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Victorian Multicultural Commission

Submission to the Education State Early Childhood Consultation 2015

The Education State Early Childhood Conversation

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1. Executive Summary

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Education State Early Childhood Consultation. The VMC has used information provided by members of it Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) and gathered during community consultations with diverse communities to inform this submission.

The VMC acknowledges the fundamental importance of early childhood education for all Victorians as the foundation for lifelong wellbeing and learning, and the need for parental engagement in the early years to ensure that firm foundation.

Good quality early childhood education and care promotes health, learning and skill development in young children. The VMC recognises that children from diverse language backgrounds receive particular benefits from early learning engagement in terms of educational and social outcomes, especially those children who speak another language at home. Research demonstrates that children who speak a language other than English at home, but are not yet fully proficient in English when they start school, may face greater challenges. A further vulnerability is that these children were more likely to live in suburbs in the most disadvantaged areas and were less likely to have attended pre-school in the year before school. [1]

Early Education and Social Cohesion

Including young children from diverse backgrounds in early learning environments, within English-speaking contexts, is also vitally important to foster social inclusion and create greater social cohesion in Victoria. For the current cohorts of young children, it is also important for their future social mobility.[2] Studies demonstrate that differing levels of educational attainment, as people enter the labour market, are one of the key determinants of later occupations and earnings.[3] Retaining footholds in education and labour markets are also important determinants of social cohesion.[4]

These factors are supported by the VMC's own research and consultation findings through RACs and consultations with young people, conducted in 2014-2015. The VMC heard about the difficulties experienced by young people from diverse backgrounds in seeking to gain educational qualifications, and access to labour markets. The importance of educational and labour market attachment for social cohesion cannot be underestimated and one of the major barriers for people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) is difficulties with communication in predominantly English speaking contexts.

Seeking to address communication, with English language skills, in early childhood therefore has myriad potential future benefits for social cohesion. These include access to employment, TAFE or university, and greater ability to socialise. Researching current drivers for social cohesion, Dandy & Pe-Pua (2013), found

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[1] Goldfeld, S, Mithen, J, Barber, L, O'Connor, M, Sayers, M, & Brinkman, S. (2011) *The AEDI Language Diversity Study Report*. Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children's Hospital, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, Melbourne. Retrieved 1 October 2015: https://www.aedc.gov.au/researchers/aedc-research/publications/publication/aedi-language-diversity-study-report

[2] Social mobility is generally measured by looking at how strong the links are between outcomes – in terms of incomes, occupations, or education – for one generation when it reaches adulthood and those of their parents.

[3] Hills, J. (2015). *New research evidence on social mobility and educational attainment.* The University of Manchester and the London School of Economic and Political Science.

[4] Dandy, J., & Pe-Pua, R. (2013). *Research into the Current and Emerging Drivers for Social Cohesion, Social Division and Conflict in Multicultural Australia*. Joondalup, WA: Edith Cowan University and the University of New South Wales.

that effective communication and improved self-esteem were the most important benefits of adequate English skills, including appreciation of humour.

1.1 Recommendations

The VMC has formulated the following recommendations in order that the Early Childhood Consultation conversation may fully consider the needs of children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, as well as supports for their parents.

RECOMMENDATION 1 – HOW TO INFORM AND MEASURE SUCCESS

The VMC recommends that:

- *the Early Childhood system introduces mandatory data capture fields on core data elements within its administrative client relationship information system, at the point of initial contact with the system by clients from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.*
- *the data capture fields should include identifying triggers that will gather information that can be disaggregated to inform policy and program development for the Victorian early childhood system.*

RECOMMENDATION 2 – IMPORTANT REFORMS

The VMC recommends that:

- *additional resources to support the early learning of young children who have language background other than English (LBOTE) status from diverse backgrounds to facilitate their learning within an English speaking learning environment, in order to ensure substantive equality within the Victorian Early Childhood System.*

RECOMMENDATION 3 – SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

The VMC recommends that reflective practice in the early childhood education and care system is employed, in order to:

- *inform ongoing work practice and achieve substantive equality for parents of young children who have LBOTE status; and*
- *progress better integration and outcomes for these children, despite individual family circumstances.*

RECOMMENDATION 4 – MORE SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE AND DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The VMC recommends that:

- *the Early Childhood Education and Care system prioritises support systems and mechanisms for families who are newly arrived and have language background other than English status from CALD backgrounds in order to facilitate initial and ongoing participation in early childhood education for their children.*

RECOMMENDATION 5 – EARLIER ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

The VMC advocates for increased numbers of children from diverse backgrounds in three- and four year old kindergarten programs, and recommends that:

- *a model, such as the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) program is useful to develop a culturally aware and effective recruitment strategy for future implementation.*

2. Introduction

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Education State Early Childhood Consultation conversation (early childhood conversation), in particular with regard to multiculturalism and the early childhood education and care needs of Victoria's diverse communities.

The VMC is the voice of Victoria's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and is the main link between them and the government. Operating under its remit, as outlined under the *Multicultural Victoria Act 2011* (the Act), the VMC provides independent advice to the Victorian Government.

