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Encouraging Diversity in the Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce

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Abstract

Early childhood education and care is recognised as extremely important for the health, education and welfare of all children. As Australia is a multicultural society then the early childhood education and care workforce needs to reflect the proportion of the population who were born overseas in non-English speaking countries, often referred to Culturally and Linguistic Diverse individuals. With the staff shortages in the sector we propose that supporting students in initial teacher training from a CALD background is important. Several ways to accomplish this goal are discussed.

Keywords: CALD; early childhood; workforce

Australia is a multicultural society as shown by the 2016 census where more than 28% of the population was born overseas, with over 300 ethnic backgrounds and languages spoken being represented (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2016). This increase has been largely due to an influx of both migrants and refugees. In 1999 the ABS introduced the term “Cultural and Linguistic Diversity’ (p. 14). Although the definition of Cultural and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities is inconsistent in Australian research, in this commentary we are using the definition suggested by Pham and colleagues (2021) that CALD status is attributed to “people born in non-English speaking countries, and/or who do not speak English at home" (p. 737).

In Australia it is recognised that the fastest learning period of a human’s life is the first thousand days. It has been shown that in these early days what happens to a child has a significant influence on their development (Young et al., 2018). The first 1000 days of life refers to the period from pregnancy to a child’s second birthday, which has a critical short-

term and long-term impact on the health and wellbeing of infants and young children. In Australia as in many western countries, the education and care of young children has become a government priority and not just left up to families (Krieg, 2010). More specifically, over recent decades, with the concern to grow the economy, it has become more and more common that both parents participate in the workplace. Consequently, their young children, especially infants and toddlers are moving into Early Childhood Education (ECE) outside the family home. In Australia, currently 30% of infants and toddlers attend education and care settings, which is similar to other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Davis & Dunn, 2019).

However, for many young children going from home care to childcare can be a difficult time. This transition can be exacerbated for children from CALD backgrounds because of their unfamiliarity with the English language, differences in play with peers and expectations from adults and other children as well as various cultural practices of eating and sleeping (Sims & Hutchins, 2001). It would seem prudent therefore, to train and employ more CALD early childhood educators to alleviate some of these problems as well as bolster the qualified staff available to work in the sector as the quality of educators is widely considered to be the single most important educational variable influencing student achievement (OECD, 2005). Many researchers have suggested that it would be beneficial to have a culturally diverse workforce in early childhood settings (Cheruvu et al., 2015; Hydon & Bose-Rhaman, 2016) as children could identify with educators with some similar backgrounds to themselves to develop their own identity. Children from the dominant culture can also benefit in observing carers from all cultures working together to develop cultural awareness and tolerance (Gide et al., 2021).

It is not only the children of CALD families but also their parents who can have difficulties with early childhood programs. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

found that CALD families did not use early childhood settings as much compared to English-speaking families with consequent poorer academic outcomes (AIFS, 2011). Although children from CALD backgrounds comprised 20% of the preschool-eligible population in Australia (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2017) only 12.1% of children attended these quality programs. While the major reason found in a qualitative study by Lamb (2020) was that preschool was too expensive for refugee families in Queensland, other reasons were the lack of interpreters for those parents who need them to enrol their children and the non-acceptance of bilingualism in the preschools.

In addition, in a survey of CALD parents and early childhood teachers Hadley (2014) found that parents and teachers valued different experiences in the early childhood setting for the children. For example, parents placed higher importance on children learning to conform while teachers emphasised the opposite, valuing assertiveness and individuality in the children. These cultural variations often lead families from CALD backgrounds to withdraw their children from preschool as they can construe different cultural practices of child rearing to be inappropriate for their children (Lamb, 2020). Hadley therefore argues that early childhood teachers need to engage more with CALD parents to increase their participation as we know the impact that quality early childhood education can have on the wellbeing and future achievement of children with CALD backgrounds, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Bove & Sharmahd, 2020; Park & Katsiaficas, 2019). As Gide et al. (2021) suggests “having a multicultural ECE workforce may also be advantageous in establishing a culturally safe place for families to bring their children with confidence” (p. 8).

