

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Melbourne—Monday, 14 October 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Meng Heang Tak

Mr Bill Tilley

WITNESSES

Ms Melodie Davies, Executive Director, and

Ms Barbara Romeril, President, fka Children's Services.

The CHAIR: Thank you for being here today. I declare open the public hearings of the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. All mobile phones should be turned to silent at this point. I welcome Ms Melodie Davies, the Executive Director of fka Children's Services, and Ms Barbara Romeril, the President of fka Children's Services. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today. But if you go outside and repeat some things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Also, all evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as possible. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and also handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to proceed with a brief 5 to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, and then we will follow up with questions.

Ms ROMERIL: Thank you. I will kick off as President. It is a great pleasure for us to be here today. As you would have picked up from our written submission, fka is an organisation that is very strongly focused on the right of children and families from culturally diverse backgrounds to be welcomed, honoured and to see their culture and language reflected in the early childhood education and care services that they attend. All of the work that we do celebrates cultural diversity. All of the professional support and advice we provide to early childhood services is strength-based, building on the strength that already exists within that service and underwritten fundamentally by children's rights. Sadly, that focus on children's rights is not universal across the early childhood education and care sector and it is certainly not reflected in Federal Government policy, which I think in many ways puts impediments in the way of the work that we do. However, as a very small organisation—not-for-profit, membership-based—we punch above our weight, and with the work that we do we do make a difference in changing culture and expectation within early childhood education and care services around seeing children from culturally diverse backgrounds as a strength in their service and in their community. With that preamble, I will pass over to Melodie to just speak a little bit more about who we are, what we do and make a reference to our key recommendations.

Ms DAVIES: I am Melodie Davies. I am the Executive Director at fka Children's Services. We do believe very strongly that our natural community in Victoria is multilingual and is multicultural and that early childhood education and care services should represent that natural community. We also believe that we need to shift educators' thinking from 'Families are difficult to engage with' to 'What is it in my service that is making it difficult for families to engage with me?'. We know that change is a long road. We know that really for educators, teachers and policymakers in early childhood services it really means a fundamental shift in the way they view children and families, which is why in recent years we have started to use the terms around 'strength-based' and 'rights-based'. Most of our work is underpinned by children's and families' rights to actively participate in their education and care, not just turn up, not just enrol, not just be there. It is about engaging with families so that they have a right to actively participate in their child's care and education.

I might just talk a little bit about the work we do. We provide language support for children who are enrolled in kindergarten where English is not their first language, or they do not speak English at all in some cases. We have a pool of bilingual workers that will go and help settle a child, and that is based on our understanding that language and cultural identity is important to a child's and family's wellbeing and sense of belonging. We also provide training sessions on supporting English as an additional language, so we also do some work with educators in how to support a child to learn English whilst maintaining home language. We provide support to educators and teachers around the curriculum decision-making that they undertake and also their policies and procedures. We talk to educators about what their policies mean for families, rather than what does this policy mean to make it administratively easy for the teacher. It is around what does the family come with, how do we change the way we approach this family. We provide telephone support and advice, and we also run a multicultural resource centre, where we have books in home language and we have culturally appropriate

resources that kindergartens can borrow. So that is the kind of work we do with a very small team—very, very busy.

The other thing I wanted to remind everyone about is that we do have very clear frameworks in which we work in children's services. We have the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* and the national early years learning framework; we have national quality standards and we have the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; but what we find is that teachers and educators have a monolingual, monocultural view of those frameworks, which is why it can sometimes be difficult for families to participate. We do talk a lot about everyone's rights, but educators and teachers tend to look at those rights from a monolingual perspective.

We also talk to educators about the fact that we are a multilingual and multicultural community, and when we are talking about rights we are talking about everyone's rights. There are a number of kindergartens and early childhood services who do this work extremely well. But it is very much reliant on the lead teacher, and if a lead teacher moves on and is not replaced with the same calibre of lead teacher, then it tends to fall back into the same old ways.

I think that is probably enough for me in an introduction because I think I have put most of it in the submission.

The CHAIR: Okay. Well, I will open up to some questions from the Committee members.

