

PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into adequacy of services to meet the developmental needs of Western Australian children

SUBMISSION

Submission prepared by the Bachelor of Social Science (Children and Family Studies) team at Edith Cowan University. Children and Family Studies is one of the three courses in Australia which has been designed to provide tertiary training for early childhood and care workers.

26 February 2009

Name of Committee: Community and Development Justice Standing Committee

Name: Dr Anna Targowska, Course coordinator, (0424 649 526) a.targowska@ecu.edu.au
Susan Teather, lecturer (0439 522 017), s.teather@ecu.edu.au

Organisation: Edith Cowan University

Position held in organisation: Children & Family Studies* course coordinator

Preparedness to appear before the committee: Representatives of Early Childhood Australia (Western Australian Branch) Inc would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee

* Children and Family Studies is a three year course recognised under the WA Children and Community Services (Child Care) Regulations 2006 as providing an A* level qualification for working with children in child care. The act defines this as a degree or diploma in early childhood care or education including a specialist course on the principles and practices of the care and education of children in the 0-24 months age range, in addition to practical experience of 100 hours (minimum) with children in that age range. Students who have completed the first two years of this course are recognised as having equivalent to the B* as defined in the legislation.

Preamble

This submission needs to be read in conjunction with the submission by Early Childhood Australia (WA Branch) Inc., as Dr Anna Targowska, the co-author of this submission, took an active part in the development of the ECA WA paper. To avoid duplication, only some of the terms of reference namely (a) and (c) have been addressed in the submission below.

As indicated in the ECA WA submission, despite the evidence of the importance of early years for the individuals as well as for some broader social outcomes, the needs of young children in WA are not being adequately addressed. This is related to a number of factors, which are complex and cannot be summarised within the scope of this submission. Some of them have been addressed in the ECA WA submission.

In this paper we would like to focus on the ability of early childhood and care services to adequately address the needs of all young children, with the emphasis on workforce issues and the inadequacy of the existing bicultural child care inclusion support for children and families from CaLD backgrounds. We would also like to address the need for a government agency to oversee and coordinate the development of policy, funding and delivery of services for early childhood education and care for young children.

(a) whether existing government programs are adequately addressing the social and cognitive developmental needs of children, with particular reference to prenatal to 3 years

(1a) Child care inclusion support services in WA.

Many researchers (Elliot, 2004; Myers, 2004; Wylie & Thompson, 2003) argue that “young children must experience high quality services, not only to ensure the best possible future outcomes, but because children have the right to the best possible [experiences at] present” (Sims, Guilfoyle, & Parry, 2006, p.1). In Australia, a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), this right should be reflected in early childhood policy and practice. Some of the important components of quality care include positive interactions with adults and peers and quality of opportunity across diversity (Myer, 2004). Children who come into care services from different cultural backgrounds than those of the caregiver are at high levels of risk (Wise & Sanson, 2003) due to possible language difficulties and incongruence in values and practices between home and care environments (Sims, Guilfoyle, & Parry). Due to the language barriers they also have fewer opportunities to develop positive relationships with staff and other children.

As learning English and gaining employment are invaluable for refugees and migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CaLD) to settle into their new country (Bartlett, 2007), accessing childcare is of prime importance for young migrant families to achieve these aims. Indeed, many migrants are required to place their children in child care in order to attend English classes in their early months of settlement in Australia. However, childcare services should not only play an important role in assisting working parents. They should also provide best developmental opportunities for all children, including those from CaLD backgrounds. To ensure such outcomes for children from CaLD backgrounds, high quality childcare inclusion support is necessary to develop strong links between home and childcare and to support CaLD children’s language needs. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that such links become a part of a strong mesosystem (a system of connections between different settings in which children participate) which enhances children’s developmental opportunities. Lack of strong mesosystem links creates developmental risks.

