

Early Childhood Education Productivity Commission: A Regional Response from a CALD Perspective

Since 1992, Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG) has been providing support services, facilitating community engagement and advocating and acting on behalf of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) existing and emerging communities in Townsville through its work with humanitarian, refugee and migration clients. In this submission, conversations with clients have been included with their express permission and with full understanding of their rights as participants in this project.

Education, including early childhood education, is viewed by all stakeholders as being a key factor in securing the future health and well-being of 'diverse' people as they integrate into Australian communities. In any context, education is a transmitter of cultural values. For CALD communities and families transitioning into mainstream Australian society, education is necessarily an experience about 'cultural adaptation' and 'identity'. The Early Years Learning Frameworks for Australia nominate the development of 'identity' as its first outcome. It talks about children developing "an emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency" (2009:22)

Support for one's identity including acknowledgement and acceptance of language, values and beliefs is important in any transition process whether it be large or small: it helps people going through change feel safe and able to learn new things. For parents and children from CALD backgrounds, support for one's identity is critical to a smooth transition process and successful adaptation. In its work with CALD clients, the Queensland's Multicultural Development Association (MDA):

...witnesses the long term impact of the refugee experience on clients, but equally witnesses the extraordinary resilience, strength and courage shown to make a new life, belong and fulfil their aspirations. In MDA's experience people from refugee and CALD backgrounds are strongly motivated and eager to learn, achieve and contribute to their new country and community. Access to equitable, quality education facilitates this. (<http://www.mdainc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/education-advocacy-position-paper-for-website-oct-2010.pdf>)

In early childhood education, the National Quality Standard (NQS) outlines seven areas that have been identified by research as critical to the provision of quality early childhood education and care. From 1 January 2012, all long day care, family day care, outside school hours care services and preschools will be assessed and rated against the NQS.

(http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Pages/QualityStandards.aspx)

NQS seven quality areas are:

- educational program and practice
- children's health and safety
- physical environment
- staffing arrangements, including staff-to-child ratios and qualifications
- relationships with children
- collaborative partnerships with families and communities
- leadership and service management

For the purposes of this submission, Townsville Multicultural Support Group have chosen to focus on collaborative partnerships between families and communities: specifically the establishment of collaborative partnerships between CALD families and the Townsville City Council, in relation to early childhood education.

Family Support:

The Townsville City Council has a Family Charter which acknowledges the significance of families in creating a strong and healthy community. The Charter acknowledges that:

Trends across Australia demonstrate that families are becoming increasingly diverse. They are affected by changing social and economic factors such as education and employment patterns. Economic circumstances, migration and changes in gender roles. Families are in a process of constant evolution, changing to meet the needs of individuals within, and also reflecting the society in which they live (2002: 2).

<http://www.townsville.qld.gov.au/community/families/Pages/charter.aspx>

There are four principles to guide its support for families including CALD families. Townsville City Council:

- will act to ensure that access, equity, quality and participation underpin its efforts in relation to families
- will work in partnership with other spheres of government, community organisations and the private sector at the local, regional, state and national level to meet the needs of families
- is committed to working in partnership with families in the local community to define and respond to the needs of families and determine future directions
- adopts a holistic view of the community, linking related physical, environmental, economic, social and cultural issues

This policy was adopted after a solid process of community consultation and was signed off by the TMSG president, Sheila Hawthorn in 2002. The vision for this policy is one of 'interdependence' and in that context it talks about undertaking educational activities to promote the value of community diversity.

The North Queensland Inclusion Support Agency is an initiative of the Inclusion and Professional Support Program, funded by the Australian Government and sponsored by the Townsville City Council. The NQ Inclusion Support Agency is a free service for child care educators which aims to build the capacity of Child Care Services and increase the skill level of educators to include children with additional needs.

The priority groups supported by the NQISA are:

- children with a disability including children with high support needs
- children from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- children with a refugee or humanitarian intervention background who have been subjected to torture and trauma either in their country of origin or during their refugee experience
- Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Australian South Sea Islander children

Inclusion Support Agency provides support to child care professionals in eligible childcare services by assisting staff to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that underpin quality care and increase the capacity of the staff. Facilitators provide practical advice and access to a range of supports designed to strengthen the services ability to create a quality care environment inclusive of all children. Part of the support offered by the North Queensland Inclusion Support Agency (ISA) is bi-cultural support.

Bi-cultural support provides additional resources to eligible child care services to assist with the inclusion of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), refugee children, and Indigenous children. A worker engaged by the Bicultural Support Program can offer time-limited support from either off-site consultants or an on-site casual bilingual or bi-cultural worker. This support can be provided when a CALD, Indigenous, or refugee child is enrolled at the child care service. Access to bi-cultural support is provided to eligible child care services free of charge.

