



Response to the
Victorian Legislative
Assembly Legal and Social
Issues Committee

Inquiry into early childhood
engagement with Cultural
and Linguistically Diverse
communities

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**Noah's Ark Inc.
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Response to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into early childhood engagement with Cultural and Linguistically Diverse communities

About Noah's Ark

Noah's Ark Inc is a non-government organisation that was founded in 1971. Noah's Ark's primary role is in early childhood intervention (ECI) services for children with disabilities and other additional needs and their families and carers. We operate from 20 locations across metropolitan and regional Victoria, as well as in the ACT and Albury NSW. Last year these programs reached over 2,200 families.

Noah's Ark currently receives funding from the Victorian Government (Department of Education and Training) for the delivery of some ECI services and for the Kindergarten Inclusion Support, Pre-School Field Officer and Parent to Parent Programs. In addition, Noah's Ark provides training and resources nationally and internationally on early childhood intervention and inclusion. Noah's Ark has been active nationally in the development of services for young children with a disability and has strong links to the early childhood intervention field internationally.

In the past, Noah's Ark has worked specifically on supporting children from Cultural and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds through the Inclusion and Professional Support Program in Child Care. We also work with hard to reach communities in Bendigo through the Communities for Children (C4C) Program. Through our work in inclusion, ECI and training, we have strong relationships with the early childhood sector.

Noah's Ark welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into early childhood engagement with CALD communities.

John Forster
CEO

Introduction

Noah's Ark has a specific interest in what supports the development of children with disabilities and developmental delays. Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services aim to enhance the development, wellbeing and participation of children with a disability or developmental delay aged from birth to seven years old. The early years are a period of rapid growth in human development and are noted for the neuroplasticity of the young child's brain.

For some children, early access to ECI services can help them to such an extent that they will no longer require support services. For other children, early access to ECI services may reduce ongoing support needs and optimise the child's developmental potential and enhance family wellbeing.

The earlier ECI services can be provided the greater their potential impact. Addressing the barriers that limit children's access to these services is therefore critical.

A recent Australian study established that people from CALD backgrounds were much less likely to access specialist disability services than people born in Australia¹. The researcher further examined whether this difference could be explained by the so called 'healthy migrant effect' in that government screening of people seeking to emigrate here reduced the likelihood that they would have a disability¹. The study found that while 26% of the Australian population was born overseas and one in five mainly spoke a language other than English at home, only 13% of disability service users were born overseas¹. The researcher found that while there were slightly less children with a disability born overseas, this pattern reversed in the older age group, so the 'healthy migrant effect' was not able to explain the gap in service usage¹. Additionally, 73% of children with English as their primary language accessed a preschool/kindergarten program, compared with 60% for those who mainly spoke a language other than English at home, indicating that access to mainstream early childhood services is also reduced².

1. Barriers to ECI services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

Since 2014, ECI services in Australia have been transitioning from state and territory block-funding to the individualised funding of the NDIS. The transition is expected to be completed by 2020. The NDIS is a major social reform that has the potential to make a significant positive difference in the lives of people with disabilities and their families across Australia, including children.

While the NDIS is administered through a federal program, at least 50% of the NDIS in Victoria is paid for by the Victorian state government. There have been major establishment and implementation issues causing unintended negative impacts. Accessing ECI through NDIS has been particularly problematic for families from a CALD background. Given the significance of the impact on Victorian families from CALD backgrounds who have a child with a disability or developmental delay, it is important that the issues be investigated by this Inquiry.

¹ Zhou, Q. (2016). Accessing disability services by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds iAustralia. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 38(9), 844-852. doi:10.3109/09638288.2015.1062925

² Baxter, J., & Hand, K. (2013). *Access to early childhood education in Australia*. Retrieved from <https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/rr24.pdf>.

Our understanding is that the barriers faced by some families from CALD backgrounds in accessing services for their child with a disability or developmental delay include:

- A lack of community engagement
- Administrative processes, particularly related to early contact
- Selection of services
- Professional development of service providers in cultural sensitivity.

a) A lack of community engagement

The NDIA established the Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) gateway to support access of children with a disability or developmental delay to ECI services. The original intent of the ECEI gateway, which are run by partner agencies, was to: a) assist access for families; b) provide community education; c) support eligible families to understand and access high quality services; and d) support ineligible families to access short-term or community services. A cap placed on NDIA staffing meant that the NDIA was unable to meet demand for planning, that is, creating a plan for services that allocated funding for NDIS services. As a result, the planning function was shifted to the ECEI partners, thus substantially reducing their capacity to attend to the functions of family and community support and education³.