The Australian Governments, past and present, recognize the need of all children to have access to high quality child care. To address the additional needs of some of Australian children (including those from CALD backgrounds) federally funded child care support services have been established in Australia. In 2006 these services and the amount of funding have been redeveloped. In January 2006 the new Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP) has been introduced (Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2007). As part of the Inclusion and Professional Support Program, the Australian Government provides an Inclusion Support Subsidy (ISS), funding which aims to contribute towards the costs associated with including children with ongoing high support needs in child care.

Children from CALD backgrounds (including refugee children) have been identified as one of the target groups for inclusion support. Under the Inclusion Support Program (ISP), a number of Inclusion Support Agencies operate on a regional basis to coordinate assistance provided by networks of Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISFs) to work at a local level with childcare services. The role of the ISFs is to assist childcare services to build their skill base and capacity to include children with additional needs. As part of supporting children from CALD backgrounds (including refugee children), child care services can also access Bilingual Support – the time limited specialist support to assist a childcare service to build its capacity to include these children (Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2007).

Whilst the funding of the IPSP indicates a level of governmental support for inclusion support, there is a vast degree of anecdotal evidence indicating concerns in the WA field that such support may not be meeting the needs of CALD families. This evidence came from WA child care services as well as some Inclusion Support Agencies' staff, who expressed their concerns during professional meetings. These concerns were also expressed by children services professionals during the 2006 consultations organized by the Professional Support Coordinator in WA (PSCWA), a body responsible in WA for the management and coordination of childcare support services.

Due to the lack of systematic qualitative data in relation to inclusion of children from CALD backgrounds available in WA, a study funded by Edith Cowan University was conducted in 2008 (Targowska, 2009). This study aimed to establish the existing level of Child Care Inclusion Support for families and children from CaLD backgrounds and its implications. The study also aimed to provide possible recommendations for children's services policy and practice. The use of qualitative methods aimed to ensure in-depth evidence of how some WA families, child care services and Inclusion Support Agencies experienced inclusion support.

The study identified a number of barriers to the inclusion of children from CALD backgrounds into children services. We would like to share with the Committee some of the findings of this study.

Many services as well as some Inclusion Support Agencies (ISAs) expressed their **confusion about the application process for bilingual support workers:**

... Before we could get any assistance [we needed]. We used to pick up the phone and ring Ethnic Child Care Resource Unit (ECCRU) if we got a child that could not speak English; you would get a worker. [Now] You have to contact the Inclusion Support Worker, you need to fill out an Inclusion Plan and submit it to PSCWA. (CC manager, private)

... The amount of paperwork is unbelievable. Thanks God the Inclusion Support worker helps us with that. But they need to take it to Professional Support Coordinator (PSC WA). We got our first one approved [the request for bilingual worker]... the first one in months.... The funding is there, but since it has been taken over by the new bilingual inclusion body, it is not getting anywhere.... (CC manager, private)

Concerns were also expressed in relation to the current role of the bilingual workers, which has changed in comparison to the period before 2006:

... the guidelines state that their [bilingual workers'] purpose is to educate and inform staff on strategies on how to work with the child. That is all very well if the child understands our language. We got to crawl before we can walk; we got to get the child confident with us [trust us] as carers [first]... (CC manager, private)

... I can't have what I want. They will provide someone who can support us. But we need someone to support us with the child, how to offer them a drink, to answer the child's questions; a few phrases. My understanding is that they won't do orientation. They can help us with a little bit of resource information but not face to face ... [working with children] bicultural support. (CC Manager, community based)

... Previous to the PSC, we had no issues getting anybody and staff would learn a few words to get by. Now I have a list of words but I have no idea how to say it. ISAs can't get any more things from PSC or BISWA. I leave messages and no one gets back to me. (CC manger, private)

... My understanding of the [current] support is that we could get support to assist with an enrolment and giving families initial information for assisting with settling the child. We seem to manage at time of the enrolment; it is the settling of the children once the parents leave that can cause the distress for all. We have been 'spoilt' by previous prompt and efficient service (CC manager, community based)

The limited range of bilingual workers has been reported by many services:

... I want things to get back to how it used to be. I did not get any support for the Sudanese family. (CC manager, private centre)