Ms SETTLE: Just so I can understand, do the kindergartens ask you to come in?

Ms DAVIES: Yes.

Ms SETTLE: Is there an issue there that it has to be motivated?

Ms DAVIES: There is an issue, yes.

Ms SETTLE: Yes. Okay.

Ms DAVIES: That is very true. If teachers do not know, well, they do not know what they do not know, and they are doing a great job. They may only call us when they think they have a perceived problem. So they might have a child or a family that is not engaging, that has enrolled but not turned up. They might have a child that is crying in the corner because they do not know what is going on. So they tend to ring us when they have got a problem rather than contacting us to create a system that is more engaging.

Ms ROMERIL: And there is a rather concerning shift happening in both the State and the Federal Government mechanisms for resourcing kindergartens to access our services. Historically a number of organisations were given funds to maintain our capability to stand ready for when kindergartens were ready and to get out there and promote what we had to offer. There is now a shift to a purchaser-provider model, a user-pays model, where funds go directly to the kindergarten and it is up to them to figure out what they want to purchase and who from, so it is quite a change for fka to figure out how to price its services so that it maintains its capacity to be ready for those calls.

It is also a massive culture shift for teachers who have not had this bucket of money to go out and buy things. They have had Melodie at the other end of the phone that they could ring up and know she had good staff who could come out and help them. So that shift to a market-based method of access is perhaps happening a little too rapidly for this issue, which is very easy to slip off the agenda to continue to get the resourcing that the kindergartens need.

Ms DAVIES: And I think following on from that there is the question that the national quality standards and the frameworks do talk about cultural inclusion, for want of a better word. But the rating and assessment system does not check. It does not ask a kindergarten, 'Have you got a cultural inclusion strategy? What is your natural community? How are you engaging with children and families?'. At the risk of being too negative, I do know a number of services that do not enrol non-English-speaking children and families, because it is very easy to get an excellent rating in the system if you do not have any children that you have to put an additional effort into. So that is also one of the recommendations I have put in there: if teachers and services are required to talk about

cultural inclusion as what their natural community is, they will think that more. Instead of thinking about, 'I need someone to come and tell me how to deal with this child', they might start thinking about, 'What is it that we need to do to be welcoming and encouraging and give families a sense of belonging here?'.

Mr NEWBURY: You mentioned that you had seen some best practice, anecdotally, and it was dependent on the lead teacher often. What are some practical examples to unpack that a bit further? What are some things that we could perhaps put on the record that you think are good? I note that one of your recommendations is a broader review, but just some of that anecdotal experience, if you would not mind outlining a bit of that.

Ms DAVIES: Yes. There is a kindergarten that we have been very closely aligned with for many years, and in that service there are multilingual educators. Those educators have been supported to be teachers, so they are leading that.

Ms ROMERIL: When you say 'supported to be teachers', they are supported to get the qualification to—

Ms DAVIES: To become a teacher.

Mr NEWBURY: And how did they pick the specific language? I mean, that is a whole other kettle of fish.

Ms DAVIES: It is. It can be quite tricky, but we also know that communities do prefer to be with their community because it helps their sense of belonging. So the one I am thinking about in Richmond, they have Vietnamese-speaking teachers, but what is happening now is they have got a lot of African families coming in, so they use our services and we support them with sending them African-speaking teachers for certain periods of the day, so they might come for a few hours a day. It is about celebrating their individual families' cultures, faiths and beliefs, so they will talk to families about what is important to them—'What are the celebrations that you celebrate in your home? Can we also celebrate that here?'—so that every child gets a sense of the way other families celebrate things. They provide notices in community languages. They provide stories, music and songs in community language so the whole kindergarten understands that this is a multilingual, multicultural environment.

The CHAIR: I have one question just to follow up on that. I have got a Vietnamese kindergarten, the sister kindergarten for Richmond, in St Albans.

Ms DAVIES: Oh, yes.

The CHAIR: They have now transitioned into teaching Japanese, which is really important.

Ms DAVIES: Yes, yes.

