About QCOSS

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) is the state-wide peak body representing the interests of individuals experiencing or at risk of experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and organisations working in the social and community service sector.

For more than 50 years, QCOSS has been a leading force for social change to build social and economic wellbeing for all. With members across the state, QCOSS supports a strong community service sector.

QCOSS, together with our members continues to play a crucial lobbying and advocacy role in a broad number of areas including:

- sector capacity building and support
- homelessness and housing issues
- early intervention and prevention
- cost of living pressures including low income energy concessions and improved consumer protections in the electricity, gas and water markets
- energy efficiency support for culturally and linguistically diverse people
- early childhood support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse peoples.

QCOSS is part of the national network of Councils of Social Service lending support and gaining essential insight to national and other state issues.

QCOSS is supported by the vice-regal patronage of His Excellency the Honourable Paul de Jersey AC, Governor of Queensland.

Lend your voice and your organisation’s voice to this vision by joining QCOSS. To join visit the QCOSS website (www.QCOSS.org.au).
Introduction

QCOSS is the state-wide peak body representing the interests of individuals at risk of experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and organisations working in the social and community service sector. As such, we are focused on providing effective policy advice and working to strengthen responsive community services through productive inter-sectorial partnerships. One of the current strategies for achieving this is through the work of the EMBRACE – Culture in Kindy Program (EMBRACE), whose primary focus is to support the early childhood and community sectors to increase enrolment and participation of families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds into early childhood education and care (ECEC), and more specifically government approved kindergarten programs. The EMBRACE program aims to identify and remove barriers to participation by enhancing the capacity of services to create culturally safe and inclusive environments.

Purpose of the conference

Focused on achieving the goal of increased participation in ECEC, the EMBRACE team organised the Embracing Cultural Diversity in Early Childhood Conference, held in Brisbane on 17 and 18 November 2015. The conference brought together more than 100 decision makers and practitioners representing 61 organisations from the early childhood and family support sectors in Queensland. The purpose of the conference was to support the sector through the provision of professional development training and relevant resources, the showcasing of promising practice, and the promotion of inter-sectorial linkages. The conference provided a platform for practitioners to identify barriers to participation and gaps in current service provision. It also provided a challenge to practitioners to take personal responsibility for removing these at a service level, whilst informing advocacy and inspiring a rethink of public policy in the area of early childhood reform at a systemic level.

Who did we invite?

Keynote speakers were invited because of their knowledge, experience and leadership in promoting cultural diversity and inclusion within the fields of early childhood education and family support. Speakers included Rhonda Livingstone from the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), Dr Miriam Giugni, co-author of Talkin’ Up and Speakin’ Out, Mary Graham, Indigenous Elder & Adjunct Professor from the University of Queensland, Jatinder Kaur, Social Worker and Diversity Consultant and Dr Jennifer Cartmel, Marilyn Casley and Kerry Smith from the Child and Family Studies team at Griffith University. A full program of interactive sessions were facilitated by representatives from QCOSS, MDA Ltd, QPASTT, The Workforce Council, AMPARO, Aspire, Cultural Inclusions, NAQ Nutrition and Balaangala Reconciliation Group. PowerPoint slides and video recordings from many of the sessions are available for download. Go to http://embracekindy.com.au/news/embracing-cultural-diversity-in-early-childhood-conference/
Embedding cultural diversity in early childhood – What is working?

The facilitating partners from the Pre-Kindergarten Grants Programs, funded by the Department of Education and Training (DET) in fourteen regions across Queensland were invited to present a session outlining their approach to service delivery, engagement strategies, program achievements and barriers to program delivery. Organisational representatives reported remarkably consistent stories about their successful community engagement strategies and the mechanisms by which they established trusting relationships with families from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and diverse cultural backgrounds. Their strategies included:

1. Engaging in continuous community consultation with appropriate feedback mechanisms to ensure that programs were in line with community need.
2. Developing the cultural competence of all staff through ongoing professional development, continual resourcing, support and advice through consultancy, and opportunities to learn through participation in professional networks.
3. Employing culturally and linguistically appropriate support workers and playgroup facilitators who match the ethnic profile of a local community, to ‘build bridges’ and to link families with local services.
4. Embedding ECEC services in local communities through establishment of community-based partnership models and alliances with local health services, schools and community organisations.
5. Linking ECEC services with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, ethno-specific cultural community groups and Elders.
6. Engaging families through soft-entry activities such as playgroups, community barbeques, parent support groups, English classes and similar activities.
7. Eliminating physical barriers by providing practical and material support directly to families through fee relief, waiting list payments, assistance with collating and filling in enrolment paperwork; provision of transport; and ensuring families have lunch boxes, hats, bags, sunscreen and so forth, to avoid stigma for children when entering an early learning environment for the first time.
8. Providing outreach. Home visiting services and advocacy were often required for a significant length of time to establish trust and build sustainable relationships between families and ECEC services.

