



Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Committee

Response

Childcare and Early Childhood Learning inquiry draft report

Who are we?

The Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Committee (QIECC) consults Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and provides independent advice to both Queensland and Commonwealth Governments on education, training and (pathways to) employment issues relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (refer <http://qiecc.eq.edu.au/>). The QIECC consists of eleven part-time members appointed by the Queensland Minister for Education, Training and Employment.

Introduction

The QIECC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's *Childcare and Early Childhood Learning* inquiry Draft Report. Our comments relate specifically to the report's discussion and recommendations that impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

General comments

The report seems largely framed by a focus on funding and administrative arrangements with cultural diversity and marginalised socio-economic populations being secondary considerations, and then in deficit terms. We would argue that the latter two are an equally important aspect in policy consideration, and indeed, should drive the way consideration of early childhood services and programs are framed. It is only then that a system will be constructed that effectively caters, as part of its core business, for *all* members of the Australian population and their diverse needs.

The only discussion of support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children appears to be in relation to the subsidy. The needs of diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children populations are unique and complex. In the Queensland context this complexity is underscored by the variety of rural, remote and urban populations and languages spoken, as well as varying levels of access to opportunities and supports. A range of support mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure improvements in economic participation and access to early childhood education and care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Some of these were suggested in the QIECC's its initial submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry, which do not appear to be addressed. This response deals with some of these below.

The report appears to suggest that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children require additional support and are marginalised and vulnerable. There is of course an over-representation of marginalised and vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families requiring additional support. However it is equally important to acknowledge and honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the original inhabitants, their unique histories and cultures, and to create a culturally safe and appropriate early childhood environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, something which all children ought to be a part of, and will benefit from.

The QIECC also notes that the Forrest Review, which has been running concurrently, focussed very highly on early childhood and recommends a range of strategies for improving disparity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early learning. There may be some opportunities to draw some linkages with some of the recommendations contained in

Mr Forrest's report, *Creating Parity*, or at least the QIECC would be interested in the Commission's response.

Access and affordability

The QIECC would like more discussion in the report on how barriers to accessing early childhood education and care services can be addressed. Strategies should account for distinctive barriers faced by different sections of the population across cultural groups, socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations. As argued in our initial submission, barriers may differ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban versus regional/remote areas. There is a range of issues in urban settings that prevent participation in early childhood services, such as families not having awareness of the types of early childhood services on offer and services lacking cultural safety. In remote locations, limited service options and lack of flexibility often present barriers to access. Across all geographical areas, however, affordability and transport remain as barriers for many families. However, it is not clear for instance in some of the modelling how the issue of affordability is addressed. The QIECC would like to see explicit strategies and models that address the issue of affordability, particularly with a view that immediate out-of-pocket expenses are reduced.

Red tape involved in accessing both state and federal subsidies and rebates (e.g. CCB/CCR/QKFS Plus) which make early childhood education and care services more affordable is a barrier to families. There is a need for strategies to simplify system and funding structure so it is less confusing and easier to access.

The table on page 16 refers to supporting children with additional needs to access to early childhood education and care services 'on the same basis as other children'. This terminology implies that only children with a diagnosis require additional support. If read in this way, the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may not be acknowledged.

Population mobility

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population remains a highly mobile population. This impacts on the ways in which early childhood services are accessed and utilised and has major implications for service construction, delivery and communication systems between individual services. This issue does not appear to be addressed in the report. The QIECC would support some kind of information sharing system across centres and borders when children move and access new centres or services. The school-based tri-border strategy which has developed systems for tracking mobile students between Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory may provide some learnings.

Expansion of services

The QIECC would like to see more discussion about the expansion of existing services, including the range of services and how they can better cater for diverse populations. Discussion about diversity appears to be restricted to child care assistance models (e.g. Figure 6, p. 18), and then only in terms of 'additional' need.