The CHAIR: But for some of those established community groups, like the Vietnamese, the Polish and many others, is there a challenge of transitioning as well? They are now established.

Ms DAVIES: Yes.

The CHAIR: Identifying the new and emerging, I suppose, communities that are coming in, what are some of the barriers and challenges? In St Albans it has been done successfully and they were able to identify that, but there might be a number of other centres that are struggling.

Ms DAVIES: Yes. They are the centres that tend to call us, because they have been successful. They know about community engagement. They might know, for example, who the Vietnamese champions are. They might know how to engage with that community and they are involved in that community. Then they need to start building relationships with other communities in order to get those communities in. For example, in Richmond the Vietnamese are now moving to African. I think it is about the attitude of the teacher and the educators. If they are welcoming, they are open and they are respectful, they will be able to engage with the emerging community much, much easier.

If they cannot get someone who speaks the home language, they usually come to us. We do spend a lot of time recruiting and making sure we have bilingual workers who speak community language. We cannot provide them with someone full-time, but we might be able to provide them with someone to get them over the edge.

Kindergartens also have access to free interpreter services, so they can use that. They tend to use the interpreter service as a way to give instructions to families, so we also talk to educators about using the interpreters to find out about the family—not just tell them when to fill out the enrolment form and what to do but have a real engagement with the family. Once we can get some champions in the emerging community, they will talk well about the service, they will get a sense of belonging and they will encourage other members of the community to come in.

Just a note about the language program, and I know St Albans is doing Japanese, we have a number of other kindergartens who are part of that new language program, teaching language, and some of those kindergartens have not thought really deeply about what is the language of their community. They have thought about purchasing or delivering a language that they think will be economically viable. They are using it as promotional material, a promotional thing. So we will have some children and families in those services that may speak, for example, an African language, and they are being taught Chinese. Our view is that all language is important, and it shows respect for diversity and languages, but we cannot forget that there are children in there who now will be learning two languages, three languages: they will have their home language, they are learning English and now they are learning Japanese or another language. So we just need to remind people that all languages are important. How do we show that and celebrate that in our programs?

The CHAIR: Yes, fantastic. Any other questions?

Mr NEWBURY: Just on that final point you made, just a quick thing: how do you then go about picking a language?

Ms DAVIES: Very difficult. Yes, it is very difficult. But the research tells us that young children can learn more than one language at the same time. It just takes longer, and children will trans-language, so they will use the language that is meaningful to them in a particular context. I need to step back a bit and say children will learn English. They live in an English-speaking country. They will learn English. We do not need to stress or worry too much. What a child might do in that instance is that they may use English words, they may use the home language words and they may use Japanese, because that is what they are doing, and that is okay. It is just all about richness of language.

We would be saying to services, ‘Try and pick the language of the most dominant number of children and provide additional support for other children’. It is tricky. I have not really got an answer, and it always going to be flex—

Mr NEWBURY: And it changes?

Ms DAVIES: Yes, it is going to change, but I think from our perspective if you are celebrating and you have a multilingual, multicultural mindset, you are showing a respect for everyone and there will be children who will speak two or three languages.

Ms ROMERIL: Just very quickly on that, I think this languages program is going to be exciting regardless of what language is chosen. I had the opportunity to see the beautiful kits that fka was funded by the State Government to produce in the language chosen by the kindergarten. There are dolls, there are books, there are instructions to teachers on how to use these resources with the children, there are games in the chosen language, and it is beautiful, tactile material. And that is going to be in the service presumably forever. They are not going to have to give that back, are they?

Ms DAVIES: No.

Ms ROMERIL: So that is going to be yet another resource, whether that language is taught into the future or not, for the teachers there to draw on to model being interested in and respecting diverse languages and diverse cultures.

The CHAIR: That is great.

Mr TAK: I would just like to add to that. Jane's already asked how to decide a language. For example, a school close to my home is predominantly the Cambodian community and Vietnamese community and the Chinese. For the school principal it was very hard, so they decided that the second language would be Spanish.

Ms DAVIES: Yes. I am concerned about that. But when we look at it as a strengths-based approach we have to go, 'Well, we're celebrating a language other than English'.