Delegate learnings

Participant feedback was gathered through an interactive session facilitated by the Child and Family Studies team at Griffith University and through written evaluations collected post-conference. A relatively high return rate of 57 per cent on written evaluations, showed 98 per cent of those delegates expressed a high level of satisfaction with the event.
All participants reported that they appreciated the opportunity to network with people across the early childhood and family support sectors, with 81 per cent reporting that they had strengthened their professional relationships and were able to move forward both individually and collaboratively with one another by the end of the conference. Eighty five per cent of delegates reported that they had gained significantly more skills and confidence to embed cultural diversity into their program or service.

Delegates were asked what part of their professional practice they would change as a result of attending the conference. The majority of delegates were enthusiastic about incorporating the Circle of Change Revisited Model with both parents and other members of their teams. Respondents said they would reflect on their current practice, listen to families more, create more welcoming classroom environments and foster positive cultural identity amongst their Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and CALD children. The themes of demonstrating respect and empathy for families, their culture, values and beliefs were recurrent and many expressed the need to be more “open, honest, non-judgmental and patient”. They learned that creating a “safe place” and a “sense of belonging” for children and their families was important. Some delegates vowed to find out more about the Aboriginal history of their local areas so they could embed this into their learning environments. Delegates said that they were now more aware of cultural protocols and the need to be mindful of appropriate speech, dress and body language when communicating. The conference helped people to gain awareness of different cultural practices, resources, events and key contacts in the field of diversity.

One of the major learnings to emerge from the conference was the paramount importance of building interpersonal relationships and strong connections with families and communities. Many participants acknowledged that relationship building took time, a great deal of patience and that the trust of families had to be earned. They realised that in order to build relationships with families they had to “break down barriers” and remove the “them and us” climate. Delegates learned that there were different ways to communicate, that they should not make assumptions, but instead, “stop, listen deeply and actively” and then work in partnership with families, rather than working for them. One participant said that “children respond better within a connected community where people feel safe and supported”. There was a general consensus that “community voices need to be heard”.

**Reducing the barriers to ECEC participation and improving inclusion**

Conference delegates reported that despite the great work of the Pre-Kindergarten Grants Programs across Queensland, there are still many barriers to be overcome in the provision of accessible, high quality and affordable early childhood education. The current state and federal policy context has created budgetary deficits and uncertainties for ECEC service providers which have in turn compromised the development and delivery of quality early childhood education programs, and reduced access to and participation in these programs for families. The barriers and specific recommendations for reducing these are discussed in this document.
1. **Structural barriers**

Many children from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and migrant and refugee backgrounds are still living in poverty. The effects of unemployment, poor physical and mental health, and lack of appropriate housing impact significantly on their ability to afford early childhood education. Recurring themes during the conference included:

- the high cost of ECEC (fees + transport + clothing + supplies)
- the lack of transport in many rural, remote and outer urban areas limiting access to ECEC
- the lack of subsidies available for refugees and asylum seekers to mitigate the high cost of ECEC attendance amidst the competing priorities of resettlement.

**Recommendations for removing structural barriers**

There is urgent need to remove structural barriers to ensure that children can actually afford to attend ECEC programs. Reform would include:

- universal access to free kindergarten programs and/or high quality early learning environments
- extending the Kindy Plus subsidy to refugees and asylum seekers
- working with the federal government before the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs and Families Child Care Package) is passed by parliament. There are currently aspects of the bill which are likely to act as disincentive to ECEC participation. (Refer to SNAICC and Mission Australia submissions).

2. **Lack of language and cultural support for families accessing ECEC providers**

Many families, due to significant language and cultural barriers are unable to negotiate enrolment of their children into ECEC programs and they often do not have the literacy skills required to fill in complex enrolment forms without assistance.

Significant numbers of parents still lack understanding of the importance of kindergarten and its connection to lifelong educational and employment opportunities. Research tells us that “children living in households where English is not the main language benefit significantly from attending formal child care”, but these children are less likely to participate in ECEC compared to the rest of the population (AIWH, p. 21).

Conference speakers and delegates corroborated about the importance of employing more 'identified' workers from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and bilingual/bicultural workers from CALD and refugee backgrounds who reflect the ethnic profile of an area. These workers are able to work both within and across services and have been invaluable assets to many of the services represented because of their ability to engage with families, provide a link between communities and ECEC services and to provide a sustainable ongoing model of inclusion.
Recommendations to create more ‘identified’ and bilingual positions

- Encourage ECEC and family support services through appropriate incentives to employ more ‘identified’ workers from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.
- Encourage ECEC and family support services through appropriate incentives to employ more bilingual/bicultural workers from CALD and refugee backgrounds who reflect the ethnic profile of an area.
- Commit to ongoing funding for a team of Bilingual Community Support Workers, (such as the current program provided by MDA Ltd.) who can provide inclusion support to CALD families accessing ECEC services across the state.
- Provide all ECEC services with free access to interpreters so that parents and services can communicate effectively.