The functions of the VMC include conducting regular community consultation, undertaking research, informing the development of legislative and policy frameworks, and seeking to ensure that services are delivered to Victoria's diverse communities in a manner that meets their particular needs.

In the course of the year the VMC convenes 24 regular Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) meetings. RAC members provide the VMC with a regular flow of information about matters affecting multicultural communities, including settlement, multicultural affairs, service delivery and citizenship.[5] In addition the VMC also conducts regular community forums. Between December 2014 and June 2015 the VMC conducted a total of 21 consultation forums, including ten for young people, eight for women and three for service providers. This submission is also informed by data and information collected by the VMC at RAC meetings and community consultations.

3. Structure of this Submission

This submission takes as its starting point the Education State Early Childhood Consultation Paper, with responses to selected key questions related to the overriding policy question - 'what needs to change?'

The submission includes a brief overview of diversity in Victoria including demographics related to skilled migration, family reunion and humanitarian refugees as well as more tenuous classes of migrants such as asylum seekers.

The submission is structured around themes that have been considered as most pertinent to the early childhood education and care policy debate in relation to CALD communities, especially community subsets where English is not the main language.

The responses to key reform areas are grouped under the following themes:-

- the most important early childhood development outcomes and how to measure success;
- the most important reform areas and why;
- priorities for supporting parents and providing coordinated and integrated support services;
- priorities for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families, including the role of service providers; and
- ways to better meet the needs of all children to participate in good quality early learning.

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[5] RAC members reflect the diversity of Victorian communities and include local residents, service providers and local government representatives. There are 8 RACs covering the whole of Victoria. Each RAC is chaired by a VMC Commissioner and has up to 13 members.

4. The VMC's Interest in the Issue

The VMC acknowledges the fundamental importance of early childhood education for all Victorians as the foundation for lifelong wellbeing and learning, and the need for parental engagement in the early years to ensure that firm foundation. Through RACs and community consultations the VMC has gained broad knowledge and understanding of the significant challenges that face children and their parents from diverse backgrounds, in navigating the Victorian education system, when compared to the mainstream community.

These challenges mean that, in terms of ensuring substantive equality[6] for these families, the Department of Education and Training (DET) must consider their particular needs in order to ensure that service delivery is not compromised through systemic discrimination not informed by cultural awareness.

As a result the VMC is keen to ensure that the early childhood conversation fully considers the needs of children from CALD backgrounds and supports for parents, including parents and guardians from diverse backgrounds and communities who may be, second and third generation migrants from CALD backgrounds, recent migrants, humanitarian refugees, and asylum seekers.

When the VMC refers to 'diverse backgrounds' and 'diverse communities' within this submission it is in the context that this includes all of these aforementioned groups.

The 2012 *Report of Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Child Inquiry* (the Inquiry), noted research that indicated the cultural, structural and service-related barriers that ethnic minority families experience on migration to a new country. Migrants can experience hardships and stressors that can impinge on their ability to provide good care for their children.[7]

The Inquiry also noted the need to better integrate migrants through positive parenting and education programs about Australian culture and norms.[8] This finding is in keeping with the view that the VMC has formed through the information provided at RAC meetings over the past 24 months, and community consultations conducted from December 2014 to June 2015.[9]

The Inquiry made recommendations to include issues relating to culturally and linguistically diverse children in the Council of Australian Governments' national framework.

The statistics at section 5, Victoria's Multicultural Population below, are included to alert the early childhood conversation to the diversity of Victoria's current population of parents and their children, as well as those of new arrivals and newly emerging communities.

5. Victoria's Multicultural Population

Victoria is home to one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world, and is also among the fastest growing and most diverse populations within Australia. As a multicultural state the Victorian population

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[6] Substantive equality recognises that policies and practices put in place to suit everyone may appear to be non-discriminatory, but may not address the specific needs of certain groups of people. In effect they are indirectly discriminatory, and create systemic discrimination.

[7] The Panel delivered the Report to the Minister for Community Services on 27January 2012. The Report was tabled by the Minister for Community Services in Parliament on 28 February 2012. The report is available at http://www.childprotectioninquiry.vic.gov.au/report-pvvc-inquiry.html

[8] Ibid.

[9] The VMC conducted ten Multicultural Forums for Young People, eight Multicultural Forums for Women and three Multicultural Forums for Service providers during the period December 2014 to June 2015.

included 26.2% persons who were born overseas, representing over 200 countries, at the time of the 2011 Australian Census of Population and Housing.

In recent decades net overseas migration has consistently accounted for more than half of Victoria's population increase, adding to the vibrancy of our multicultural society and economy. The fastest rates of growth in diversity over the past two decades took place between the Censuses of 2006 and 2011, with current rates of migration projected to continue or grow. Patterns of migration indicate that the range of source countries for new migrants has increased and therefore our diversity is growing.

Victoria's migration intake is predominantly skilled migrants followed by those who have settled through family reunion. The state has also received between 30-35% of Australia's total humanitarian intake; 36,399 arrivals through the humanitarian stream within the past decade.

