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Cultural support workers and long day care services

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Abstract

In Australia, eligible long day care services may apply for support at the state level to assist with the transition of children from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds into childcare settings. For staff in childcare services, this support comes in the form of a Cultural Support Worker (CSW). The primary role of a CSW is to build capacity in childcare staff to support children and families as they enter the childcare program. This article draws on interview data and documentation from multiple sources to report the perspectives of key stakeholders affiliated with a cultural support program in an Australian childcare setting. It concludes that a more flexible approach to policy that directs the work of CSWs is needed, as well as further research into ways to build capacity for cultural competence for both CSWs and childcare staff who work collaboratively to support young children as they transition to childcare.

Introduction

The population of Australia is culturally and linguistically diverse. In addition to Aboriginal people and those from the Torres Strait Islands who comprise the Indigenous population, many years of immigration have produced a country where nearly one in four people were born overseas (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2008). This has resulted from planned immigration programs by successive Australian governments, the humanitarian program for refugees, as well as temporary immigrants who fill gaps in the availability of skilled workers. The most recent transformation of Australian society is due largely to changes in the source countries of Australia's permanent arrivals, with settlers coming from more diverse regions of the world, including refugees from the Horn of Africa (notably Sudan and Somalia), the Middle East and South West Asia (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs [DIMIA], 2005). Those arriving between July 2007 and June 2008 came from nearly 200 countries, with the majority born in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, India, China (excluding Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) and the Philippines (DIAC, 2008). Levels of migration to Australia are the highest in 20 years (Nieuwenhuysen, 2007) and the current skills crisis and humanitarian program for refugees suggest that high levels will continue. Many migrants settle in south-east Queensland, the context in which the data reported in this article is set.

Given the diversity of the Australian population, the Commonwealth government has developed policies and programs for successful inclusion of settlers, the ultimate aim of which is a socially cohesive society. These policies and programs include a whole-of-government approach to responsibility, a National action plan, citizenship, settlement services, and community grants and partnerships which are aimed at connecting communities and government (Andrews, 2007). Despite these policies and programs, the predominant approach by successive governments to

migrants has been and remains, assimilation. To date migrants have helped create a dynamic society and supported economic growth, and this has occurred with relatively little “social conflict and division” (Nieuwenhuysen, 2007, p. 1). However, inter-ethnic riots in Sydney in December 2005 shocked the nation, and security and legislative changes in response to the international ‘war on terror’ have resulted in suspicion being cast on the Muslim community (Nieuwenhuysen, 2007). These examples of conflict and division are what Nelson (2007) would call some of the “many paradoxes that unsettle the appearance of exemplary social cohesion in Australia” (p. 105). While these paradoxes also include the Indigenous population, the focus of this article remains migrants. Immigration, as one aspect of globalization, creates challenges for the social cohesion of all societies. Notwithstanding Australian government aims for social cohesion, it is a complex concept and there is no one way of defining it (Nieuwenhuysen, 2007), which means that it can be difficult to make judgments about its success because different approaches apply different criteria. Complicating matters further is the knowledge that many factors have been attributed to the development and maintenance of social cohesion (Jupp, 2007).

Despite the challenges of defining and ‘measuring’ social cohesion, educational attainment is seen as a factor contributing to social inclusiveness because it creates greater human capital, which leads to increased economic participation and integration (Koo, 2007). Immigrants can and do make a strong contribution economically but immigrant children can also face difficulties in education (OECD, 2006). Migrants (with refugee status) can also be disadvantaged, and according to the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (2008) reasons for disadvantage include:

...being part of a minority group in Australia...experiences prior to migration (for example refugee trauma), the different values and practices...encounter[ed] here, the difficulty of learning a new language, the problems...face[d] having qualifications and experience ratified, and the various forms of racism...experience[ed]. (p. 1).

There is a distinct lack of relevant research identifying the educational needs of young children of immigrant families (see Adams & Kirova, 2006), and a growing and serious concern that simply providing regular mainstream education for these young children is not enough (Ariza, 2006). What is known is that working with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds requires cultural competence (ARACY, 2008; Rothman, 2008). This article investigates the support provided by a CSW in a long day care centre in Brisbane, Australia, in an effort to shed some light on an under-researched area: the educational needs of a young immigrant child settling into long day care.