Further the QIECC would like to hear the Commission's views on what investment ought to be made in existing services, most particularly for what purposes. For instance, how can existing services be supported to improve delivery of culturally appropriate services and to become more culturally safe? What mechanisms could be developed for continuous improvement around cultural safety? As a starting point we propose:

- Cultural competency training for current staff and centres
- Inclusion of cultural competency into the National Quality Standards
- Increase percentages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff

- Inclusion of kinship care arrangements into the funded child care options.

Quality systems and services

The QIECC supports the retention and strengthening of the National Quality Framework (NQF) to enable a quality system. It is important to have quality staff with appropriate qualifications. However the QIECC views with concern the recommendation to remove aspects of the NQF, particularly reduction in qualifications for educators working with very young children. There is a risk of reduced quality delivery, which particularly impacts on marginalised sections of the population, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Indeed, we would argue that aspects which deal with diverse and socially marginalised populations and culturally safe institutions could be strengthened. Indeed, the table on page 16 which outlines an ECEC system to aim for, names cultural appropriateness as part of a quality system. The QIECC applauds this inclusion. Such an aim needs to be built into systems, structures and strategies in order for it to become a reality.

The report appears to suggest that dedicated preschools be removed from NQF completely. The QIECC views this with concern. If preschools join the schooling system, it is important they remain play based. Regulatory governance around this should remain within the early childhood sector, particularly given the obvious differences in the purpose and orientation of schooling.

Flexibility for home based care, & relative care

Conversely the report recommends greater regulation and requirements for family day care. This will not only potentially provide a disincentive for those wishing to offer family day care, but will particularly inhibit any move towards relative care, something which we have argued particularly benefits Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, is culturally appropriate and needs to be recognised. However this recommendation provides a further barrier to and move away from relative care.

The table on page 16 refers to an aim where ECEC places not needed on a temporary basis can be used for occasional care. This supports the mobility of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, especially when families travel to another community for sorry business for a period. The use of places for occasional care would ensure the child has a place in another centre and thus has continuity of care. In these instances, processes will need to be developed for the system support this to happen with regards to rebates and fees and so on.

Transition to school

There is an assumption throughout the report that early childhood services are about development and not learning. In terms of the transition to school the orientation of early childhood services becomes increasingly important. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children it is very important they and are proficient in Standard Australian English (SAE) and have acquired foundational literacy in SAE. This is critical for ongoing success at school. Some discussion of this issue is required.

Workforce participation

Part of the construction of a culturally safe as well as culturally diverse environment is the employment of more Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander staff in early childhood settings in a range of roles. There does not appear to be discussion of the benefits, both within and beyond early childhood settings, of a diverse workforce, nor strategies for developing and maintaining this.

The QIECC argued in our initial submission that to enable a culturally responsive service, key service delivery personnel require an understanding of community's needs and are able to relate to and engage the community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from within the community are best placed to do this, and where required, the employee can be assisted to attain formal qualifications. Community liaison roles are important to assist non-Indigenous employees to promote a responsive, quality service. A quality service also includes it being culturally responsive and meeting local needs. We would be interested in the Commission's views on this issue.

Comments on specific recommendations

In addition to the above, which relates to a range of recommendations and discussion, we also offer a couple of specific comments.

Recommendation 12.4

There is an opportunity here to make an explicit statement and linkage to the commitment by all governments to 'close the gap' in participation in early childhood services between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other Australian children. This may provide some context around some of the specific proposals in the recommendation as well as sharpen the focus of some of the suggested financial supports. It would also address some of the access issues discussed above.

Recommendation 12.6

The QIECC would like to hear more discussion on how this recommendation might be ongoing and sustainable into the future.

We would also strongly caution that the support needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children extend beyond 'community groups' in highly concentrated low socio-economic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations (refer also to *General comments* above).

Further information

We recognise that the above comments are broad. Representatives of the QIECC are happy to provide further detail and specific ideas in relation to the above comments.

The Committee can be contacted by emailing qiecc@dete.qld.gov.au or telephoning 1800 263 836 should further information be required.

Leon Epong
Chair

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