Mr TAK: Yes, that is right.

Ms DAVIES: That is all we can do. To be honest, I was concerned when I saw some of the languages that the kindergartens chose. But I still think in the long run as long as we keep supporting those other languages and we do not pretend that the new languages program is going to replace the programs that we need to provide to the other languages, we will be okay. That was my concern when that language program first came out. I thought, 'Are you going to get rid of all the other programs?', because it is doing a different thing.

The CHAIR: Just two questions: how do the newly arrived families learn the true value of kindergarten?

Ms DAVIES: Yes. I think that it is up to the teachers and educators in the service to develop that relationship with the family and demonstrate and show what an early childhood education program looks like in Australia. That does not happen a lot now. We have a lot of centralised waiting lists and centralised enrolment systems, so we do find families that turn up in a kindergarten because they may have been told by a community member, 'This is a really great kindergarten. You can enrol there', and they will turn up at the kindergarten and the teacher has to say to them, 'Well, you need to enrol at local government. You need to enrol at the early years management service'. Then they get a list and they get a really long waiting list form with 50 million questions on it that is usually in English, and they give up. I think if we think about having a multilingual and multicultural mindset, we need to give educators the time to develop relationships with families in order to show them what it actually means—what early childhood education means in Australia. Does that make sense?

The CHAIR: Yes, that does. Just on a final question, we have heard that cost has been an issue.

Ms DAVIES: Cost of?

The CHAIR: Cost of kindergarten.

Ms DAVIES: Okay.

The CHAIR: What are some of your experiences?

Ms DAVIES: I have not heard that the cost of kindergarten is too high. I think the cost of long day care is probably too high. Well, it is too high. We also know that in long day care services, unless the family meets the activity test they cannot go for any more than—they get a couple of hours, don't they?

Ms ROMERIL: Yes. A few, I think.

Ms DAVIES: A few hours? Yes. I do not think kindergarten is too expensive because it is quite well-subsidised.

Mr NEWBURY: Just on your previous question, the first question that the Chair asked where you were talking about the need for educators to establish the usefulness or merit of kinder, do you think that there is a gap? We have heard that there may be a gap between newly arrived people understanding the importance of the service and perhaps not even connecting to the point of an educator being able to show that need. Do you think there is a gap—

Ms DAVIES: Yes, there is.

Mr NEWBURY: and a role perhaps for Government or industry, whatever it is, to bridge that gap so that that gap can be filled?

Ms DAVIES: Well, yes. Our notion of early childhood is a very Western notion. I will stand and say it is the right one—of course it is. In our experience it works best when we can connect with a champion in the community, so when we can identify who is the leader in the community who has influence in the community and work with them. We have not found that written documentation is successful. I think there is a place for it. We also find success in speaking to communities in their home language, so encouraging the service to be a centre for that community and having welcoming morning teas, talking to people in those ways.

It is tricky, but I actually do not think the problem is that newly arrived families do not want to use or do not want to enrol in kindergarten. I think the problem is they may enrol but not feel valued and welcomed or a sense of belonging, and so we do know of a lot of families that move services. My response to that is, ‘Well, what is wrong with the service?’. It is not about the family being transient, it is that the family is not getting what it is they want from that service. Yes, I think there is written stuff we can do, but really it is about tapping into that community and going where they are.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

Ms ROMERIL: And if I could just reiterate a point that Melodie made earlier, word of mouth within the community is the strongest attraction for people to understand and trust a service and approach it, so if the first people who are brave enough to go to a service discover it is respectful and honouring of them and their child, they will spread the word and bring other families in. So I guess Government can support services to make sure that there is time on behalf of the teacher and other educators in that service to welcome families, to have morning teas, to go and attend community events, to create a smooth bridge between the home life and the early childhood setting.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank you very much for taking the time out to present to us, and you are able to keep up to date on the progress of the Inquiry through the parliamentary web page. Thank you for all the work that you do.

Ms DAVIES: Thank you for inviting us to come. It was incredibly exciting for us to suddenly hear that someone is interested, to be honest.

Witnesses withdrew.