SSi For equality of life.

Submission on
**Productivity Commission Inquiry
On Early Childhood Education and Care Draft Report
February 2024**

Acknowledgement of Country

SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

About SSI

SSI is a national non-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of human services that connect individuals, families, and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities – including settlement support, disability programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways. At the heart of everything we do is a drive for equality, empathy, and celebration of every individual.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria, providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. In FY 2022-23, SSI supported nearly 56,000 clients across more than 59 programs and initiatives. We are also a leading provider of evidence-based insights into the social sector and are known as an organisation that can reach communities considered by many to be hard to reach.

In the area of children and families, SSI offers our expertise in culturally responsive practice through delivering the National Community Hub program in NSW and Queensland (a place-based model working with migrant and refugee families); our Multicultural Child and Family Program; our NDIS LAC support includes children; and our programs supporting children and families from a refugee background. SSI is also a partner organisation in Logan Together, a place-based initiative in Queensland focused on early childhood, which is funded under the Australian Government's Stronger Places, Stronger People program.

Overarching comments

SSI welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) draft report. Our submission focuses on issues relating to the relatively poor developmental trajectories experienced by children from CALD backgrounds; we note that there is limited discussion of this cohort of children in the Commission's draft report.

Our submission specifically responds to two Information Requests:

- Information Request 2.2 on cultural safety in ECEC services; and

- Information Request 7.2 on navigation support.

In 2021, SSI commissioned the Telethon Kids Institute to analyse data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) – a nationwide census of children starting full-time school over four time points 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018.[1]

SSI recently completed an update of this research with Prof Sally Brinkman and her colleagues at the University of South Australia to update using AEDC 2021 data and adding some additional analyses to determine the impacts of socio-economic status and English language proficiency on

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[1] Rajwani, H., Culos, I., & McMahon, T. (2021). *Stronger starts, brighter futures: exploring trends in the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia*: SSI.

the developmental trajectories of CALD children. Key findings in *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II*[2], which was not included in our original submission to this Inquiry, include:

- Australia is becoming more culturally diverse. In 2021, 26% of children in the AEDC were from CALD backgrounds; this was up from 17% of children in 2009.
- 82 per cent of children from CALD backgrounds attended some form of ECEC in 2021, compared to 90 per cent of non-CALD children – a gap that is seen across all national cohorts of the AEDC from 2009 to 2021.
- The gaps in ECEC attendance between children from CALD and non-CALD backgrounds vary by ECEC setting:
  - the percentage of children from CALD backgrounds who do not attend preschool (the most common type of ECEC in Australia) is less than that of non-CALD children, though the gap has narrowed;
  - a similar result is seen in attendance at playgroups which has seen a drop in attendance for all children in recent years;
  - however, attendance by children from CALD backgrounds in early intervention programs is particularly low (almost half compared to that of non-CALD children), a significant gap that has persisted across all five waves of the AEDC since 2009.
- Children from culturally diverse backgrounds are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school than non-CALD children. This was consistent across all five AEDC cohorts of children from 2009 to 2021, though the gap has been closing over time.
- In 2021, overall, children from CALD backgrounds who did not attend any type of ECEC were 1.7 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable compared to CALD children who did attend.
- Preschool attendance has the strongest positive relationship with developmental outcomes – CALD children who did not attend preschool had 2.08 times greater odds of being developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDC domain, compared to children who did attend.
- Socio-economic disadvantage is the largest driver of developmental vulnerability for all children. Almost a third of children from CALD backgrounds in the most disadvantaged socio-economic areas were developmentally vulnerable compared to 1 in 6 of their peers in the most advantaged areas. SSI supports scaling up place-based initiatives in disadvantaged areas to improve child development and wellbeing and address entrenched disadvantage.
- English language proficiency also plays a large role in the risk of developmental vulnerabilities at school entry for CALD and non-CALD children. The largest gap in developmental vulnerability between CALD children and other children is on the Communication Skills and General Knowledge domain of the AEDC, a domain associated with English language proficiency. For bilingual children, attending high quality ECEC settings such as preschool is an effective way to support the development of their English language skills prior to school entry.[3]

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[2] Lam, B., McMahon, T., Beauchamp, T., Badu, E. & Brinkman, S. (2024, in press). *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II: Exploring trends to promote the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia*. Occasional Paper - Number 5. SSI/Education Futures, UniSA.

[3] Australian Early Development Census. (2009). *Research snapshot: The impact of English proficiency on the academic language skills of Australian bilingual children.* https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/the-impact-of-english-proficiency-on-the-academic-language-skills-of-australian-bilingual-children

Information request 2.2: Cultural safety in ECEC services

What factors most effectively promote the provision of culturally safe ECEC?
Would professional development in cultural capability (draft recommendation 3.6) be adequate to promote inclusion in ECEC services, or are there other components required?