Services available within the Bicultural Support Program are determined by the needs analysis from each state/territory and may include facilitating communication between eligible child care services and families by assisting educators in communicating with culturally diverse families and children (for example, interpreting meetings between parents and educators, providing verbal translation of enrolment documents as well as educators with key words and phrases that can be used to communicate with the child)

Facilitating cultural awareness by:

- assisting child care services in better understanding particular ethnic backgrounds, cultural experiences, and child rearing practices of the children and families

- enabling the exchange and sharing of information between educators and parents about the child and family life
- providing educators with an understanding of relevant cultural issues

Supporting curricula or programming by:

- assisting with the implementation of culturally and linguistically appropriate practices and a culturally inclusive curriculum
- supporting the child care service to maintain the child's bi-lingualism
- supporting the implementation of programs that support the development of English as a Second Language
- supporting the implementation of programs that assist newly arrived children and families from refugee backgrounds

Supporting resource and linkages by:

- providing educators with information, where available, about relevant community resources and services to support the inclusion of culturally diverse children and families
- providing bi-cultural advice and support to ISAs

Bi-cultural support is not used for:

- regular interpreting and translating assistance for families or eligible child care services
- supervision of a child or group of children (for example, to meet staff-to-child ratios or to provide staffing to relieve educators)
- providing settlement and community support services to families and children

The role of the offsite consultants is to provide specialist support for implementing inclusive programs or curricula. This role should be developed in consultation with the ISA. The placement of onsite bilingual and bicultural workers is used to provide specific language and cultural assistance to eligible child care services. Child care services can make a request for Bi-cultural Support through the ISA or the IPSU. The request must be accompanied by a Service Support Plan (SSP), which is developed by ISAs and the child care service to identify a range of inclusion support needs such as bicultural support. The Inclusion Support Agency currently provides support to approximately 150 eligible childcare services in the region including the Hinchinbrook, Burdekin and Dalrymple Shires as well as Palm Island.

TMSG's involvement with Townsville City Council

Townsville Multicultural Support Group through its settlement programs with Humanitarian entrants, migrant families and dependants of skilled migrants with low English proficiency, has created working protocols with the Inclusion Support Service (ISS) of the Townsville City Council early childhood services/child care centres. The goal is to facilitate early support and intervention for children of newly arrived migrants and refugees who are placed into child care centres to enable

parents to attend English classes/to attend employment. The Inclusion Support Service can assist also in accessing child care places in some instances. With regard to Humanitarian Entrants, TMSG flags the ISS of an impending need and provides information about the language and the life experience of the family prior to arrival in Australia. This is particularly important for those families who have been living in protracted refugee existence in camps or urban settings under great duress. The resilience and strength of these families is outstanding but the concept of our Australian child care centres with the demands of supplying 3 snacks per day, following routine rules and relating to busy staff can be very daunting. Similarly, some migrant parents and their children face difficulties and anxieties in settling their children into child care centres.

Staff of child-care centres appreciate any information/ knowledge/ traditions/songs that will help the child settle and that will help them relate to the family. The Multicultural Development Agency based in Brisbane coordinates the supply of bi cultural support workers to attend child care centres to work with the staff as required. TMSG is able to assist MDA through referral /recommendations of possible cultural support workers. TMSG is committed to facilitating culturally competent service and through its Community Action for a Multicultural Society (CAMS) program, advocates for appropriate policy changes and service delivery across a broad range of service types, including early childhood education.

Case Studies:

Two case studies are included to pay TMSG's respect to the everyday experience of CALD families, which differs from the organizational discourse of service delivery. The families were chosen at random. As part of an ethical and culturally sensitive process designed to protect their confidentiality, the interview participants were briefed on TMSG's approach to the productivity Commission submission and supplied with an Informed Consent form which gave them certain rights as participants.

Interview with Participant A:

What was it like when you sent your child to day care?

It was an intriguing experience because it was not only about learning about the school rules but also about social rules...social behaviours. For example in Brazil my daughter would hug the day care person and she would give kisses...because in our culture this is common. But here this is not a common thing. Later on I understood it was about child protection but my first reaction was that I felt guilty about leaving her in a place where my child was not well accepted or taken well care of.

So it was about communication?

It's not just about the spoken language but body language- it was for me a cold reception but now I understand it to be normal behaviour. And another barrier we felt was that the ways that we could interact with the school because since we are not fluent in the language we are not as effective as we could be. We asked what we could do but we felt we could not interact as much as we wanted. For example, there is a chart in her class room with numbers in lots of languages but not Portuguese. It would make that child who comes from a different background feel important.

What would have made the experience a better one for you?

I think it would be interesting if the school had a more active posture towards informing and inviting those new parents in the school to be involved in new activities. I felt that it was not as inclusive as it could be. There is a fear of being 'misunderstood', when back home we would offer ideas to the teacher and the school. The language is one thing: when your language is not so good, you could ask someone something and be offensive without meaning to. In my experience women often feel the limits in oral expression the most- it is intimidating and frustrating.

So how did your child adapt to this new situation?