Some humanitarian entrants have significant and particularly complex needs that affect their settlement and participation in Australian society. The Complex Case Support (CCS) Program delivers specialised and intensive case management services to humanitarian entrants with exceptional needs.

The top six countries of birth for CCS clients in 2012–13 were Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar (Burma) Sudan and Ethiopia. Most referrals to the CCS programme come from settlement service providers, community and health organisations and government agencies (such as health services and child protection services).[10] Early childhood services therefore must consider the need to partner and work together with these and similar agencies to ensure that families receive the support they need to ensure a good start for their children in the Victorian education system.

5.1.1. Snapshot of Migration to Victoria, 2014-2015

The Commonwealth reports that migrants are relatively young. More than three-quarters of the Family Stream is allocated to Partner visa migrants, who tend to be younger. This is also due to the essential criterion for most Skill Stream visas being that the Primary Applicant is under 50 years of age. Therefore, both streams tend to attract younger people, with many having children.[11]

The top ten migrant source countries have remained fairly consistent over the past few years and include three English speaking countries (United Kingdom, South Africa and Ireland). There are seven migrant source countries that include people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB); these are:-

- India;
- People's Republic of China;
- Philippines;
- Vietnam;
- Republic of Korea;
- Malaysia; and
- Sri Lanka[12]

Data from the 2011 Census demonstrated that overseas-born children of migrants who grew up in Australia had on average higher levels of educational attainment than people of a similar age born in

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[10] Commonwealth Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) Publication, *Australia's Migration Trends 2012–13.* Available: http://www.immi.gov.au/pub-res/Documents/statistics/mig ration-trends-2012-13.pdf
[11] Ibid
[12] Migration Reporting, Department of Border Protection and Immigration (DIBP), 2014.

Australia.[13] Therefore, the importance of ensuring that young children from diverse backgrounds are engaged early with the early childhood education and care system is vital to the future success of their education careers.

- Skilled Migrants:-
    - Total Skill Stream Outcomes were 15,004 (22.1% of the national total), of which:-
        - 56.2% (8,427) were General Skilled Migration;
        - 25.3% (3,803) were Employer Nomination Scheme; and
        - 14.7% (2,203) were Business Innovation and Investment Program;
    - Skill Stream outcomes by the top source citizenship countries were:-
        - India with 25.1% (3,760); and
        - China with 22.8% (3,419).
- Family Stream:-
    - Total Family Stream outcomes 7,500 (24.3% of the national total) of which:-
        - 78.7% (5,905) were Partner outcomes;
        - 16.5% (1,237 were Parent outcomes; and
        - 4.3% (323) were Child outcomes.

5.1.2. Maritime Arrivals Settled in Australia

The Commonwealth differentiates between people arriving in Australia to seek asylum by air and by sea, referring to refugees and asylum seekers who arrive by air as 'non illegal maritime arrivals', and to those who arrive by sea as 'illegal maritime arrivals'.

Non Illegal maritime arrivals (non-IMA) - Australia[14]
In 2012-13, Australia received 8,308 applications for asylum by people who originally arrived by air (an 18% increase on the previous 12 months). 33% of applicants were found to be refugees at the primary stage, and overall around 60% of applicants were 30 years of age or younger.

Non-IMA Grants 2012-2013 - Top five countries by volume of final grants		
Iran (91%)	Iraq (91%).	Pakistan (80%)
Egypt (79%)	China (26%)	

Illegal maritime arrivals (IMA) – Australia
In 2012-13, a total of 18,119 people who arrived in Australia by sea were screened into a refugee status determination process.[15] About 68% of asylum seekers who arrived by sea whose claims were considered and decided in the first instance by officials were found to be refugees.

Around 85% of those screened into a refugee status determination process in 2012-13 were male, and about 66% were aged 30 years or younger. A ratio that has remained fairly steady over the past five

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[13] Migration Reporting, Department of Border Protection and Immigration (DIBP), 2014.

[14] All IMA and non-IMA statistics derived from DIBP Reports, 2014.

[15] Only those persons arriving as Illegal maritime arrivals (IMAs) who seek Australia's protection are screened into a refugee status determination process.

program years.

A total of 4,949 Protection visas were granted to Illegal maritime arrivals in 2012-13 representing 66% of all Protection visa grants. Afghan citizens accounted for more than 40% of grantees.

Illegal maritime arrivals (IMA) – Victoria
Bridging E visa (BVE) allows IMAs to remain lawfully in Australia while their immigration status is being resolved. BVE holders are free to choose where they live, and according to the most recent statistics issued by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), the majority choose to live in Victoria.

IMA BVE Grants December 2014 – Current Location by state		
State	Number	Percentage
Victoria	9,605	38%
New South Wales	8,648	34%
Queensland	3,070	12%
South Australia	2,362	9%
Western Australia	1,558	6%

IMAs who had been granted BVEs are able to live locally in the community. Those BVE holders who have the 'no-work' condition (condition 8101) removed from their visa are permitted to work.