The development of the Early Years Strategy provides a key opportunity to develop and embed a national cultural competency framework for CALD families within the early childhood sector.

Professional development in cultural capability is essential but <u>not sufficient</u> by itself to support equitable participation by CALD families in ECEC services. While capacity building is often operationalised in terms of additional training at the individual worker level, such workers are often limited in their ability to effect change in the organisation where they are employed or in the service system in which they are based.

An effective cultural competency framework requires changes at multiple levels such as government policy; professional standards; organisational policies and practice; and staff training and development. As has been highlighted by the National Health and Medical Research Council, the four dimensions of this framework interrelate so that cultural competence at an individual and professional level is underpinned by systemic and organisational commitment and capacity.[4] This is also consistent with the framework recommended in a recent report by the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre and the National Ethnic Disability Alliance, commissioned by the Disability Royal Commission in its deliberations on how build cultural safety for people with disability from CALD backgrounds in the disability sector.[5]

The cultural capability framework should include a focus on strengthening capability of workers to engage and support people from CALD backgrounds within both initial in-service training and ongoing professional development. While many services seek to respond to diversity, they often need support with skill development to ensure that they are culturally responsive to the needs and preferences of diverse communities. Further, cultural competence is a developmental process that evolves over an extended period.

Settlement providers such as SSI have deep knowledge and experience in working with diverse communities and are well placed to provide culturally responsive training. For example, SSI's Culture-Ready training was developed and delivered to build the skills and cultural responsiveness of the NDIS workforce. During 2021, the program delivered 240 workshops across all states and territories. The evaluation found that workers reported increased understanding of issues to consider when supporting people with disability from diverse backgrounds. In the 3-month follow up surveys, they reported changes to their practice, including providing access to translated documents, increased use of the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) and adapting other processes and policies.[6]

Recommendation 1: A cultural competency framework for the early childhood sector to improve cultural safety and participation of CALD families should be developed and implemented as a priority under the forthcoming Early Years Strategy.

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[4] National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2006) *Cultural competency in health: A guide for policy, partnerships and participation.* https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/cultural-competencyhealth
[5] Bates, S, Kayess, R, Giuntoli, G, Rengel-Gonçalves, A, Li, B, Fisher, KR, Golding, D, Ramirez, B & Katz, I. (2022). *Towards best-practice access to services for culturally and linguistically diverse people with a disability.* Prepared by the Social Policy Research Centre and the National Ethnic Disability Alliance for the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.

Does the structure of the Inclusion Support Program adequately prioritise and allow provision of culturally safe ECEC in mainstream services? If not, what are the issues and how could these be addressed?

The current operation of the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) does not adequately prioritise and promote engagement and participation of CALD families in ECEC, even though this is part of its brief. Relatedly, analyses of early intervention data from the AEDC show attendance by children from CALD backgrounds in early intervention programs is particularly low (almost half compared to that of non-CALD children), a significant gap that has persisted across all five waves of the AEDC since 2009.[6]

The stated intent of the ISP is to provide support for ECEC providers to build their capability to include children with additional needs including those with a disability or developmental delay, a health condition, behavioural issues, trauma, or are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, or from non-English speaking backgrounds.[7] However, as the Draft Report recognises, in practice, the ISP is largely limited to supporting children with disability. The Strategic Inclusion Plan (SIP) is a key mechanism in the ISP to strengthen inclusion. Yet, the SIP has a focus on disability rather than an overall focus on inclusion. As the evaluation of the ISP outlines, *"…if one considers a refugee child who has faced a series of traumas, the barrier is simply conceived of in terms of an outcome such as challenging behaviour or difficulty sleeping, rather than the more fundamental question of their needs arising from trauma and from cultural differences."[8]*

Recommendation 2: The Australian Government should review the operation and reach of the Inclusion Support Program to address persistent disparities in access to early intervention and early childhood education for children from CALD backgrounds.

Information request 7.2: 'System navigator' roles in the ECEC sector

Are current initiatives to support families experiencing additional barriers to navigating the ECEC system sufficient?

There is emerging evidence on the benefits of community-based navigators in improving engagement of disadvantaged families, including those from CALD backgrounds, in ECEC.[9] Navigators or linkers working in culturally responsive ways can assist participants to navigate cultural issues that impact on participation in ECEC.

However, the development of system navigation support initiatives in the ECEC system is still in its infancy and such initiatives only exist in a small number of geographic locations across the country.