There are many different cultural views of parenting, child development and disability. In some cultures, it is traditional to do everything for infants and young children, for example to carry them and spoon feed them long after a child may have been encouraged to do this independently in other cultures. Likewise, in some cultures, children are not often spoken to by adults and so it is not considered unusual for a child to begin speaking at a much older age than would be anticipated in Western cultures. Such cultural practices may delay the recognition of a disability or developmental delay.

The concept of disability varies from culture to culture and from one individual to another. Some cultures don't have words for disabilities, such as Autism. Attitudes or beliefs towards disability also vary enormously with some cultures viewing it as a gift and others viewing disability as a punishment⁴. In some cultures, disability can carry such shame that families may go to significant lengths to conceal a child's disability or delay from their extended family and community. Other families may fear that discovery of their child's disability or delay may result in failing to achieve permanent residency in Australia. Families may also come from a country where they had limited trust in government and may hold similar fears in their new country. Families may simply be unaware services are available for them and their child.

It is important that communities are engaged in understanding both the nature of disability and the availability of supports. The ECEI Partner agency in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, recognised in 2018 that they required a specific strategy for CALD communities as only 9% of those attempting to access services were from a CALD background: less than half the anticipated number. Given the number of Australians born overseas has now reached 28.2%⁵, and that the Northern suburbs of Melbourne is a particularly multicultural area, 9% is clearly a worrying low level of engagement. In response, the Brotherhood of St Laurence developed the 'Building Cultural

³ Brotherhood of St Laurence. (2019). Submission to the NDIS Thin Markets Project Consultation(July). Retrieved from http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/11392/1/BSL_subm_DSS_NDIS_Thin_Markets_Consultation_Jul2019.pdf

⁴ Boston, Q., Dunlap, P., Ethridge, G., Barnes, E., Dowden, A., & Euring, M. (2015). Cultural Beliefs and Disability: Implications for Rehabilitation Counsellors. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 37(4), 367-374. doi:10.1007/s10447-015-9250-7

⁵ <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/previousproducts/3412.0main%20features32015-16>

Responsiveness Project'. They initially targeted four cultures to explore both the barriers and enablers to NDIS access in these communities and then to develop fact sheets, community engagement approaches and training for staff.

Recommendation

We recommend that the Inquiry examine how this, and any other promising projects, can be scaled up to systematically engage with communities on issues of child development, disabilities, the importance of early intervention and the services available to provide support.

b) Administrative processes, particularly related to early contact

One of the barriers to access the NDIS or all families, that has a more significant impact on families from CALD backgrounds, is the method of initial contact from the NDIA. Families who are currently accessing state funded ECI services are automatically eligible to receive NDIS funding. Typically, the NDIA calls families from a private number with no caller ID. If the family does not answer, as many families do not when there is no caller ID, the NDIA does not leave a message due to privacy concerns. A parent who does not speak English is less likely to answer if they don't know the caller as they cannot engage in a conversation. It is reported that the NDIA will make several of these calls and if there is no response, they make no further attempts to engage with the family by phone. The NDIA send a letter in English, but not all families have access to support in reading their mail. It is our understanding that if families do not respond they are listed as uncontactable.

It has been our experience with existing clients transitioning from state-based services that families from CALD backgrounds were far more likely to have a delayed and difficult transition, even with support from our program.

While an interpreter will be provided by the NDIS if required for the process of determining access to the Scheme, the cultural relevance of the eligibility interview and assessment is questionable. If access is granted, the next step is a planning meeting. The families we work with have reported mixed experiences of planning. Some of the issues reported by families from a CALD background include:

- Interpreters are not always being provided when needed, particularly if parents have some limited English. Several families did not realise that the meeting they had was a formal planning meeting until they have received the completed NDIS plan in the mail. Other families missed the opportunity to have a support person with them as they did not realise the nature of the meeting.
- There is an option of families having an 'NDIA managed plan', 'Plan Managed plan' (managed by another organisation) or a 'Self-managed plan'. Many families have reported that they were placed on a Self-managed plan without adequate explanation of what is required to undertake this. On realising they are unable to manage the tasks required due to their limited English, they have then been required to seek a plan review. This causes considerable stress, confusion and extended loss of service access while the issue is rectified. Noah's Ark staff report that this happens more frequently with families from a CALD background.
- Staff indicate that families from CALD backgrounds typically receive the same amount of funding as other families in relation to the child's level of disability or function. However, working with Families from CALD backgrounds, particularly when interpreters are required, takes significantly more time to communicate effectively, so additional funding is required.
- NDIS plans are not always provided to families in a language they can read.