... My original phone call to PSCWA was about a parent who could not understand English; I could not understand her and she could not understand me... I couldn't get a bilingual worker ... So this Indonesian family did not come through, as I could not enrol them. (CC manager, community based)

... In my experience in my previous role, I had lot of trouble in getting someone [bilingual inclusion worker]. (CC manager, community based centre)

... Our experience is that it is very difficult to get the appropriate [bilingual] worker. If indeed any worker. There are a number of problems that seem to be contributing to that. One is the information flow for requests. This is very unclear. There are problems with services and ISA's understanding what is needed to access an inclusion worker and there also don't seem to be prompt responses from the agencies that are responsible for these applications. So in some cases we know of requests that have gone through to PSC and they have not been responded to. We have had to prompt them to get a response even second and third time. They would be responded in a half - hearted fashion ... the arrangements haven't been followed through. It has been quite disappointing. (Coordinator, ISA)

It has been found that the existing level of Child Care bilingual inclusion support has a number of implications for services, children and their families.

Implications for the services include:

Lack of understanding of cultural differences

... We need a lot of help. It's pretty much that children 'get a lot more spoilt' [are interdependent] in their culture and get spoon fed up to the age of 5. We were expecting them to eat [independently] and thought they were not eating because of culture shock. I did not have any idea. I thought they were just crying, but they were crying because they needed to be fed. That is something we needed to help them with. [the coordinator received this information from their Indonesian staff member]. (CC Manager, ABC centre)

Lack of understanding of family and children's needs

... It would be good [for the BW] to spend a little time with the child and spend a little time with the parents. I mean, we might set the table and put out all the bowls and spoons and then a little one might come and eat with his hand; it's not wrong to eat with their fingers... ... if my staff don't know what their [families'] traditions are ... they cannot respond appropriately [to the child's need]. (CC Manager, private)

... It would be good to have one on one support for them [children] ... basically, for them to communicate what their needs are... getting across that they are tired and they want to sleep or they want to ask a question. (CC Manager, ABC)

Services becoming hesitant to make a request for bicultural support

... From the child care perspective it has been very frustrating. We have had a couple of very bad experiences. So, you become a little hesitant to make another request. (CC manger, community based)

... Previously children attending through Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) have not been eligible to have Bi Cultural Inclusion Support through the PSCWA. We have requested support, but did not receive it. We are now able to get around this issue but have not requested any assistance this year. I am about to ask for some assistance with a family from Somalia. (CC manger, community based)

Services struggling on their own with a varying degrees of success

... From the child care perspective it has been very frustrating. We have had a couple of very bad experiences. So, you become a little hesitant to make another request. (CC manger, community based)

... Previously children attending through Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) have not been eligible to have Bi Cultural Inclusion Support through the PSCWA. We have requested support, but did not receive it. We are now able to get around this issue but have not requested any assistance this year. I am about to ask for some assistance with a family from Somalia. (CC manger, community based)

I gave up asking for help within six months of the PSC starting. We were told we can't have that help, and it was just frustrating. I have requested [help] quite often. We have a lot of African children, most are from Sierra Leon, Somalia. Black Africans, a lot did not speak English, I had no idea of what they were saying and it was very hard to get things done ... A couple of months ago we contacted ISA, [and asked] if they can get somebody in. They said no, you just won't get anybody. (CC manger, private)

Lack of empathy: 'She will be right' attitude

... A lot of centres don't want to call anyone unless there is a 'problem'. If a child is not crying or not interacting [withdrawn] but there is no problem [the child doesn't cause problems for staff or other children] they do not call. Staff does not seem to understand what it means to include children in a group. (CC manger, community based)

... There is a notion that 'she will be right'. Lack of empathy at times; here is a child that has no English and is totally distraught. Mum and dad may be able to speak [English], but not necessarily the child [and the centre does not request support]. (Coordinator, ISA)