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[6] Lam, B., McMahon, T., Beauchamp, T., Badu, E. & Brinkman, S. (2024, in press). *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II: Exploring trends to promote the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia*. Occasional Paper - Number 5. SSI/Education Futures, UniSA.
[7] Bray, J. R, Carroll, M., Baxter, J., Budinski, M., Gray, M., (2021). *Evaluation of the Inclusion Support Program. (Research Report)*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. ttps://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/2021_Inclusion%20Support%20Program%20Report.pdf
[8] Ibid.
[9] Uniting. (2023). *More than money: why some children are still left behind by early learning.* https://www.uniting.org/blog-newsroom/research-publications/Articles/white-paper-more-than-money; Dandolo Partners. (2021). *Links to early learning evaluation report.* https://www.paulramsayfoundation.org.au/news-resources/links-to-early-learning-evaluation-report

As outlined above, the focus of the ISP is on building the capacity of ECEC providers to strengthen inclusion and it does not provide support to families to navigate the ECEC system.

Is there a need for national investment in system navigator roles? – If so, who would be best placed to perform these roles? Examples could include Inclusion Agencies or contracted delivery by a range of ECEC services, community organisations, local councils or ACCOs.

How could this be delivered across different groups of families (for example, regional or remote, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse families), including ensuring delivery in a culturally sensitive manner?

SSI does not consider that inclusion agencies are well-placed to provide navigation support to families particularly given that the ISP is currently primarily focused on disability rather than an overall focus on inclusion.

Inclusion and access issues for individuals and families from CALD backgrounds can be seen across a span of human services. Given that navigation initiatives in the ECEC sector are still in their infancy, there is an opportunity to gain insights from similar initiatives within broader human services in relation to who is best placed to perform this role and key success factors. Organisations that already work with CALD communities and are embedded in culturally diverse local communities are particularly well placed to address inclusion and access issues for CALD communities.

SSI has experience in delivering navigation support to people with disability from CALD backgrounds that is relevant to similar inclusion challenges seen in the ECEC sector. SSI was previously the largest provider of the Ability Links program in NSW.

Ability Links was established in 2013-14 as the NSW approach to Local Area Coordination for people with disability, their families and carers. Early Links supported families of children with disability up to eight years old and had similar components and objectives to Ability Links NSW (both programs ceased to operate when Local Area Coordination transitioned into the full NDIS scheme with a national model in 2018). Ability Links employed "linkers" and provided learnings that are particularly relevant to consideration of key success factors in provision of navigation support to ECEC with CALD families.

SSI commissioned an independent evaluation of its delivery of Ability Links in NSW. The evaluation found that 64% of SSI's Ability Links individual outcomes were with CALD people, which represented 75% of the state-wide program outcomes for CALD participants in NSW. [10] It found that the strong performance of SSI's Ability Links with CALD participants was supported by the design of the Ability Links program, which was flexible and holistic. Stakeholders attributed the culturally competent elements of the program, including SSI Linkers being bilingual, from diverse backgrounds and connected to their communities, as key to supporting outcomes. This meant participants and Linkers had a shared understanding and were able to build trusting relationships and help participants overcome cultural and linguistic barriers. A critical feature of Ability Links was the focus of the Linkers on building trust and rapport before working with participants to identify goals.[11]

Notably, the state-wide evaluation of Ability Links, commissioned by the NSW Government, found that other providers of Ability Links were less successful in reaching CALD people with disabilities and their families and carers.[12]

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[10] ARTD Consultants. (2018). *Summary of Evaluation of SSI's Ability Links*. https://www.ssi.org.au/ssi-insight/summary-of-evaluation-of-ssis-ability-links/
[11] Ibid
[12] Urbis. (2016). *NSW Ability Links Final Evaluation Report*. https://urbis.com.au/app/uploads/2017/01/2016-Evaluation-Report.pdf

It is also vital that navigation support in human services is delivered by organisations that are strongly embedded within the local community so that they have strong knowledge and relationships within the local service system. The state-wide evaluation of Ability Links identified linkers being embedded in the local community as a key strength of the program.[13] Similarly, the recent report of the NDIS Review emphasises that navigation support should be strengthened and be "*delivered locally by people who have genuine connections, knowledge and links to local services.*"[14]

Recommendation 3: As part of the Early Years Strategy, the Australian Government should work with state/territory governments to scale up investment in navigation initiatives in the early childhood sector. This should include a targeted focus on navigation initiatives to address the lower attendance and higher developmental needs of children from CALD backgrounds.

Recommendation 4: Organisations that are contracted to provide navigation support in the ECEC should be able to demonstrate that they are strongly embedded within the local community and have expertise in early learning and family support. Further, organisations should be able to demonstrate that they have the required experience and expertise to meet the needs and preferences of CALD families.

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Commonwealth of Australia. (2023a). *Working together to deliver the NDIS Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme Final Report.* Part one. https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/resources/reports/working-together-deliver-ndis/part-one-unified-system-support-people-disability-3 https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/working-together-ndis-review-final-report.pdf