

Submission on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Productivity Commission Draft Report July 2014

Settlement Services International (SSI) is a leading not-for-profit organisation providing a range of services in the areas of humanitarian settlement, asylum seeker assistance, community capacity building with people with disabilities and multicultural foster care in NSW. SSI's strategic vision is to assist vulnerable individuals and families to reach their full potential and build on their social and economic participation. SSI works to create opportunities for clients and communities to meet their own needs, wants and aspirations.

SSI is also the peak, state-wide representative body for 11 Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) and delivers several programs at the local level through a decentralised service delivery model using SSI staff co-located at MRCs throughout NSW. SSI operates from four main office sites and 12 other locations in NSW and currently employs 450 staff and has 300 volunteers.

SSI's principal client groups are:

- refugees and other humanitarian entrants (including unaccompanied humanitarian minors);
- asylum seekers, who are living the community after being released from immigration detention;
- people with disabilities; and,
- children in out-of-home care.

In 2013, SSI delivered support services to almost 10,000 refugees and other humanitarian entrants settling in NSW. They are provided with immediate post-arrival support and links to services and community support through the Humanitarian Settlement Services Program funded by the Department of Social Services. In the same year, almost 6,000 asylum seekers released from immigration detention under the Community Support Program were supported by SSI. The Community Support Program is funded by Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

In addition, SSI member MRC agencies deliver a range of services including the Settlement Grants Program which targets family and humanitarian migrants in the first five years of settlement in Australia. Collectively, member MRCs provide a diverse range of services to between 30,000-35,000 newly arrived migrants in any given year.

Through our service delivery and community footprint, and the work of member MRCs, SSI is well placed to provide feedback on childcare and early childhood learning issues among newly arrived migrants.

Background

It was estimated that by 2001 one third of Australia's children were immigrants themselves or had at least one parent who was an immigrant, a reflection of Australia's increasing cultural diversity. [1] This demographic shift is continuing with about two thirds of children aged 0-17 years who became permanent residents in Australia between 2006 and 2010 being born outside of Europe and North America. [2] Despite this demographic reality there is a dearth of research on the developmental trajectory of children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, with much of the existing research fragmentary and sporadic. [1]

The benefits of access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) on child development and the protective impact of this early development on children's life trajectories are well established. Similarly, it is well established that migrants across a range of visa categories – skilled, family and humanitarian – can struggle to access universal services.[3] There is a mixed picture of the well-being of children from CALD backgrounds in Australia. In general, lower levels of well-being have been found among children in non-English speaking households than among the general population. [1, 2] However, a recent analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children found lower levels of well-being in children with an overseas-born mother irrespective of English proficiency. [2] This conflicting evidence has been attributed to the heterogeneity of immigrants and, in particular, the selective nature of the permanent skilled migration program [1] which accounts for 60% of Australia's annual migration. [4]

The focus of this submission is primarily migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds across the family and humanitarian streams who make up just under 40% of Australia's annual Migration Programme and the permanent skilled migration stream which makes up the remainder. [4] The submission also considers the potential impacts of ECEC services on the children of temporary skilled migrants from CALD backgrounds who make up an increasing part of the Australian labour market, a high proportion of whom apply for, and gain, permanent residency while they are living in Australia. [5]

SSI's perspectives on the Draft Report

Overall, we welcome the emphasis in the draft report on the disadvantage experienced by children from CALD backgrounds in accessing ECEC services, the focus in the draft report on expanding access to ECEC in the year prior to school, and the intent to deliver more affordable ECEC services. We also support the thrust of the measures outlined in the report that form the basis for the Inclusion Support Program to address disadvantage, and welcome the potential to divert some funding from the proposed changes to the Paid Parental Leave scheme to improving ECEC services.

While we accept that some of the disadvantage faced by children from CALD backgrounds in accessing ECEC services may be attributed to English language proficiency in the family household we also want to highlight the equally important challenge of cultural barriers. English language proficiency is relatively easy to measure and may often be a marker of cultural barriers which are more difficult to measure. These barriers may include a preference for parental care due to dissatisfaction with the care provided in current ECEC services.[6]

Other factors such as availability and accessibility can also be driving patterns of childcare use among migrants. For example, a recent large survey of newly arrived family, humanitarian and skilled migrants found that they were largely satisfied with their proximity to schools, medical centres, shops, and public transport but much less satisfied with proximity to childcare and their workplace. [3] This may be related to the fact that many new migrants settle on the outer urban fringe of major cities. Consequently, we support the draft recommendation (8.2) for State and Territory governments to provide out of school hours care where demand is viable.

We support the draft recommendation (7.5) for the ACECQA to explore ways to make it easier for people with international qualifications in education and childcare to have them recognised in Australia and unlock the capacity of these migrants. This would be in keeping with a key recommendation of the *Inquiry into Migration and Multiculturalism in Australia* by the Joint Standing Committee on Migration to reduce the complexity associated with migrants having their skills and qualifications recognised. [7] Numerous reports, including a report from Productivity Commission in 2006, have underscored how this complexity hampers the positive economic benefits of the migration program. [8] There is evidence that migrants with tertiary qualifications from non-English speaking countries, in particular, are

working below their occupational level, a mismatch that may impact the ECEC sector and its capacity to be more responsive to CALD communities. [9]

We broadly support the thrust of the recommendations and the intent of the Inclusion Support Program to build the capacity of ECEC providers to address the needs of disadvantaged children. However, we are concerned that some options, broadly categorised as cultural competency, have been overlooked. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has argued that improving access to essential services by disadvantaged populations demands change at a systems level, at a professional level (e.g. ACECQA), at the level of the provider (e.g. ECEC provider) and change at the individual worker level. [10] In SSI's experience, capacity building is often operationalised in terms of additional training especially at the individual worker level, with little attention paid to the necessary organisational, professional, or systemic changes. Individual workers are often limited in their capacity to effect change at the other, higher levels.[10] We urge the Commission to consider the multi-level approach to cultural competency put forward by the NHMRC in refining the final settings for the proposed Inclusion Support Program.[10] We believe that applying a cultural competence frame could maximise the potential benefits of the Inclusion Support Programs to children from CALD backgrounds and other disadvantaged populations.

Conclusion

The benefits of access to childcare and early childhood learning on workforce participation and childhood development are well established. Therefore, adequate access to ECEC is an essential service. In SSI's view, with improved policy settings ECEC can be a building block to improve social, economic and civic participation of newly arrived migrants in Australia and contribute to economic prosperity and population well-being.

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5/9/2014

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