... One of my deepest concerns is that I am aware that this region had really low rates for requests for inclusion support. In the past I think it was a true reflection of CaLD children in child care but the numbers of CaLD children in child care have definitely increased ... there are a lot of children from migrant and refugee backgrounds. But services are still not requesting support ... I have had caregivers and coordinators tell me they won't bother to [request support] because it's been so disappointing, why would we do that again. It is very worrying. (Coordinator, ISA)

... We get an extremely small percentage of requests for bilingual support ... child care centres don't let us know that they have children from culturally diverse backgrounds. That's the first issue we come across. (ISF)

Impact on families

Emotional distress

... Every time I wanted to come here, he [my son] said he didn't really want ... I was really worried. It was a hard time for me, too. [if there was another person who spoke the child's language] I would be confident that he is [being] taken care of, that he is understood. But in this situation I always had to think about him and had to worry about him, if he is able to communicate with the carers. But I think the carers did a good job... (parent, community based CCC)

Not joining the workforce

... There are many people who do not send their children to child care because there aren't any workers who speak their child's language there. I know many women who do not go to work [because of that]. My wife did not work for two years... We only sent K. to CC because my parents were here and he did not have to go for a long time at the beginning ... he would only go for a few hours a day. And for the first month he only went one day a week. My parents stayed here for nearly a year, so they looked after K and after they left, he went to this CC for a few days a week. So that was really good. Centres are trying to do their best, but it is possible to make it better. It has to be a way of improving this for children. (Parent, private CCC)

Social isolation

... ECCRU was there to help us include children ... to help us understand that we are not all the same. It was important to understand that... What is happening now is that parents are taking children out [of CCCs] and people are staying home because CC staff is finding them too hard. This results in isolation... (CC Manager, community based)

Lack of personal relationships

... [In our centre] every family has a contact person, whether it is the team leader, assistant coordinator or coordinator over three or four weeks. We get to know the family and what their needs are. We then get the picture of what we need to do for this family. **We cannot possible do that [with families from CaLD backgrounds] without bilingual/ bicultural support** ... So what's happening for us is that these families haven't got anyone to build a relationship with and weeks down the track there are behavioural issues with the children; they do not want to get out of the cubbyhouse and they are screaming. How do we deal with that if we have not formed a relationship? And when my biting issue came up and other issues, it was the worst situation on earth because I did not have the relationship [with the families]. I need someone to help me build relationships with these families; I believe all families have that right. It's an issue of equality. (CC Manager, community based)

Impact on children

Emotional distress

... He actually was only two years old. He could only speak a little bit in our local language, but he did not know any English when he came in here. He actually had a really hard time settling in. Because he could not even tell them when he wanted to go to toilet or wanted something or if he was distressed. So it was difficult for him, it took him about **four or six months to settle**. He cried [all the time] for the first month I think. As soon as I was going to leave he would start crying and the carers told me, that he does not eat, does not interact with any other children and it was like that for a few months. (A parent; community based centre)

Emotional distress and behavioural problems

... We have a Sudanese family and an Ethiopian family [...]. So we have [for example] a five-year-old that is becoming very disruptive because he cannot communicate... He stands outside and does not want to do anything [does not engage in any play activities]. (CC manager, private)

... Because parents need to attend English classes, they have no choice... And the children are left with us, crying their hearts out because they can't speak any English. (CC manager, private)

... We have a little girl like that too, she disturbs everybody else, and she actually bites because she is frustrated. (CC manager, private)

Behavioural problems and emotional withdrawal

... They won't listen to us. They are under the table and they are spitting. (CC manager, private)

... Some children won't let you cuddle them ... that's my frustration. I have wanted to just sit with the children and read them a book but I have been pushed away because they don't understand me. They were quite young, 18 months and two were 4 years old. The 4 year olds took longer to settle. They want to sit on the cushion and cry or go and sit in the corner. (CC Manger, private)

Unequal access

... We have a responsibility to every child to make sure they have equal access to all our programs, we can't do that when a child is screaming and saying words that we don't understand. (CC Manager, community based)