Victoria - No of IMA BVE Holders by country of Citizenship, Dec 2014

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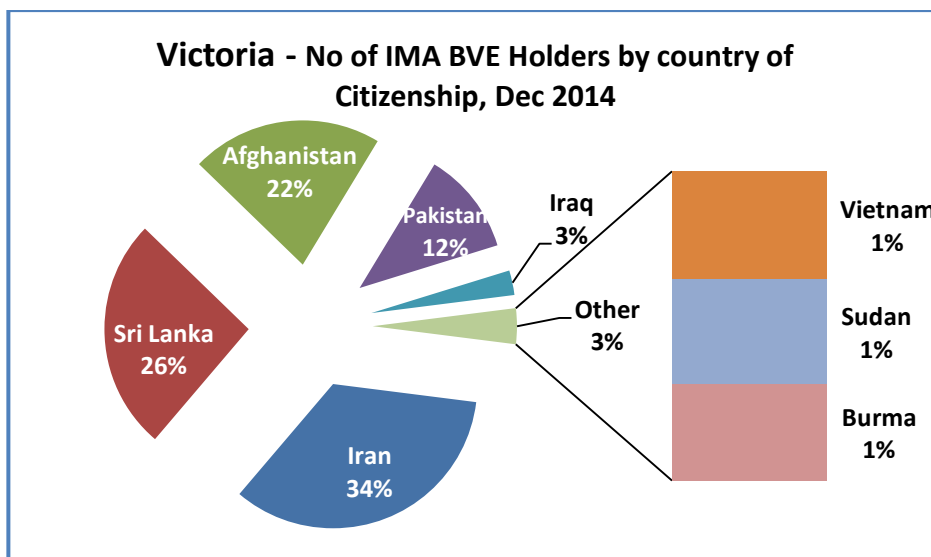
6. Response to Key Questions – What Needs to Change

6.1. Victorian Early Childhood System

❖ **RESPONDING TO THE DISCUSSION STARTER REGARDING THE MOST IMPORTANT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES AND HOW TO MEASURE SUCCESS**

The most important early childhood development outcomes must include a Victorian early childhood system that is fully inclusive and accessible, where every resident Victorian child aged 0-5 years receives the best possible support and care from the system, regardless of ethnic diversity, socioeconomic status and geographic location.

Such an outcome begins with data collection and building the evidence base. To establish the client base in the first instance, and to better inform the needs of diverse communities requires the use of disaggregated data. This involves taking collective or aggregated administrative information in order to gain increased knowledge by disaggregating the data.[16] For instance disaggregating information by gender, ethnic background, language, geographical location, and age group is a critical step towards providing the information necessary to identify the client base and its needs, to better inform policy and program development for the Victorian early childhood system.

Disaggregating data assists in identifying barriers to accessing the system at strategic points, which can then be utilised to inform intervention strategies to assist families from diverse backgrounds. For example, including the aforementioned categories in Maternal and Child Health administrative data capture would provide the early childhood system with the information necessary to identify children and families from CALD backgrounds as well as recent migrant families.

Collecting more and richer information would help policy makers to better understand the scope of responses necessary to create effective policies and programs from a culturally congruent aspect. It can enable the identification of vulnerable groups, establish the scope of the problem and make vulnerable groups more visible.[17] Collecting disaggregated data can also help to strengthen accountability for at-risk and vulnerable populations. It can also be used to determine children from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) who may require extra supports in pre-school and primary school to ensure that levels of English language skills are not disadvantageous to their ability to learn.

The VMC refers the early childhood conversation to the 2012 *Report of Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Child Inquiry* (the Inquiry), especially Chapter 13, 'Meeting the needs of children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities'.[18] The Inquiry conducted consultations with workers from CALD community organisations in 2011.

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[16] The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, World Health Organisation. *The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health 2015 Accountability Report. Strengthening Accountability: Achievements and Perspectives for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health*. Geneva, Switzerland, PMNCH, 2015.

[17] Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009-2010 National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, Child and Youth Health, The Importance of Disaggregated Data. Document available at http://www.nccah-ccnsa.ca/docs/fact%20sheets/child%20and%20youth/NCCAH_fs_disaggregated_EN.pdf

[18] The Panel delivered the Report to the Minister for Community Services on 27January 2012. The Report was tabled by the Minister for Community Services in Parliament on 28 February 2012. The report is available at http://www.childprotectioninquiry.vic.gov.au/report-pvvc-inquiry.html

Although the Inquiry was charged with a review of Victoria's child protection system, the findings in relation to administrative data for families from CALD backgrounds has direct relevance for the early childhood conversation.

Overall the Inquiry found that Victorian Child Protection systems and practice did not provide for the collection of relevant CALD identifying client data. Because this data was not being collected its lack prevented subsequent analysis of the extent to which Child Protection engaged with children, young people and their families from CALD backgrounds.

The Inquiry also recommended that data be collected to help determine whether services currently provided were culturally appropriate. The Inquiry found that the collection of culturally relevant CALD identifying client data was a crucial element in ensuring that the system was adequately equipped to meet the needs of its clients from CALD backgrounds.