Cultural support workers

Cultural Support Workers (Childcare) provide support to early childhood educators who work in childcare settings (long day care) with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. They are employed by the Multicultural Development Association Incorporated (MDA) to increase the capacity of childcare staff to work with children and their families. One of the main aims is to “provide cultural knowledge and understanding and language skills that will facilitate effective linking with the family [and that will ensure] a successful placement at the service” (MDA, 2007, p. 8). Cultural Support Workers speak the same language as the child transitioning into a childcare program and because of this are able to assist

communication between children and families, and staff at the centre. This includes support for families in completing enrolment forms and providing information about other services. They also help children settle into childcare, “maintain and develop their first language...develop and maintain pride in their own language and culture [and] help to develop positive self esteem” (MDA, 2007, p. 8). Cultural Support Workers are able to gather background information about children and families and relay this to staff. They also help staff with developing and maintaining “culturally and linguistically responsive programs” (MDA, 2007, p. 8) and where necessary, can assist staff with referrals for children to services they may require.

All children should be able to see themselves reflected in the early childhood program they attend. For children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in particular, curricula must explicitly acknowledge diversity in their cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds in order to assist identity development and to make authentic connections to culture (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001). In Australia, children can attend long day care from 6 weeks to the age of five years. This age range is recognised as pivotal in a child’s identity development including knowledge of prejudicial attitudes and racial stereotypes (Shaffer, 2002). Cultural Support Workers provide a critical support role in building staff capacity to create an inclusive environment for young children, who may otherwise see few representations of themselves in the classroom environment, or the staff and student demographic. Factors that can impede the important work of CSWs have been identified in this teacher research study.

Methodology

This study was a small-scale teacher-as-researcher project conducted by a teacher in a childcare centre. The study transpired as part of a larger PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) project

about professional development in the childcare sector that was being conducted at the teacher's centre. The teacher, Meg, had a postgraduate certificate in education (completed in the UK) and was supported by the PhD researcher (Melinda) to conduct the study as part of a sustained program of professional development on a topic of the teacher's choice. The aim of the teacher-as-researcher project stemmed from the teacher's (Meg's) desire to learn more about the role of the CSW and consider how she had engaged with a CSW to support a child's transition into the program. Self-evaluation as a form of professional development was a key component of the research process.

The focus of data collection was gathering perspectives from key stakeholders involved in the MDA's cultural support program. Collecting a range of perspectives meant it was possible to evaluate circumstances surrounding the program and to consider multiple viewpoints including those of the 'policy makers', the teacher, the CSW and a parent involved in the program. To gather these perspectives, a 30-60 minute semi-structured interview (Creswell, 2008) was conducted with:

- An MDA representative (Interview 1);
- A CSW who had worked with the teacher in the classroom (Interview 2); and,
- The mother of a child supported by the CSW at the same centre as the teacher; (Interview 3 - translated, in part, by the CSW).

The interviews took place over a period of two weeks to align with the teacher's non-contact time. To consolidate the interview data, documents were also collected. These included the MDA's CSW Handbook (2007) and the teacher's written reflections (Teacher Reflections) about the experience of working with a CSW in the classroom. In the analysis, the CSW Handbook (2007) was used to consolidate the interview data from the MDA representative.

This document also provided points of comparison between the MDA's official line about the role of the CSW, and the perspective of the CSW working in centres with childcare staff. The teacher's reflections were used reflexively, in that they provided points of self-reference to build awareness and critical understanding about how one's personal beliefs and values shape one's experiences (Figueroa, 2000). A reflexive process supported the teacher to identify how she had constructed culture and how these constructions impacted understandings about the role of the CSW and her professional relationship with the CSW. The teacher's reflections were recorded at the time of working with the CSW, as well as retrospectively as a component of self-evaluation. While there is no intention of generalizing the results to wider populations, what has been found from this small study may provide insight for others working with children and families in similar circumstances.

Analysis and findings

Interview and documentation data were analysed collaboratively by the teacher, Meg, and the PhD researcher, Melinda. Input from the PhD researcher's supervisor also came in the form of collaborative discussion about the processes of data analysis and subsequent write-up. This process aligns with explanations of teacher-research as a collaborative and social activity that requires opportunities for sustained and substantive intellectual exchange among professional colleagues (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004).

Data were analysed using a comparative method (Silverman, 2006) to identify complementary and contrasting themes across stakeholder perspectives. Sentences or phrases that represented each stakeholder's perspective about what the role of a CSW did and did not involve were listed. This allowed for cross-examination of all perspectives to identify similarities and differences in expressions about the role of a CSW in the childcare program. Themes were generated by asking how one expression was similar to or different from

another (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Complementary themes identified included: the value of CSWs in supporting staff and children; difficulties with limited time frames for support; and, the need for a holistic perspective about the transition of children into a program. Contrasting themes identified included: different expressions of the role of CSWs; different expressions about who is the first priority of the CSW; and, differences in constructions of what constitutes cultural knowledge.