Recommendation

We recommend that this Inquiry examine if best practice principles or standards have been developed for the engagement of families from CALD backgrounds by government departments and government funded services and if not that it develops them.

c) Selection of services

Under the NDIS, once a family has a plan, they are then required to select service providers in an environment of Choice and Control: a core pillar of the NDIS. Some families from a CALD background make initial contact with Noah's Ark when their time-limited 12-month plan has almost expired because they have not had sufficient support to find, and engage with, an appropriate service provider. The ECEI Partners need to be sufficiently funded to enable them to provide the support families require to understand best practice in ECI and access it.

There are a broad range of ECI programs in Victoria; not all of which are providing services within the parameters of the best practice guidelines that have been endorsed by the NDIA⁶. Those services should be culturally responsive, that is they create:

“welcoming and culturally inclusive environments where all families are encouraged to participate in and contribute to children’s learning and development. Practitioners are knowledgeable and respectful of diversity and provide services and supports in flexible ways that are responsive to each family’s cultural, ethnic, racial, language and socioeconomic characteristics”⁷.

Recommendation

We recommend that that Inquiry establish or endorse standards for the provision of accessible information about government funded services for families and CALD communities.

d) Professional development in cultural sensitivity

Professional development is important to ensure staff are culturally sensitive and responsive. The roll-out of the NDIS has reduced financial confidence in the disability field⁸ and more disability service providers are operating at a loss⁹. In addition to this, NDIS funding is attached to direct client approved activities. This means that in contrast to the previous state block funding, staff are required to work to billable hour targets. Activities like supervision, team meetings and training are not funded. This means that in addition to paying for course fees, professionals in the sector have the additional cost to their employer of lost income while they are being trained or sharing their knowledge with other staff in team meetings or supervision. This imposes a risk of reduced investment in professional development which may impact skills, knowledge and practices. Professional development in cultural sensitivity and responsiveness is one of the many areas that is currently being impacted.

⁶ Early Childhood Intervention Australia. (2016). National guidelines: Best practice in Early Childhood Intervention. Retrieved from <https://www.ecia.org.au/Resources/National-Guidelines-for-Best-Practice-in-ECI>

⁷ Early Childhood Intervention Australia. (2016). National guidelines: Best practice in Early Childhood Intervention. Retrieved from <https://www.ecia.org.au/Resources/National-Guidelines-for-Best-Practice-in-ECI>, p10.

⁸ Mathys, Z., & Randall, K. (2019). NDIS market dynamics study, National Disability Services, Victorian NDIS Sector Development Project, April 2019

⁹ Carey, G. (2019). How is the disability sector faring? A report from National Disability Services' Annual Market Survey. Retrieved from https://www.csi.edu.au/media/How_is_the_disability_sector_faring_FINAL12.3.pdf

Time spent engaging harder to reach communities such as by volunteering to speak with multicultural groups or attending community events is also unfunded. These activities take staff away from billable activities in a climate where service providers are experiencing such financial strain that over a third of disability provider agencies are considering a merger to survive⁸.

Recommendation

We recommend that the Inquiry establish or endorse standards in the funding of professional development in cultural sensitivity in government funded services.

2. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Attendance at ECEC services is beneficial to all children's learning and development¹⁰. Limited knowledge of these benefits or cultural beliefs may be barriers for some families accessing ECEC. For other families they may not know how to access these services, or they may have concerns about how their child might cope if they do not speak English.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)¹¹ provides a strong framework to promote the learning and development of all Victorian children aged from birth to eight. The VEYLDF recognises the importance of wellbeing, relationships and community to children's learning and sees children as people with rights¹¹. The VEYLDF is informed by the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and responsibilities. One of the guiding principles of the VEYLDF is Equity and Diversity.

There has, for many years now, been services to assist the transition to ECEC for children from CALD communities. There is a federally funded Inclusion Support Program (ISP) which aims to assist the inclusion of many marginalised children such as those from a CALD background or those that have a disability or developmental delay. Some of the supports available for families from CALD backgrounds include accessing bicultural or bilingual support workers to help the child settle into a service and there is funding for additional workers when a child has a disability or delay. The inclusion program has undergone considerable changes in recent years. It has been reported to us that applications for bicultural or bilingual support are taking between two weeks and six months to process. By the time an approval comes through, the child may have been at the service for many months and made the difficult transition without appropriate supports. ECEC services have informed us that they have stopped applying for this support as it will not be provided in a timely manner.