The VMC has conducted further work in this regard. In 2014 the VMC commissioned research into data collection systems and practice within the Victorian Child Protection Program for CALD clients, which identified the crucial role of adequate data collection systems and practice.

This VMC research was informed by input from VICSEG New Futures, the Commission for Children and Young People, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Foster Care Association of Victoria, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, and the Department of Health and Human Services. The research noted the impact of new waves and patterns of migration, and integration of second and third generation migrant families mean that cultural and linguistic diversity within Victoria is dynamic and subject to constant change.

As a result the research determined that the absence of data impacts on the extent to which government agencies know how culturally responsive their services are for clients from CALD backgrounds, and identified recommendations and options for improved CALD data collection. Research recommendations identified three key areas for development:-

1. **Changes to administrative data capture system**:
   - To ensure CALD data entry aligns with good practice information gathering and assessment, and contributes to the achievement of the *Children Youth and Families Act* 2005 Best Interests Principles, namely that practitioners should actively consider and promote a child or young persons' development, including their social and cultural identity.
   - It was further recommended that CALD data entry at intake should be based on practitioner assessment of information to hand, with user prompts inbuilt to be triggered at each phase transition and direct the practitioner to revisit CALD background fields for completion or updating, with the introduction of mandatory fields on core data elements.

2. **Improved training:**
   - Introduction of a training regime to determine how to appropriately address issues related to working with CALD families, including the upskilling of staff as part of ongoing professional development.
   - Areas with the highest proportion of CALD families should be determined with initial focus on these areas initially, with a longer term phased rollout across the state.

3. **Development of specialist resource guides:**
   - Consider the development of a discrete specialist resource guide outlining the importance of identity and culture, when recording the data within centralised administrative systems.
   - The resource guide should also be relevant to case planning, and capable of articulating good practice in engaging with CALD families.

> **RECOMMENDATION 1 - HOW TO INFORM AND MEASURE SUCCESS**
>
> **The VMC recommends that the Early Childhood system introduces mandatory data capture fields on core data elements within its administrative client relationship information system, at the point of initial contact with the system by clients from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.**
>
> **The data capture fields should include identifying triggers that will gather information that can be disaggregated to inform policy and program development for the Victorian early childhood system.**

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6.2. Key Reform Areas

❖ **RESPONDING TO THE DISCUSSION STARTER RELATED TO ALLOCATING PRIORITY TO THE MOST IMPORTANT REFORMS**

In discussing the five proposed areas of reform the VMC advocates that the following three reform areas are most important for families from diverse backgrounds.

- More support for parents;
- More support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families; and
- Better connection between services.

Once these reform areas are implemented the remaining two would be better supported and achieve better outcomes, namely:

- Earlier engagement in learning; and
- Boost to educational quality.

These important reform areas need to be directly informed by the data. Improved information, data and data sharing between and within early childhood systems would facilitate a picture that renders children and their families from diverse backgrounds fully visible to the system.

The VMC views supports for parents and guardians and better connection between services as crucial to the success of any reforms in the early childhood system.

In support of the VMC's selection of the top three reforms areas noted above, we cite the Victorian Government Directions Paper, *Victoria's Vulnerable Children, Our Shared Responsibility,* released in May 2012 in response to the *Report of Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Child Inquiry* which noted that:

"We don't know enough about the stress factors being experienced by culturally and linguistically diverse families or the types of support they need to address the issues that have lead children from some communities to be over-represented in out-of-home care."

Data that captures the developmental vulnerability of children from CALD backgrounds is provided by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC, 2011), which found that almost 94% of children with a language background other than English (LBOTE) and not proficient in English, were developmentally vulnerable in one or more of the AEDC domains; most particularly in the language and cognitive skills domain. The AEDC also found that 20% of children proficient in English, but who have LBOTE status were developmentally vulnerable.[19]

Children who speak a language other than English at home, but are not yet fully proficient in English when they start school, face greater challenges to learning than children from mainstream groups. These children must simultaneously tackle learning English while trying to keep pace academically with their peers.[20] The VMC has found this to be an issue for children who have LBOTE status at all stages of education.

During ten consultation forums with young people aged 16-25 years (2014-2015) the VMC heard that English competency was a real issue for young people from non-English speaking backgrounds, both in relation to their learning and as a barrier in accessing labour markets. The VMC findings illustrate a clear need for more intensive English language education in the early stages of settlement, and for some time on-going to develop proficiency in English sufficient to access the curriculum.

At Dandenong (March 2015) participants told the VMC that in their communities 'women are not able to learn English without male permission.' In households such as these the children are at greater disadvantage, where mothers are not fluent in English, unable to read to their young children in English or assist with English language development.

Children who have LBOTE status are therefore at greater developmental vulnerability when compared to mainstream English speaking populations. As a result the VMC advocates for additional resources to support their early learning in an English speaking learning environment, to ensure substantive equality in the early childhood system.