... [In the past] They [bicultural workers] worked with the whole group. They talked to the staff, not just being with the child ... They did things that included the child ... Their [children's] faces brightened up when you knew a word. The staff could ask the worker for words and information about the culture. (CC manager, private)

Some centres also talked about trying to build their own capacity for inclusion by:

- organising own collections of multicultural resources
- learning sign language and common phrases
- using parents and other family members and other agencies as interpreters
- employing bilingual staff
- some attempts to develop links with communities in their area

These attempts were not always successful. Although some services managed to develop good collections of resources and learn phrases in different languages, their ability to employ bilingual staff to meet the needs of all language groups in their service and to develop links with communities was limited.

Obstacles of current services ' capacity for inclusion can be summarized as follows:

- Lack of adequate support services
- Lack of cultural competence
- Limited opportunities for adequate inclusion training
- Lack of skills in community work
- Lack of human resources to engage with local communities and contribute to building their social capital (Healey, 2007)

Recommendations

The above findings demonstrate that at present child care services do not adequately meet the needs of children and families from CaLD backgrounds and that current situation in relation to bilingual inclusion support is quite disturbing. Our Children & Family Studies team believes that there is a need to:

- review the current funding as well as the existing guidelines for the inclusion support for children from CaLD backgrounds
- review the capacity of the current Bilingual Inclusion Support Agency in WA to adequately meet the inclusion needs of child care services

- provide funding and more opportunities for adequate inclusion training and development of cultural competence among child care staff

There is also a need to consider development of a new integrated service model, where child care would collaborate and co-locate with other services (eg. health, parent support, education). Such integrated model would allow for more successful inclusion of children and families from CaLD backgrounds through:

- Employing bilingual staff shared by co-located services
- Employing community workers to facilitate links within the community and identify community leaders
- Sharing cost of training in cultural competence

The above strategies would potentially contribute to the development of social capital in the local communities.

(2a) Workforce issues

The research reported in this submission also highlights the need for improvement in the quality of child care workforce. Quality child care requires suitably trained and skilled professionals who are able to provide high standard of care so that the needs of all children 0 – 3years are met. As indicated in the previous subsection, children from CaLD backgrounds are often being denied the opportunity to gain the many benefits child care offers. In order to adequately meet children’s needs, not only improved inclusion support is needed. There is also a need to ensure that all child care staff have essential skills and knowledge in relation to cultural competence and working effectively with communities. For this reason the long term child care workforce issues must be addressed.

The workforce associated with programs for children 0 – 3 years is pivotal to quality and the adequacy of services to meet children’s developmental needs. Elliot (2006, p. 40) in the report *Early Childhood Education: Pathways to quality and equity for all children* states that there is a long standing argument that “government funding and regulations for early childhood programs both in Australia and elsewhere, provide little incentive or support for attracting and keeping appropriately qualified early childhood staff”. Quality child care requires qualified professionals, retention of staff to ensure consistency of care, small group sizes and appropriate child to staff ratios to effectively nurture children’s development and support their families. But with current poor working conditions, low status and low wages, qualified child care workers often leave this profession after a short period of time (Community Services Minister’s Advisory Council, 2006). The depth of the workforce issues is illustrated by Elliott (2006) as she refers to a number of government reports focused upon these issues in the child care sector. Workforce issues are not new and have been visible for some time, yet they remain unresolved, or even untouched.

It is critical to addressing the developmental needs of children that workforce issues are taken into consideration. As previously indicated, Edith Cowan University (ECU) has one of three courses specifically designed to create graduates to work in the child care sector. The intention of the Bachelor of Social Science (Children and Family Studies) three year degree is to broaden students’ understanding of the needs of children and families, their communities and society as well as prepare them for work as policy makers, managers and practitioners within the community/public service sector. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) approach to understanding children’s development (referred to in previous subsection) is central to this qualification and this includes understanding of all factors that impact upon a child. This qualification ensures that graduates are well equipped to work with all people and therefore graduates contribute to ensuring that the needs of children 0-3 years are adequately met.