Not only has the CALD population increased but so have students who are at tertiary institutions with a growth in domestic student enrolments of CALD, with 25,693 recorded nationally in 2018 (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2020). The ABS reports that there are 27.3% of early childhood care workers who are born overseas (2016).

These figures, however, do not separate workers from CALD backgrounds, with most of these workers being born in England and New Zealand, as the ABS does not categorise people from CALD backgrounds (Gide et al., 2021). These figures also include childcare workers, family day care workers, nannies and out-of-school hours care workers. However, most of these workers are unskilled and are doing this work as their higher qualifications in another field are not recognised in Australia (Bove & Sharmahd, 2020). This can lead to poorer quality education and care and therefore, these workers need to be encouraged to gain higher qualifications in early childhood education.

In addition, there is currently a shortage of staff to work in early childhood care. In a recent survey of over 3 300 childcare sites, it was found that nearly of all job vacancies in education and care settings in Australia remained unfilled in the first six months of 2021 (Community Early Learning, 2021). In this research it was estimated the national demand for early childhood educators is expected to increase by 17% by 2025. These staff shortages were attributed to poor pay and conditions and lack of qualified people. In Australia, early childhood educators are the 13th-lowest-paid workers. This fact together with the demanding nature of the job have led to many leaving the profession (Rogers, 2021). While extra funding to increase wages and more staff to alleviate the heavy burden could overcome some of the problems of staff turnover, it is more difficult to overcome the training problems. In fact, some potential staff leave the profession even before they actually start.

While we know that the reasons for attrition from training courses for early childhood educators are complex with many factors influencing the outcome (Beer & Lawson, 2017), we also know that one of these factors for students leaving is a difficult practicum (Kirk, 2018). Practicum is a vital component of initial teacher education programs. In Australia, according to the National Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA, 2014), there are specific requirements for practicum in early childhood initial

teacher education programs and all practicum experiences must be planned with clear links to these programs, as well as all must be located in licensed early childhood education (ECE) centres. While many students find practicums to be a challenging time in their training, students from a CALD background often face extra struggles (Nuttall & Ortlipp, 2012), although there is scant recent Australian early childhood literature on this topic.

The teaching practicum is conducted because initial teacher educators need to become exposed to the real world of teaching process and gain knowledge related to the complexity of current classroom practices, which improve initial teacher educators' motivations, attitudes, and engagement towards the teaching profession program. With the current push of the Australian federal government to ensure that initial teacher education students are classroom ready, practicum is a truly essential requirement. This means all initial teacher education students, especially those from CALD backgrounds need employability skills (Australian Government, 2016).

Students from CALD backgrounds have even extra difficulties as mentioned previously in early childhood education practicums. Research has shown that initial teacher education students from CALD backgrounds seem to fail teaching practica more often than their Anglo-Australian peers (Nuttall & Ortlipp, 2012; Tangen & Campbell, 2017). This situation could be because these students often experience unique challenges with communication and language skills and have alternative attitudes to what is considered to be success in a practicum. Focus groups of CALD initial education early childhood teachers found that the English language and communication was their primary concern before going on practicum, especially talking to parents (Miller et al., 2016). This is understandable as communicating with parents is at the heart of early childhood education (Jeon et al., 2021). The students expressed concern about what to talk to parents about, parents speaking too fast for them to understand and parents not understanding their English.

However, we need to increase and retain the numbers of CALD initial education teachers (Hartsuyker, 2007). This sentiment has been growing in the past decade in Australia. As Gide et al. (2021) has expressed “every single peak-organisation representative we contacted stated that having a culturally diverse workforce is very important for the provision of high-quality ECE, despite the noticeable silence on the numbers, experiences, enablers, and barriers of the CALD ECE workforce” (p. 4).