I think my child had that adaptation period when she was getting used to the language and also about being accepted by the other kids. And getting used to the language was faster than getting used to the other kids. It is a common experience of being a new kid in a school – the time it takes. I think it was easier for her than for us- the parents. Since the first day she was feeling comfortable and wanted to play more so when we went to pick her up. For me this is a clue that she was feeling ok; that even without the hugs and the kisses she was ok; that the teacher's behaviour was another way to behave- not worse or 'bad'.

What was there to recommend about this early childhood educational experience?

I really like the class room activities because they have the project with one theme and so the children use that approach to do their pre-school education. Holistic learning ...where all the skills were developed including drama, knowing their letters, drawing, numbers, fine and gross motor skills. So she was easily able to adapt to her new surroundings.

What are your final comments as a parent in relation to this topic?

At the beginning I really felt not comfortable about expressing to the school my concerns or feelings- there was no avenue provided for that. So one year later, I am more confident with the school and the teachers. But I also think it's because I understand more about the cultural background. With a little more information the cultural issues would be evident and not a puzzle that we would have to put together every day- it would reduce our anxiety.

Discussion:

The interesting aspect of this experience was that here was an 'identity' transition that one would have expected to proceed easier than most. Despite Participant A stating that her English language skills were insufficient to express her concerns about her daughter's schooling, that is plainly a

subjective self- assessment. When interviewing the participant, it was clear that she had a good command of English and was able to express complex ideas and feelings. TMSG's experience has been that some clients do not wish to have the services of ISA officers: they do not want to have their children labelled as 'ethnic' because of the discrimination issues. That was not the case here because Participant A suggests that bi-cultural assistance would have been helpful.

Most people would experience a period of adjustment when they start work in a new organisation. For people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, this adjustment often requires more than just understanding the policies and procedures of the workplace (Chan, Chng, Wong & Waniganayake, 2010: 24).

In the same way parents coming into child care organisations experience a period of adjustment which is more than just understanding policies and procedures. Why were the parents not identified as being from a CALD background so that they could access the service? It is all speculation as that question was never addressed at the school. What can be safely concluded is that bi-cultural support is important for CALD families regardless of their professional and English speaking backgrounds. Also too, it is noteworthy that this parent used this interview as a form of debriefing to address her former anxiety, as she named it.

Interview with Participant B:

What were your children's early educational experiences like?

My children spoke English when they went to school. It wasn't the mixed ethnic heritage as in the colour of their skins that made a difference: it was their names. I found a negative experience for my 2nd child when I came to the kindergarten, to pick my child up. I found her sleeping without any blankets under the air-con. All the other children had blankets so I asked the worker and she said "Sorry" but had no explanation. She was a new worker and I made allowances for that.

My last child was at a day care centre- they (staff) were all good. When the children talked about their family story, the workers paid attention and identified the family were of a different religion to the other families in the centre. They were asking you to talk to the class room about your religion – a positive experience.

How well did you communicate with the teaching staff?

I was empowered to talk to the teachers at school because my culture requires that my children have certain kinds of food at the day care centre. So I had to communicate that to staff. The staff would write notes to me all the time to let me know what they were doing and why.

So summing up, what do you now feel about the whole experience?

My children's early childhood education in this community has been a positive and respectful experience: although there has been a difference in terms of 'inclusiveness' between my eldest child's experience and 3rd child's experience. At the time of my first child's entrance to

school- about 10 years ago, she was always complaining about feeling left out. However in the upper primary years that sense of difference faded away.

Discussion:

Participant B had several children to average out her experience with early childhood education. As well, her husband was Australian and the children spoke English as a first language. However her cultural/ religious heritage was distinctive to the extent that her children ate certain foods only. The parent's own adaptation and the sensitivities that shaped that experience are evident in the way they view their children's transition into early education because "ethnicity, including language and religion, are inextricably tied to a person's identity" (Chan, Chng, Wong & Waniganayake, 2010: 24) It is apparent that memories of positive and/or negative treatment meted out to their children have lasting impacts on CALD people's experience of life here in Australia.

The North Queensland Inclusion Support Agency, in partnerships with agencies such as TMSG, has striven to implement the changes needed to build the capacity of Townsville and regional Child Care Services; and to increase the skill level of educators to include children with additional needs including CALD families. However the system is not a guaranteed safety net. Feedback from CALD clients, such as the interview participants to the Townsville Multi-cultural Support Group suggests that there needs to be a deeper appreciation of the challenges childhood education for CALD families in this community. For example it is the view of this agency that the critical transition /settlement period for CALD groups is exacerbated by unhappy /unsettled children.

TMSG Recommendations:

- Federal Government commitment to regional settlement should be matched with increased funding for 'gap services'.
- Cultural Competence training for childcare workers and early education practitioners-funded by the State or Commonwealth government
- The Commonwealth Government could insist that every child care centre have a plan/policy around cultural competence and there be evaluations based on community expectations.
- Award payment for workers in early childhood education to reflect the valued work they perform and the wide range of skills required to perform their tasks competently.

TMSG thanks the Early Childhood Productivity Commission for this opportunity to show case our regional efforts to meet the challenges in meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse people and their children.

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