In the first instance additional supports are necessary to support parents in their role as the child's first teacher. This could be provided via information sessions conducted in community settings such as libraries (e.g. story time), community play centres and recreation centres. Having interpreters on hand to assist with communication and interaction would ensure optimum engagement, as well as providing translated materials and storyboards wherever appropriate to broaden the reach of the information being conveyed.[21] Providing outreach workers, preferably bilingual, who could attend at local public community events, engage local community leaders and become a link between parents and the early childhood system, would provide greater reach and help to develop a responsive, accessible and engaged system.

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[19] Goldfeld, 2011.

[20] Ibid.

[21] For information about CALD COM storyboards for people with limited English language skills. Each story is carefully crafted to convey messages that tell people about services, civic life and basically what life is like in Australia. http://www.moreland.vic.gov.au/community-care/multicultural-services/cald-com-storyboards-and-videos/caldcom-story/

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6.3. More Support for Parents

❖ **RESPONDING TO THE DISCUSSION STARTER REGARDING PRIORITIES FOR SUPPORTING PARENTS AND PROVIDING COORDINATED AND INTEGRATED SUPPORT SERVICES**

The central role of parents in supporting a child's wellbeing and learning has been established, however the ability of parents to fulfil this role depends on a number of factors. The importance of the early years for later development is well documented – learning begins at birth and the first few years of life are a critical period for brain development. This early learning can however be enhanced or inhibited by the environment in which a child grows up.[22]

In their research to understand 'health inequalities', Wilkinson & Pickett (2010), uncovered the benefits of greater equality. They observed that poverty and inequality had independent effects and that poverty alone did not explain the inequality effect. Babies and young children need to be in caring and responsive environments for optimum development, however for parents and care-givers who are poor, or stressed, or unsupported this can be harder to provide and therefore greater investment in support mechanisms is necessary for these families.

Research demonstrates that children who experience more stress in early life may be more aggressive, less empathetic, and used to dealing with conflict.[23] Early life experiences can also serve as a 'taster' of the quality of social relations a person is likely to have to cope with in adulthood. For example, the emotional make-up which prepares a person to live in a society in which they have to fend for themselves, watch their backs and fight for every little thing, is very different from the emotional make-up needed to grow up in a society in where a person depends on empathy, reciprocity and co-operation, and in which individual security depends on maintaining good relations with others.[24] These experiences can be lived side by side within a society where inequality prevails.

It is important therefore in catering to the needs of all Victorian families with babies and young children to ensure that help and support reaches those who are most vulnerable. This includes making a concerted effort to reach migrant groups who have LBOTE status, including refugee backgrounds. The pressures that affect these families can be similar to mainstream populations but can be exacerbated by severe financial

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[22] Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2010). *The Spirit Level. Why Equality is Better for Everyone.* London: Penguin Books Ltd.
[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid

pressures. For example, refugees usually arrive in Australia with no possessions or financial assets and have to start their lives again. The first priority for many families may be to meet basic needs, such as finding a house, a job, feeding the family and feeling safe. Meeting these needs becomes the initial priority, before seeking to have a positive impact on children's development outcomes.[25]

There may also be limited time for involvement in early childhood education due to family size, having many young dependent children or being further constrained due to work hours.[26] However, despite the difficulties research shows that these parents do seek involvement. Findings from the *Connecting CALD Parents* project (CMY, 2006) suggested that parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds want more information and actively seek guidance on how to support their children's education.[27]

Reflective practice is important in this regard, to inform ongoing work practice and to ensure substantive equality for parents of young children who have LBOTE status within the early childhood system. Seeking to gain information that will provide insights that support, inform and enrich decision-making about children's early learning for these community subsets will progress better integration and outcomes for parents and their children, despite their individual family circumstances.[28]

There is also a range of beliefs, behaviours, and expectations of parents and societies in regards to children's development, both within and between cultures.[29] Thus, support for parents also needs to be culturally aware and sensitive. For example, refugee families who have experienced traumatic periods in which their children may have been lost or endangered can have raised anxiety levels when entrusting their children to outside authorities. They are also likely to have varied knowledge of Australian early childhood systems, including significant gaps in information or understanding. Their fears about the Westernisation of their children and the loss of culture and values can also be great.[30]

Disaggregated data can be used to inform reflective practice. In focus groups with service providers Goldfeld, et al (2011), found that a wide variety of sources were accessed to better inform practice. This ranged from large national data sets, to shared information from peers.[31] These were used by service providers to look at the 'key ages and stages', birth numbers per region, parent's country of birth, language spoken at home and proficiency in English.[32]

The evidence shows that when early childhood educators respect the diversity of families and communities, and the aspirations they hold for children, they are able to foster children's motivation to learn and reinforce their sense of themselves as competent learners.[33]

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[25] Goldfeld et al, 2011.

[26] Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), (2006). *Connecting CLD Parents Project Report*, CMY: Carlton

[27] Ibid

[28] Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace, (2009). *Belonging, being and Becoming, The early Years Learning framework for Australia*. Attorney-General's Department, Barton ACT.

[29] Pumariega, A.J. & Joshi, S.V. (2010). Culture and Development in Children and Youth. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 19(4), pp.661-680

[30] Goldfeld et al, 2011.

