

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Sunshine—Monday, 25 November 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

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Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Ms Samantha Kolasa, Board Member, and

Ms Lisa Minchin, Advocacy and Grants Lead, Early Learning Association Australia.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Welcome to the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. I welcome Samantha Kolasa, Board Member of Early Learning Association Australia. Would you like to state your name and position please for the record?

Ms MINCHIN: I am Lisa Minchin, and I am the Advocacy and Grants Lead at Early Learning Association Australia.

The CHAIR: Lovely; thank you. 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 the same things, including on social media and other platforms, you may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available, and any verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the Committee's website. I now invite you to proceed with an opening statement to the Committee, which will then be followed by some questions from Committee members. Thank you very much.

Ms KOLASA: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today. We know that this is an important issue facing the early childhood sector, and it is something that resonates with me personally given my own ethnic background. My name is Samantha Kolasa, and I am here today representing Early Learning Association Australia, otherwise known as ELAA. I was recently elected as one of their new board members. ELAA is a peak body which works in partnership with early learning providers and parents to deliver its vision of excellence in early learning for every child. ELAA has a membership base of over 550 service providers, managing services at nearly 1200 locations. These include early years management organisations, independent kindergartens, local governments, long day care services, government and independent schools and out-of-school-hours care programs. I am also currently the CEO of the Glen Eira Kindergarten Association, or GEKA, which is an early years management organisation based in metropolitan Melbourne. We managed 10 kindergartens within the municipality, and while certainly not as culturally diverse as Brimbank, whom you heard from earlier today, we are still faced with our own challenges regarding access and inclusivity.

I commenced my career as a psychologist specialising in working with vulnerable children from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. Many of these children were in the child protection system, many had suffered trauma and many were new to our country. However, all required the safety and stability of a place that could prioritise their needs, nurture their independence, put in place clear boundaries, provide warmth and comfort and bring out their individuality. For the younger children that I worked with, the benefits of child care, long day care or kindergarten provided that place for them and enabled the parents to work through their own issues of abuse, grief or trauma—sometimes all three.

The timing of this Inquiry is significant. The early childhood sector is entering a period of major and exciting reform. The rollout of three-year-old kindergarten over the next decade clearly demonstrates that the Government is aware of the benefits that two years of high-quality play-based early learning prior to school can provide.

School readiness funding is being provided to kindergartens to address educational disadvantage, particularly in the areas of communication, wellbeing and access and inclusion. The policy direction of integrated services is also a positive shift. This will provide families with the ability to engage and connect across different services and minimise the transition at various life stages, which can often be quite daunting for families. However, for our culturally and linguistically diverse communities these benefits and Government initiatives are often not even realised. Families who are newly arrived to our country have often experienced significant trauma, and unfortunately their child's participation in an early childhood service is often the last thing on their mind; shelter and food become the priorities. The different enrolment processes for three- and four-year-old kindergarten can be confusing. Some municipalities offer central enrolment, some do not. Some municipalities manage both three- and four-year-old enrolments, others do not. In some areas this is the role of the individual kindergarten or early years manager. When families are struggling with their own levels of vulnerability and perhaps cannot even speak our language, it is no wonder that there is little understanding of how to access early childhood services and the benefits this can bring.

Within Glen Eira we have a number of families who leave our service at the end of term 3 to return home until the new year. Whilst connection to country is absolutely important, these children are not able to experience the full year or two of benefits that an early childhood education can bring them. We know that one in five children start school with a developmental vulnerability in one or more areas. Children who speak a language other than English and are not proficient in English are more than 90 per cent likely to be vulnerable in one or more areas. The participation in an early childhood service provides many positive benefits for families, including the opportunity for those children who are behind in their learning to catch up to their peers; the ability for parents to enter the workforce, thereby increasing Australia's productivity; turning around Australia's declining school performance; and more children going on to further education to be employed and earn more—and we know there is a direct correlation here.

The focus needs to be on engagement and making early childhood education a less complex and more welcoming space. Whilst we cannot mandate families to send their children to an early learning service, as we can with school, we can promote the importance in a way that all families understand.

In a previous role that I held I was fortunate enough to be part of the committee that developed Doveton College. For those of you that do not know the area, Doveton is one of the most socially disadvantaged areas in metropolitan Melbourne. Rates of family violence are high; child protection reports are equally high. I was committed to being a part of Doveton College, given my own migrant father spent his life growing up in the area. Doveton College is a school with many newly arrived immigrants who have suffered significant trauma. Many are uneducated and many do not speak English. The college established a beautiful and safe space for these families. Not only does the school offer children an education from prep through to year 12, but it also offers child care and kindergarten. There are English classes for the parents. There are social groups. They have visiting allied health professionals who see the children requiring intervention. They have on-site interpreters. Families that come from CALD backgrounds have their needs met in one safe space.