3. Lack of cultural competence exhibited in ECEC and early years services

Delegates and speakers expressed concern at the limited commitment by both state and federal governments to continue to fund the embedding of diversity in the ECEC sector. They reported differences in ECEC policy between Australian states, with some states and territories perceived as more likely to value diversity than Queensland. Government policies were viewed as cyclical in nature, which means that good programs often become established only to be defunded a couple of years later. Delegates made specific reference to the EMBRACE and EATSIPEC programs as a case in point.

Without appropriate professional development and ongoing resourcing of the ECEC sector through targeted consultancy, delegates feared that ECEC services would continue to inadvertently exclude people from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and diverse cultural backgrounds. Early learning environments will continue to be viewed by community as places that lack ‘cultural safety’. Low levels of ECEC attendance have been linked directly to “Indigenous families preferring a culturally safe environment for their children in the years before school” (AIHW, 2015 p.19).

The underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in kindergarten and other ECEC programs and their overrepresentation in out of home care remained an issue of concern for delegates. The question remained as to how to achieve the targets set by the Closing the Gap Prime Ministers Report, such as “95 per cent of all Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025” (p.12), without support to services to assist with the social and cultural inclusion of families.

Recommendations to increase cultural competence of the ECEC and early years sectors through training and consultancy

- Mandate early childhood and family support practitioners, managers and decision makers to become more culturally aware, culturally sensitive and culturally competent through ongoing cultural competence training and collective reflective practice.
- The Queensland Government has outlined a commitment to “work with sector peak bodies to develop professional development programs, training materials and curriculum resources” as part of the ECEC Workforce Action Plan 2016-2019 (p.5). Professional development in cultural competence should form part of the ‘skills’ action area. A cost effective use of resources would be to continue to fund, build upon and
expand the successful EMBRACE – Culture in Kindy Program run by QCOSS and currently funded by DET.

4. **Families from diverse cultural backgrounds remain disengaged from ECEC services**

Many delegates realised that the services they worked for were not truly inclusive of all the families in their communities. They expressed concern that there might be many other families in their local areas whose children were missing out on quality early learning opportunities and they wanted to do more to include them.

Some of the services who had been very successful in achieving parental engagement:

- were involved in continuous consultation with all members of their communities. For example, they held barbeques in parks to get to know local residents and to listen to community concerns
- employed or worked closely with bilingual outreach workers who visited families at home
- ran playgroups and English classes to provide soft entry points into ECEC services
- provided advocacy, referral and support or linked families to other services who did this
- provided direct practical and material support to families in terms of fee relief, transport, waiting list fees, hats, lunch boxes and bags to reduce stigmatisation and alleviate the cost burden.

**Recommendations to increase opportunities for family inclusion in ECEC**

- Engage in continuous community consultation with appropriate feedback mechanisms (see above) to ensure that programs are in line with community need.
- Create transition to school programs with home-liaison workers who can encourage participation in approved kindergarten programs to increase school readiness.
- Run ethno-specific and multicultural playgroups from ECEC services to increase cultural safety and engagement.
- Create opportunities for parents to participate in adult programs such as English classes, parent support groups, community barbeques, therapeutic groups or parenting programs run through or linked closely to ECEC services.
5. Lack of CALD / NESB data to inform service delivery or measure success

There is a significant lack of data collected by the Queensland State Government to show the proportion of CALD / NESB children participating in kindergarten and other ECEC programs in Queensland.

There is consequently no baseline data with which to plan service delivery to CALD families at either local or state-wide levels or to measure the success of any programs or interventions designed to promote their social and cultural inclusion.

Currently, a child is considered to be attending kindergarten if they enrol and attend for only one day. There is a considerable drop-out rate for CALD and ATSI children which is not currently measured.

Recommendations about collecting CALD / NESB data from ECEC services

- CALD/NESB participation data needs to be collected from ECEC services and aggregated with:
  - ABS resident population data (using an estimate of the NESB population for Queensland)
  - AEDC kindergarten census data
  - Prep enrolment data currently collected by DET (particularly when Prep becomes compulsory).

  This would improve the ability of the state, local ECEC and family support services to deliver programs appropriate to the needs of all Queenslanders.

- Participation data needs to be captured over a period of time, such as at enrolment, mid-year and end of year to measure actual participation and drop-out rates.
References