The Inclusion Support Program comprises the Inclusion Development Fund (IDF) which has a stream of funding available for innovative ideas. This may include "activities which facilitates outreach and connections to community support, and funding to purchase translating and interpreting services, services from cultural experts or specialist advice on how to include a particular child, including bicultural support workers."¹² Applications to this fund are made in the form of a business case. It has been reported to us that for further details are sought many months after the initial request was submitted. Furthermore, it has

¹⁰ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2014). *Children with a disability in inclusive early childhood education and care*. NSW Government Retrieved from <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/literature-review-children-with-disability-in-inclusive-early-childhood-education-and-care>.

¹¹ Victorian State Government. (2009). *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)*. Melbourne Retrieved from https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/veyldf_for_children_from_birth_to_8_1.pdf.

¹² KU Children's Services. (2016). Inclusion Development Fund Manager. Retrieved from <https://www.idfm.org.au/innovative-solutions>

been reported that the fund is underspent to such a degree that a project worker was hired by Community Child Care to investigate why the funds are not being spent.

Families from CALD backgrounds report to Noah's Ark staff that the IDF families from CALD backgrounds do not communicate with educators at ECEC because they do not speak English and an interpreter is not offered. Many ECECs are working hard to engage CALD communities and provide welcoming and inclusive services. Access to, or understanding of, using interpreting services may be a barrier to this.

When a child comes from a CALD background and has a disability, the barriers to accessing ECEC multiply. Cultural shame regarding disability can lead to "service hopping" when educators raise their concerns about a child's development with parents¹³. Additional inclusion supports can help children achieve better outcomes¹³ and it is vital that these are provided in a timely manner.

Recommendation

We recommend that the Inquiry investigate the availability and utilisation of bicultural supports across early childhood services and recommend or endorse standards about both the availability and utilisation of these resources.

3. Playgroups

There are a number of organisations and initiatives to involve families from a CALD background in playgroups such as Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG), Smalltalk, diverse Council playgroups, Vietnamese Women's Association and many more. It seems that there are beneficial exist within the community to engage families from CALD backgrounds and support them to socialise within their community/language in a playgroup setting.

Recommendation

We recommend the ongoing support for the inclusion of families from CALD backgrounds and support to organisations to provide information to families about the new system for children with a disability.

4. Interpreters

Noah's Ark is aware of the import role played by interpreters for families with CALD backgrounds. Under the NDIS, families and services providers are required to access interpreters when needed from the TIS. Our staff report that they have frequent issues with interpreters either not being available from TIS and not being allowed to seek them elsewhere, interpreters either cancelling at late notice, or not attending the appointments. In these circumstances, staff try to make accommodations using a telephone interpreting service. This can be both awkward and challenging as ECI professionals may be coaching parents and modelling strategies. This can involve explaining over the phone what they are physically doing in addition to what they are saying.

At times we encounter difficulties with confidentiality, particularly when a cultural group is relatively small, and the interpreter might be known to a family and the family. Some families are reluctant to access interpreters as they do not want the community knowing their child has a developmental delay.

¹³ Tsambouniaris, M. (2016). How do we support the inclusion of CALD children with disabilities into our services?: Let's talk about disability in the context of culture. *Every Child*, 22(3), 8-9.

When a family does not live close to other people of the same cultural background it can be even harder to access an interpreter as it is not financially viable for the interpreters to travel far for work. Families in rural and remote areas have very limited access to interpreters, sometimes relying on telephone interpreting or interpreters travelling from out of the area to see several families on a particular day. If families cancel frequently, as more vulnerable or marginalised families tend to do, the interpreters can stop coming.

Recommendation

We recommend that the Inquiry explore ways of promoting the breadth and availability of interpreters in Victoria.

Conclusion

Children from CALD communities can experience multiple disadvantages. When the child also has a disability, these disadvantages escalate. Access to high quality ECI and ECEC services is essential to give these children the best opportunities for learning, development, participation and wellbeing. Recent changes to supports available to children with a disability and their families may have unintended negative consequences that impact even more so on children from CALD backgrounds. The introduction of the NDIS has complicated access to and participation in ECI services.

We recommend that the Inquiry:

- examine how this, and any other promising projects, can be scaled up to systematically engage with communities on the issues of child development, disabilities, the importance of early intervention and the services available to provide support.
- examine if best practice principles or standards have been developed for the engagement of families from CALD backgrounds by government departments and government funded services and if not that it develops them.
- establish or endorse standards for the provision of accessible information about government funded services for families and CALD communities.
- establish or endorse standards in the funding of professional development in cultural sensitivity in government funded services.
- investigate the availability and utilisation of bicultural supports across early childhood services and recommend or endorse standards about both the availability and utilisation of these resources.
- provide ongoing support for the inclusion of families from CALD backgrounds and support to organisations to provide information to families about the new system for children with a disability.
- explore ways of promoting the breadth and availability of interpreters in Victoria.