Whilst we cannot roll out this model across the entire country due to the significant cost, much can be learned from Doveton College and how they have helped to engage these important Australians. New migrants are likely to live in areas of the lowest quality services. In Victoria roughly one in five services are rated as working towards the national standards. The quality of interaction between staff and children is what determines the learning outcomes. The children who stand to benefit the most from early childhood education are the least likely to have access to the highest quality services, which would make the biggest difference. Driving improvements in quality in areas of disadvantage will increase engagement of CALD families and help children on their lifelong journey.

We will need an additional 6000 staff over the next four years to support the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten. Having a diverse workforce is critical to engaging and welcoming families. An ELAA member, Acacia Children's Centre in St Albans, just down the road from here, has children from 37 different language groups. The staff who work there speak a total of 28 different languages. The managing director there says that families who have a staff member speaking their language are happier with the service, and they work hard to engage the remaining 30 per cent of children and their families, but it is a challenge.

I want to acknowledge the work that is being done in the early childhood space. The policy initiatives are positive, and it is an exciting time for me particularly to be working in the sector. My message today is to reinforce that in implementing these reforms we have the opportunity to set the sector up to successfully engage with families, including with a diverse workforce. We need all families to recognise the benefits and to have access to quality early childhood services. It is often those that need these services the most that we are unable to reach. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will start the questions. Thank you for your submission and the evidence you provided today. As a local member for this area, including Acacia in St Albans, I just want to put forward my absolute thanks to all the early childhood educators. They do a fantastic job, and your organisation does a really super job by being the peak body. It is no easy task to manage services at 1200 locations, so thank you.

Just a note: with Acacia it is very interesting that you noted that there are 28 languages spoken by the staff. In the last 12 months our Government has been really integral in this space in providing languages at kinders. It is

important to note that Acacia, which has a very diverse demographic—and I have told this story before—is now teaching their children Japanese. That is fantastic, and I just think it is really important. Even though there is not a big Japanese community in St Albans, it is providing that additional language in its curriculum, which is fantastic.

We have heard a lot about navigation of the services and how complex that is. From your perspective would you be able to tell us: what are some of the improvements that are needed to make the service much smoother and much more friendly to CALD parents, carers, grandparents, because at the moment it just seems that the system—and we have heard this across the board—is just too complex?

Ms KOLASA: I think there are a couple of things. Firstly, as I said in the opening statement, different municipalities do things differently. So some of them have centralised enrolment, some of them do not. So for those that have centralised enrolment, parents need to know what is the lead-in time in order to enrol their children. Often that can be different for the threes and the fours, and I can speak for Glen Eira: parents enrol their three-year-old children with us directly as the early years manager but then through council for the four-year-old program. When you actually cannot speak the language, how do you begin to navigate that? That is just one LGA. So there is not consistency across. I think that would be a great first step in terms of having a centralised system where families can enrol their children and very clear fact sheets around what are the requirements and what is the lead-in time. So the process, given we are rolling out three-year-old kindergarten over the next 10 years, should be the same. When you enrol your child for three, you are enrolling them for four at the same time—not that you go down the road to do threes and down the other end of the street to do fours. I think that would help in the first instance. The other key part is when you do enrol your child for an early childhood service there are lots of things that you need to have done. Your child needs to be vaccinated—that is a perfect example. Again, many families do not actually understand that in order to access a service they need to have met certain requirements. So I think another thing that we could do is make sure that there is lots of information available at maternal and child health centres, at playgroups, wherever else families may be accessing services, to let them know what the requirements are before they actually enter the system—really basic things.

The other thing that would be helpful is generally interpreters are available for the more formalised meetings, but not that impromptu day-to-day ‘What do I do here? How do I do this? How do I complete that form?’. So again I think if the material was translated into simple English, particularly with regard to the process, that would assist a lot, and if we had consistency across the state as well.

The CHAIR: Just a question, and this is in relation to the previous evidence that was provided by Brimbank council. It stated that there has been an 18 per cent decrease in kindergarten enrolments since 2018, and that sort of puzzled me because we talk about the excitement in this area when it comes to the investment, the innovative programs and in particular in this region when it comes to multicultural communities—you have got multicultural playgroups and kindergartens and 28 teachers speaking different languages—and then you see a stat like that where it talks about a decrease in enrolments. In your professional opinion, what do you think would be some of the reasons for the fact that there has been a decrease in enrolments?