[31] Large national or state sets of data directly linked to child development outcomes were the Victorian Maternal and Child Health data, New South Wales Midwives data and the Families NSW report.

[32] Ibid

[33] Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace, 2009.

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6.4. More Support for Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Children and Families

❖ **RESPONDING TO THE DISCUSSION STARTER REGARDING THE PRIORITIES IN THIS REFORM AREA AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT SERVICE PROVIDERS**

The Education State Early Childhood Consultation Paper (2015), acknowledges that some children from vulnerable groups can be at risk including those from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, and those who have recently arrived in Australia. As the voice of Victoria's CALD communities and the main link between them and the government, the VMC advocates for these groups to be prioritised in this reform area.

There is much that has already been noted above in section 5.3, More Support for Parents, that is equally relevant in response to this discussion starter, however rather than reiterate some additional points are offered here.

Looking closely at the AEDC (2013) results for all Australian children gives important insights:-

a) the percentage of children who are developmentally vulnerable is highest in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas;

b) children who speak a language other than English at home are more likely to live in low socioeconomically disadvantaged areas than children who speak English only;

c) children who do not attend preschool in the year before school have higher proportions of developmental vulnerability than children who do attend preschool in the year before school; and

d) children who speak a language other than English at home are slightly less likely to attend preschool than other children.

These four points, taken together demonstrate the need for children and their families from CALD backgrounds to be prioritised, in order to receive the supports necessary to ensure substantive equality of opportunity and access to early childhood and education and care.

Seeking to answer pertinent policy questions can inform strategies likely to facilitate the greater participation in early childhood systems of families from CALD backgrounds. For example, this might entail liaison with State and Federal Government settlement services. Settlement services have a specific and

limited role and focus primarily on building self-reliance. This includes developing English language skills and establishing and fostering connections with mainstream services in the early settlement period.[34]

However, new arrivals and refugees can be highly traumatised and arrive in Australia with complex needs. Initial settlement experiences can also be quite overwhelming with much information to process, in addition to the more immediate needs of finding suitable accommodation and employment, as well as health care and education. As a result of pre-settlement experiences some families may also be highly mistrustful of authority bodies and figures. Therefore, although there is a requirement for them to engage during early settlement there may be some families who are harder to reach down the track. Seeking to maintain contact with these families must also be a priority.

In order to prioritise vulnerable and disadvantaged families from diverse backgrounds the VMC suggests the following policy questions for consideration to better inform the participation of vulnerable community subsets. Services include all early childhood educators and carers including, Maternal and Child Health Services; Kindergartens; Preschools; and Long Day Care Centres.

How do services seek to:-

1. identify specific vulnerable community subsets who are not in regular contact with services?
2. connect and foster good relations with vulnerable community subsets once identified?
3. facilitate the needs of vulnerable families who have LBOTE status and from CALD backgrounds?
4. develop sound on-going relationships with vulnerable families who have LBOTE status from CALD backgrounds?
5. ensure the timely involvement of vulnerable families who have LBOTE status from CALD backgrounds with early childhood systems?

The following high priority questions will also help to inform policy measures, as well as to identify the resources required to meet community needs.

1. What services and support are needed to support vulnerable new arrivals, including children and families from refugee backgrounds, to participate in early childhood systems?
2. What have been the impacts and outcomes of pre-settlement journeys affecting children and their families?
3. What is understood in diverse communities about early childhood services in Victoria?
4. What targeted solutions (including translated materials and interpreters whenever possible) can be deployed to ensure services are 'user friendly' for vulnerable families from diverse backgrounds?
5. Are the types of educational materials produced sensitive to the needs of diverse communities – translated, in pictorial form ('storyboards') etc.?
6. What good practice interventions work to engage vulnerable families from diverse backgrounds with early childhood systems?

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[34] National Framework for Settlement Planning, (2006), Department of Social Services. Available at: https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/12_2013/sett_plan_framework_access.pdf

RECOMMENDATION 4 – MORE SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE AND DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The VMC recommends that the Early Childhood Education and Care system prioritises support systems and mechanisms for families who are newly arrived and have language background other than English (LBOTE) status in order to facilitate initial and ongoing participation in early childhood education for their children.

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6.5. Earlier Engagement in Learning

❖ **RESPONDING TO THE DISCUSSION STARTER REGARDING WAYS TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN TO PARTICIPATE IN GOOD QUALITY EARLY LEARNING.**

Early childhood learning in an English speaking learning environment can be particularly beneficial for children who have LBOTE status, who speak another language at home. Currently research demonstrates that, although oral/conversational English can be learned relatively quickly (within 2-5 years), proficiency in English (language skills to facilitate full engagement with the academic curriculum), can take much longer to obtain (on average 4-7 years).[35]

Victoria is a linguistically diverse state with around 23% of the population speaking a language other than English at home.[36] There has also been an increasing diversity of languages spoken in Victoria due to changing patterns and source countries of migration. Languages from Asia, Africa and the Middle East have experienced growth since the last census (ABS, 2011), with a corresponding increase in the number of Victorians with limited English proficiency.[37]

The AEDC (2011) identified that, although 93.5% of children for whom teachers completed a checklist were born in Australia, a high proportion of those children were rated by their teachers as not yet proficient in English. The languages spoken by children not-proficient in English were Vietnamese (21.8%), Chinese (19.2%), Mandarin (18.4%), Cantonese (17%), and Arabic (15.6%).

