan mother reported that having schooling in her country of origin made it easier for her to settle in Australia. She spoke English but relied upon her husband for completing forms in written English.
- 3 women required an interpreter to participate in the Consumer Focus Group.

For some parents, the language barriers they faced made it difficult to feel confident engaging with kindergarten services, particularly educators, for information about how their child is developing. For example, one mother said that she engaged with other parents to understand the expectations of the educators because she felt that she did not receive sufficient information about her child's development from educators directly. She had questions she would like to ask of educators but felt unable to do so because she did not yet feel confident in speaking English. Such situations can be isolating and widen communication gaps between parents and educators.

Engaging with the necessary government agencies (such as Centrelink) also presented challenges for people with low English proficiency.

*"Any issue that I have as a mother, in kinder, I have no-one..."*

Consumer Focus Group Participant

## 4.6 Children's connection to language and culture

### 4.6.1 Loss of language acquisition for children

*"It would be excellent if the education system would introduce my native language in kinder. My kids will know their identity exists outside the house"*

*"Which language [is needed] for the future, when they [the children] go to prep?"*

*"When my kids started they said 'my teacher doesn't speak Oromo, can you take me to the teacher who speaks Oromo?'"*

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Language was a key theme for the parents we spoke to, just as it was for our early learning staff. Many women expressed concern about the loss of native language and culture for their children. They reported that their children can speak and understand their language of origin at home but cannot read or write it as this written language is not taught in schools. Correspondingly, they recommended that the education system introduce their language of origin in kindergarten.

Parents stressed that having educators that can speak their native languages was critical for children to learn to communicate in their language of origin and was especially helpful for when people first arrive in Australia with limited English proficiency. Parents also noted the difficulties choosing key languages spoken by teachers given that:

- There are children from many cultural backgrounds present in class;
- Cultural and linguistic groups change frequently; and
- Children do not typically stay in kindergarten long.

One mother pointed out that she wanted her children to learn the languages that will be important in the future, for when they go to primary school. Interestingly, some parents report that their older children in school already were learning Japanese and Italian, which had no cultural or linguistic relevancy in their household.

As well as learning about a child's own language and culture, parents were keen for their children to gain more cross-cultural education to help children speak multiple languages and understand different cultures. This would also help children and their parents foster a sense of cultural connection and identity.

### 4.6.2 Need for cultural connections

*"Australian culture – everyone knows. It's on TV every day... The only thing missing for them [the children] is their culture. They need more."*

Consumer Focus Group Participant

As identified previously by our staff, parents in the Consumer Focus Group expressed a strong need to maintain and enhance connections for their children to their cultural identity. Women told us that their children had grown up and understood a lot about Australian culture because it is all around them. However, they felt that there was a need for cultural learning that facilitates greater cultural connection to their country of origin. One mother expressed this as a need for bonding between parents and children through sharing their culture in social activities and events at services they already engage with.

There was a sense that opportunities for engagement that strengthen cultural connections are currently being missed by the education system. For example, a South Sudanese mother questioned why her child was learning the Japanese language at school rather than Arabic or Dinka, which would strengthen intergenerational understanding and family relationships.

Parents also valued cross-cultural education. Another parent noted that she valued the centre making an effort to mark important days such as Eid and Chinese New Year.



## 4.7 Access issues

### 4.7.1 Affordability of childcare

*"The more you earn, the more they [childcare services] get from you."*

*"It holds us back sometimes, when you can't afford childcare" (to be able to study at school yourself)*

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Compared to kindergarten where 15 hours are provided free, most mothers in our Consumer Focus Group considered childcare too expensive to use. The lack of affordable childcare had flow on impacts for some mothers who were working or studying, such as:

- A young mother had been studying but could not afford to continue because the cost of childcare was unaffordable. She had learnt English and gone to school for the first time in Australia but experienced barriers to continuing her education because the cost of childcare.
- A mother reported driving an Uber to gain an income but had to give this up this work because the childcare costs for several children cost more than she was earning.

### 4.7.2 Timeliness and information on child education

*"The problem with this area, it's a big community with government housing... The waiting list here is about how lucky you are."*

*"When I came from Melton in 2017, I enrolled in childcare, and I wait[ed] for like 3 months."*

Consumer Focus Group Participants

A strong theme emerging from the Consumer Focus Group related to difficulties accessing childcare and kindergarten services due to waitlists, mirroring issues raised by our staff. This was particularly problematic in areas close to community housing where there was a high density of families seeking childcare and kindergarten. Some mothers reported that it was easier to access kindergarten for a first child, while others felt accessing kindergarten was easier once their first child was at a service.

There was some concern and confusion about when to apply for kindergarten and when the new 3 year old kindergarten subsidies were starting. This points to a systemic lack of information provided by the government and its funded services to ensure CALD families can participate in early childhood services, as discussed previously by our staff.

The mothers we spoke to said they wanted earlier access to subsidised kindergarten to ensure their children are ready for school but they did not know where to get information about how to make this happen.

### 4.7.3 Real and perceived discrimination

*"I don't understand why they didn't accept my children... Why don't they open the door for my children and people like me?"*

*"It's discrimination. They [a Child Care Centre] don't want to take your details..."*

*"They [a Child Care Centre] said I'm not allowed to come here unless I pay."*

*"We did everything and they [another Child Care Centre] said they would give me a call. They never did."*

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Another key theme emerging from the Consumer Focus Group was a feeling of discrimination by some early learning services who were not willing to enrol children from several of our Consumer Focus Group participants. Some mothers report feeling frustrated, confused and upset that they would be allowed 15 hours of free kindergarten (under the Victorian Government policy), only to then be turned away from a service close to their home or told to wait and then not hearing back from a service. This situation could relate to discrimination by services, perceived discrimination, or that may actually reflect inadequate communication and information provided by services to CALD communities about how services operate (e.g. waitlists), what services are available and the current context of demand for early childhood services for the entire Victorian population.

No matter whether real or perceived, discrimination impacts on people's feelings of safety, security, health, wellbeing and community connection, and has ongoing implications for individual, family and community participation in Victorian society.

## **4.8 Other supports for parents**

Parents were, above all else, concerned with their children's development and education and wanted more support to help children to be able to progress at home (e.g. for writing). Parents also wanted practical advice to support children developing social skills, behaving appropriately and playing safely.

When it comes to parent's needs, there was a sense that additional services would be helpful in the early learning environment, such as financial counselling, support workers and child development support (e.g. when children have developmental problems). One mother suggested that having regular weekly or monthly visitors would be helpful for developing new practical skills such as first aid and safety for children.

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