Ms KOLASA: I think the key thing is that most families do not actually understand the benefits that that three- to five-year span brings. Another key thing is we have many families out there that still see early childhood services as a nanny-type system or just the provision of care as opposed to the provision of a lifelong education. That is the key, I think, if we can emphasise the importance of education actually not starting at five or five years and four months or whatever the child may be when they start school. I said in the opening remarks we cannot mandate early childhood services—I understand that—but I think there is not enough done about promoting what the benefits are, particularly around brain development, around setting them up for future learning. That three to five age span is the pivotal time and most families do not understand that, because we do not promote that. So I think that is probably the key part.

The CHAIR: For a lot of parents it is quite standard and routine for kids to get to the primary school level. It is just a routine, ‘Yes, my child will attend primary school’, and there is no real challenge in that. Do you think perhaps there might be an opportunity for Government to consider compulsory enrolment?

Ms KOLASA: Am I giving you my personal or professional view?

The CHAIR: Whatever you are comfortable with.

Ms KOLASA: Yes. I think there are advantages and disadvantages to both of course. For me, what is more important are the transition points for families across their life span. So if we can create a system where families are not going in and out and operating in silos—and we use that word all of the time, but that is a really daunting experience. If I speak personally, my child has gone to the same three-year-old, four-year-old school et cetera that provides that safety for her. I think if we can offer that to other families, that is what will assist them. I do not necessarily think that mandating three- to five-year-olds is the answer. I think it is about promoting what the importance is and the benefits that that brings and then enabling families to make their own informed choice with all of the information, because at the moment I do not think that they actually have access to all of the information.

Mr TAK: Just one question. Thank you for mentioning Doveton—I live somewhere around there. I could be wrong, but in terms of what you just said about understanding the benefit of having early childhood education, could it be a generation's perception? In the multicultural community, those who came to Australia, as an example, to the Enterprise Hostel in Springvale at a young age, now they are young parents. That includes my family. What are the things that you think perhaps could penetrate into the multicultural community and promote the awareness of the importance of early childhood education?

Ms KOLASA: When families are accessing services back at maternal and child health, often the other services are not promoted. A family may access a playgroup or they may have their 10 key age-and-stage visits at the maternal and child health service, but then kindergarten is not particularly talked about. It may be how to enrol your child in school at the three-and-a-half-year-old visit, but the focus needs to be at the two-year-old check, 'Okay, what about three-year-old kindergarten? What does that look like? What are the benefits that that brings?'

The other thing as well is I think a lot of families struggle to understand the concept of play-based learning. Early childhood services generally work under a play-based framework. I had the privilege of speaking to 30 principals from Asia about two months ago, and they really struggled with the concept of play-based learning. What does play-based learning mean? How do children learn through play? I think again it is about talking to families around: just because a child is playing or blowing bubbles, it is about eye-tracking, it is about helping them to read into the future. But, again, it is taking the time to explain that to families as opposed to: you are just dropping your kids off to be babysat. I think it needs to emphasise that there is learning taking place all the time and what the benefits of the different environments can bring—the home environment and the play-based learning environment as well.

Mr TAK: Thank you. Maybe a confirmation: does your organisation experience or come across young kids sent back by the parents for the grandparent to take care of them and then they come back with the parent when they start their primary school or prep?

Ms KOLASA: At one of our services in particular, right in the middle of the municipality, a lot of the children there actually attend for the first three terms and then they go home, or back to their country of origin, for fourth term. So they actually miss out on that last 10 weeks of the school term because their whole family goes back home. Often what also happens is at the start of the year the parents may not have arrived in the country so the children are with other family members. So they are struggling to adjust to a new country, to living with grandparents or other family members, whilst they are waiting for the parents to come over. So in that first term the transition is difficult, and then in the last term the transition is also difficult because they are actually leaving us altogether. So that is something that we have really struggled with. Because I work in a centre where there are 10 services, we actually have a list of all of the different speaking educators across the municipality. So what we actually do is place those educators in the services so they can have those conversations, because it is not just about the language, it is about the culture as a whole. Language—that is one part of it; but understanding the culture and the significance and the importance, that is what we ask our educators to do with the families.