For children who are bilingual (proficient in two languages, English and one other) there are recognised cognitive advantages. A growing body of research that examines developmental outcomes for children who have LBOTE status has identified that bilingualism may also have benefits for early reading skills.[38] For children who are bilingual therefore these skills can be assets when children are trying to meet the demands of learning in a predominantly English speaking environment.

Other children with limited English proficiency however, have been shown to experience increased stress (e.g. through discrimination, stigma, difficulties accessing curriculum), which in turn may contribute to

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[35] Hakuta, K., Butler, Y., & Witt, D. (2000). *How long does it take English learners to attain proficiency?* Santa Barbara: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute.

[36] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Census of Population and Housing, 2011.

[37] *Victoria's Advantage, Unity Diversity Opportunity*, (2012). Office for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship (OMAC), Melbourne.

[38] Lesaux, N.K., & Siegel, L.S. (2003). The Development of Reading in Children Who Speak English as a Second Language. *Developmental Psychology*, 39(6), pp.1005-1019

poorer behavioural and psychosocial outcomes. The evidence shows that these children also tend to be rated less favourably by their teachers on measures of social, emotional, academic and behavioural outcomes.[39]

The AEDC (2011) also identified that, for nearly a quarter of children, their teachers were not aware of their ability in their own language even when their English proficiency was poor. This findings was of concern because this information can provide insight into English language difficulties, for example, whether these difficulties relate to a broader language problem.[40]

Overall the AEDC (2011) finds that proficiency in English is the main factor related to successful transitions to and within school settings. For children of LBOTE status, who are not proficient in English the AEDC found they were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in all five domains:

- physical health and wellbeing;
- social competence;
- emotional maturity;
- language and cognitive skills; and
- communication skills and general knowledge.

In order to ensure that children from LBOTE status are prepared for learning in an English speaking learning environment, earlier engagement in the early childhood education and care system is environment is vital. The VMC therefore, advocates for increased numbers of children from diverse backgrounds in three- and four year old kindergarten programs. It is however also appreciated that the children who might benefit most are also in families that may be hard to reach.

A useful model of recruitment is provided by the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY). The program is structured as a two-year program starting around age 4 years, which teaches or mentors parents to be their child's first teacher. The program works on a train-the-trainer model where parents, once trained, become tutors for other parents. The program is delivered through a combination of home visits and parent group meetings by a HIPPY tutor.

In an evaluation of the HIPPY program the Brotherhood of St Laurence (2014) analysed participant feedback from the 2014 national coordinator survey and the 2013-14 site visits. The analysis identified challenges at the individual, program and provider levels in reaching and recruiting the children and their families who would most benefit from the program.[41] These findings may be useful to the early childhood conversation when thinking about strategies to recruit and engage hard to reach community subsets.

Individual factors identified by BSL related to 'hard to reach' families included:

- family circumstances which did not adapt easily to formal service offerings;
- feeling marginalised, or distrusting service providers due to previous negative experiences;
- family experiences and perceptions, and language barriers;
- family circumstances, including transient or insecure housing, and work or family commitments;
- family difficulties, including new baby, poor health, and lack of social confidence;

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[39] Dowdy, E., Dever, B., DiStefano, C., & Chin, J. (2011). Screening for emotional and behavioral risk among students with limited English proficiency. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 26(1), pp.14–26.

[40] Goldfeld et al, 2011.

[41] Roost, F.D., Jones, N.M., Allan, M. & Dommers, E., (2014). *Recruiting and retaining families in HIPPY,* Brotherhood of St Laurence: Fitzroy.

- family perceptions and beliefs such as parent's own prior negative experiences with education systems;

- parents lack of formal education and poor language or literacy skills as a barrier to assisting their children with reading; and

- lack of confidence to teach their child themselves.

These challenges are verified by the VMC consultation and RAC findings, which included additional findings such as:

- lack of awareness of specific early childhood services; and

- difficulties in accessing early childhood service due to geographic location, transport difficulties and cost prohibitive.

To improve the recruitment of families to the program parents provided BSL with their top four recommendations, which consistently related to the program and provider factors. The most consistent suggestions were to:-

i. improve or expand involvement by HIPPY Australia in local program promotion;

ii. increase flexibility around the program model or structure;

iii. provide extra funding for coordinator and tutor positions; and

iv. expand the HIPPY catchment areas.

RECOMMENDATION 5 – EARLIER ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

The VMC advocates for increased numbers of children from diverse backgrounds in three- and four year old kindergarten programs, and recommends that a model, such as the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) program is useful to develop a culturally aware and effective recruitment strategy for future implementation.

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