This qualification not only has the objective of providing learning opportunities for those people interested in child care but opportunities for graduates to work in a range of other services that support families with children, in particular children 0 – 3 years. The breadth and depth of knowledge and skills that students graduate is an asset to the community. Yet despite there being sufficient graduates from this course (to meet the demand for tertiary qualified child care workers as well as other family and child focused positions) the number of graduates entering the child care sector or remaining in the sector is low. Workforce issues deter graduates from remaining in child care as they seek better paid positions with more attractive conditions. Yet retaining professionals educated specifically to work with young children and their families is one step to ensuring that the developmental needs of children are met and society reaps the benefits of this achievement.

ECU has also a Bachelor of Education Early Childhood Studies course, whose graduates could potentially work in the Child Care sector. However, due to the issues discussed previously, not many graduates from this course seek this form of employment.

In order to 'upskill' an early education and care workforce, which is an important part of the Federal Government early childhood agenda, this sector's working conditions and remuneration need to be improved. We believe that the needs of children 0-3 years need to be addressed in the same way as the needs of school aged children. The existing discrepancy in government funding for these two sectors demonstrates that the importance of early years continues to remain in the area of rhetoric.

(c) which government agency or agencies should have coordinating and resourcing responsibility for the identification and delivery of assistance to 0-3 year old children
--

There seems to be a need to have an overarching body to overcome the fragmentation of service delivery, funding and policy in early education and care sector. We support the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People's proposal to establish an Office of Early Childhood. However, in order to adequately meet the needs of young children, especially those between 0-3 years, and their families, this office would have to include a diverse range of professionals from an array of disciplines such as education, child care, family support and health.

References

- Bartlett, A. (2007). *Overcoming the Barriers – Assisting new Migrants to Settle in Australia: Issues and campaigns*. Retrieved September 10, 2007 from <http://andrewbartlett.com/faq.php?id=19&category=5>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The ecology of human development : Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Elliot, A. (2006). *Early childhood education: Pathways to quality and equity for all children*. Victoria: Australian Council for Education Research.
- Community Services Minister's Advisory Council (2006). *National children's services workforce study*. Victoria: Victorian Government Department of Human Services.
- Convention on the Rights of the Child. (1989). UNICEF. Retrieved August 15 2007 from http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30160.html.
- Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. (2007). *Inclusion support subsidy guidelines*. Retrieved September 10, 2007 from <http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/childcare/services-ipsp.htm#13>

- Gunnar & White, (2001) Salivary cortisol measures in infant and child assessment. In L.Singer & P. Zeskind (Eds.), *Biobehavioural assessment of the infant*. 9pp. 167-1890. New York: Guilford Press.
- Healey,K. (2007) *Creating better communities: A study of social capital creation in four communities*. Sydney, NSW: Benevolent Society.
- McCain, M., Mustard, F., & Shanker, S. (2007). *Early years study 2: Putting science into action*. Toronto: Council for Early Childhood Development.
- Myers, R. (2004). *In search of quality in programmes of early childhood care and education (ECCE)* Retrieved January 10 2004 from http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=363538&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION+201.html. Geneva:UNESCO.
- Sims, M., Guilfoyle, A., & Parry, T. (2006). Children's cortisol levels and quality of childcare provision. *Child Care, Health and Development*. 32(4), 425-466.
- Targowska, A. (February, 2009). The focus of Parent-Child Centres: Helping to create social capital in local communities. Paper presented at the 2009 NIFTeY/CCCH Conference, Melbourne, Australia.
- Wylie, C., & Thompson, J. (2003). The long-term contribution of early childhood education to children's performance – evidence from New Zealand. *International Journal of Early Years education*, 11(1), 71-78.
- Wise, S. & Sanson, A. (2003, 12 – 14 February 2003). *Cultural transitions in early childhood: the developmental consequences of discontinuity between home and childcare*. Paper presented at the 8th Annual Institute of family Studies Conference, Southbank, Melbourne.