Ms SETTLE: Initially just a comment: listening to you it seems to be the consistency issue. Because we have spoken to a few councils where the maternal healthcare nurses are very active in promoting three-year-old and so forth, so there is obviously a consistency issue there, which you highlighted earlier. What I am really

interested in is you were talking about Doveton College, and it is interesting trying to work through whether we work within the mainstream system or do we work in specialist services. We were in Geelong the other day and we saw a fantastic community hub which was within the school—so they did playgroup and the parents could learn English. So I guess my question is: should we be looking to work within the mainstream system or is the Doveton model where it is specialised services the way we should be going?

Ms KOLASA: I do not know the Geelong service that you are talking about, but it sounds very similar to the Doveton model—so, again, a similar thing: there is visiting maternal and child health, paediatricians, physios and speechies. Also there is playgroup there, there are veggie gardens, there is English as a second language—all of those things are there. The other key part that is particularly beneficial about Doveton College is that families when they arrive to drop their children off can actually speak to a professional there. Often, particularly women that may be subjected to family violence, the only time they are able to leave the house is when they are dropping their child off to school, and having somebody there that does not raise any alarms with the partner makes it a lot easier.

I am not sure if that is similar to the Geelong model. What I will say, though, is the staff—and part of this is around the staff supporting the children—are trained in a way to deal with families that have experienced trauma, intergenerational abuse, that are new to the country. So in terms of mainstream, they have access to employee assistance programs that the kindergarten teachers currently do not. Again, we provide it as part of our early years management model because we can, but most standalone kindergartens across the state cannot do that. So in terms of supporting the staff, they are all trained in how to deal with trauma—so, again, if somebody turns up and they are at the sewing class and they disclose, ‘This is what I’m experiencing’, those staff are trained in that.

So I think in terms of, ‘Can we learn some benefits from the mainstream system?’, we absolutely can because they are part of a larger community hub where there are the additional supports there. If you look at the new estates around Victoria, that is the model that is adopted—that generally community hubs are where everything is, where families can access everything they need. Doveton was fortunate enough in an older area to actually have that built there for them. It would be fantastic to have that model everywhere. That is my belief. I do not think we can necessarily do that in the more established areas of Melbourne, but I think we can take learnings from how that model does work. It is about training the staff and supporting the staff and making sure that families can speak to somebody. It may not necessarily be the teacher when they arrive for drop-off or pick-up or those sorts of things, because in the hustle and bustle with 30 kids arriving in the morning for kindergarten the teacher does not have the chance to actually engage, whereas that can be, often, as I said, the only time that a parent leaves the house and may need that support. Even just having a conversation around the struggles with, ‘I’ve just arrived, my husband hasn’t arrived yet or he hasn’t found a job’, or whatever it might be, it is having that one-on-one dialogue. So I think there are learnings from the mainstream that we could still implement in the current system.

Ms SETTLE: And so around the workforce obviously we have introduced certificate III as a free TAFE course to try and encourage. What more do you think we can do to try and encourage bicultural people to engage and take up those opportunities to grow the workforce, because obviously having the 28 different languages is a wonderful thing. What more can we do to encourage that cohort?

Ms KOLASA: Yes, so I think the main focus generally needs to be on the relationships. As people are coming to the service it is establishing that relationship with the educator and then the educator being able to have a conversation with them—‘Did you know this is what’s available?’—or even promoting it at the service. Again, kindergartens do not generally tend to do that because by the time you have put up the national quality standards and who is the nominated supervisor for the day and whatever else it is on the wall, you are not then putting information about that. So, again, it is having conversations with families, even when families arrive and are accessing their benefits and those sorts of things—‘This is an option of employment for you’. I am not quite sure that we have got that right in terms of, ‘This as an option’, because again, as I was saying, the priority becomes housing and food and those sorts of things as opposed to, ‘Do you know what? At the moment you can actually do this course and it’s pretty much 100 per cent funded. Wouldn’t that be fantastic to give back to your community?’. Again, do we put that expectation on the teachers? I would like to think that part of it is that relationship and having those conversations, but do they have the time? That is what I was talking about before.

Ms SETTLE: Maybe that is where that hub model, as you say, works.

Ms KOLASA: Correct, but I think other services could absolutely be involved as well, like your Centrelinks and those sorts of things, in promoting what it is that is available for them.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for taking the time to present to the Committee. The next steps will be that the Committee will deliberate on all the evidence and submissions, and next year we will hand a report to Parliament with some strong recommendations. Your submission will also be part of those deliberations. If you would like to keep updated on the progress of the Committee, you can do so by going online to the Committee's website, but no doubt we will keep you informed of the progress. Again, thank you for all the work that you do, and all the very best.

Ms KOLASA: Thanks for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.