There are various suggestions for improving the situation of initial teacher education, especially practicum for students with a CALD background. Potential solutions include addressing placement planning and preparation barriers by providing students from a CALD background with extra programs before their practicum, training for practicum supervisors, the teaching of cultural competence for all students and finally modelling of teaching for diversity incorporated into tertiary institution degrees, diplomas and certificates.

Pre-practicum programs for CALD students

The first suggestion from many researchers is the provision of preparation for practicum programs for CALD students to improve their skills. For example, a program called Creating Context through Play workshops (Joseph & Rouse, 2017), and Celebrating Cultural Diversity program (Nallaya, 2016). Participants in both programs felt they had benefited after the program, however, both these studies had small sample sizes, no control groups and no follow-up after placement or graduation (Lee et al., 2019).

However, although preparation programs for students with CALD backgrounds are the most common form of assistance for practicum (Harrison & Ip, 2013), which are often found to be very helpful to the students, underlying the program is the concept that these students need to fit in, be fixed, that they are the problem (Harrison & Felton, 2017). This becomes paradoxical, as we want diversity and yet we are advising students from CALD backgrounds to change to be more Australian and less diverse.

Training for practicum supervisors

Other researchers have suggested that practicum supervisors should be trained when they accept a CALD student. In fact, many researchers are calling for training for all supervising teachers, where working as a childhood educator only is not a sufficient basis for supervision (Calamlam & Mokshein, 2019). Early childhood educators are being encouraged to not only be role models for the student teacher but also to dialogue, co-examine and co-reflect on practice with their students (Quinones et al., 2020).

Cultural competence teaching for all

Culture is complex with many layers. The most obvious first layer is language, dress, food and religious differences in cultures. However, as Weaver (1996) says there is also deep cultural variations which are not so obvious but are an extremely powerful influence on behaviour. Cultural practices in child-rearing, faith, concepts of justice, beauty, modesty and education can be different in each culture. Cultural competence is the awareness, knowledge and skills shown by one's behaviours and attitudes to work, serve, and teach individuals from cultural backgrounds that are different from one's own (Huisman, 2018). It is a clear expectation in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) that all workers develop cultural competence.

Inclusive education experienced by CALD student at university

Probably most important of all for assisting students from CALD backgrounds in their practicum and tertiary education is that they experience being taught by culturally aware lecturers. Modelling of teaching for diversity should be incorporated in teaching initial early childhood teachers by their university and TAFE lecturers. However, while realising that initial teacher education needs to teach about teaching for diversity of infants and children, modelling cultural competence with CALD initial education teachers remains a challenge in the tertiary sector. One of the main challenges is changing lecturer's assumptions about

CALD students (Wong & Chiu, 2020). CALD students face challenges not only with practicum but with navigating the tertiary education itself (Gayton, 2020). Challenges these students face are experiences of educational practices in their home country that vary from those of Australia and reduced opportunities to build financial and social capital (Naidoo & Adoniou, 2019, Stevenson & Baker, 2018). Early childhood education lecturers do not seem to take into account the skills and strengths of CALD students (Stevenson & Baker, 2018)

Conclusion

The Productivity commission (2017) acknowledges that Australia needs to promote and support a diverse workforce in ECEC, suggesting changes in attitudes of seeing cultural diversity as a strength, with more funding for bridging courses and recognition of career pathways. Attracting and retaining CALD students in early childhood tertiary education and assisting them in practicum is also one way to do this. We need to prepare teachers as culturally sensitive and competent (Allard & Santoro, 2004) but we need to be teaching CALD initial teacher education students by catering for their diversity in training and not just about how they cater for diverse children. The commission also reported the lack of information collected on CALD workers in the sector and the lack of research involving the impact and agency of ethnic workers which needs to be implemented. Further research in how to attract and retain well-educated ECEC workers is sorely needed.

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