Identified themes and corresponding data were re-examined to consider how complementary and contrasting perspectives work together to produce particular effects (Silverman, 2006) such as assumptions and silences. By examining how each theme impacted another to produce a particular set of circumstances surrounding the program, it was possible to reveal underlying assumptions that work to sustain these circumstances. . Across all data, four key assumptions were revealed:

- 1) That CSWs have knowledge about the childcare sector and are trained to build capacity in child care professionals;
- 2) That capacity building can be achieved in a limited time frame with limited access to the child's family;
- 3) That children benefit most from receiving support from CSWs individually in the child care context;
- 4) That CSWs are 'experts' in cultural knowledge.

The discussion shows how these assumptions work together to influence outcomes for the parent, the teacher and the CSW; individuals who have a direct relationship with the child transitioning into the childcare program.

Assumption 1: Cultural support workers and capacity building

Cultural Support Workers interact with and support key stakeholders in childcare services including staff, children and families. They facilitate interactions between these stakeholders to “assist in the successful placement” of a child into a childcare program (MDA, 2007, p. 8). This description of the CSW’s role, set down by the MDA, infers that CSWs have knowledge about childcare as an educational context. It also infers that CSWs are trained to respond to the needs of stakeholders involved in childcare services. It is plausible that knowledge and training relevant to the childcare sector are central to the achievement of ‘successful placements’. When there is an assumption that CSWs have relevant knowledge and are trained adequately to support key stakeholders – the first of four assumptions explored in this article – it is necessary to explore aspects of the cultural support program and the childcare sector in Australia. Such action enables an exploration of how contradictions between these two sets of circumstances impact key stakeholders involved in the program.

In the long day care sector in Australia, diversity in service types and staff qualification levels is wide. For example, the *2006 Census of Child Care Services* reported that 61% of staff in long day care hold a range of formal qualifications (certificate level, diploma level and bachelor level) and only 12% of all qualified staff have university degrees (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2008). Furthermore, a wide range of curriculum frameworks is employed in services, sometimes developed and used exclusively by a particular childcare ‘chain’, and at other times a blend of established approaches is adapted to suit individual contexts and their clientele.

The assumption that CSWs have knowledge of this diverse sector can contrast with the prior professional experience they bring to the role. For example, the MDA Handbook (2007) states that it is *desirable* for all CSWs to hold or be studying for a relevant early

childhood qualification, or have prior experience of working in the childcare sector in some capacity. “Essential” pre-requisites include the ability to communicate, read and write in English, the ability “to speak a language other than English at a native level” and “a demonstrated strong interest in working with children” (MDA, 2007, p. 8). Cultural advisors are of great benefit to services including childcare contexts, that support children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (ARACY, 2008). However, limited knowledge and experience with a particular service type and the practices employed there can make the role of *building* capacity in staff difficult (Bredeson, 2003). For CSWs, this is compounded by salient features of diversity in service types, staff qualifications and philosophical approaches in the Australian childcare sector.

Adequate training of staff in an educational or related organisation is central to the capacity to achieve set directives for the benefit of key stakeholders (Bredeson, 2003). For the cultural support program, adequate training of CSWs is central to the achievement of successful placements for young children in childcare services. In reality, formal training in the program is virtually non-existent due to funding constraints, and it is not compulsory for CSWs to attend informal attempts to provide and share information about their role. As indicated by the MDA representative...

Officially, we don't have a training budget...there's been things that we do creatively to make sure [CSWs] get something...ideally, we run every couple of months what we call a learning circle or morning tea, but it's under a learning circle sort of format where we'll have a couple of identified topics...the first one we had was inclusion – ‘what is it and how can we support it in early childhood services?’ That actually ended up being a really big one; it went over two morning teas. (MDA Representative Interview 1; 05/09/08)

This comment shows how a lack of funding works to condense the key philosophical intent of the MDA's cultural support program – cultural inclusion – to a topic for discussion during a non-compulsory gathering of CSWs for 'morning tea'. The fact that the topic of inclusion ended up "a really big one" and extended over "two morning teas" is not surprising given its significance to the program. However, ad-hoc conditions for training deny workers sustained focus on essential topics and the opportunity to continually receive and contribute information critical to their professional role (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003).

For CSWs, the extent of training undertaken could compromise their perceptions about their personal capacity to build competence in others. This was evident in the comment by the MDA representative "...in my experience most [CSWs] go in [to services] very unsure and a little bit nervous" (MDA representative; 05/09/08). Expectations about the role of CSWs held by childcare staff may compound this issue and create contrasting perspectives about the role of the CSW in the childcare program, as explored later in this article.

For the cultural support program, a lack of funding for training purposes from state and federal government departments is symptomatic of the broad governmental response to the childcare sector within Australia. The 2006 OECD report highlighted the exceedingly low levels of government investment in the early childhood sector in Australia (0.45% of GDP), compared with other developed nations whose investments rate amongst the highest such as Denmark (2.1%) and Finland (1.1%). For organisations such as the MDA, there is a need to employ creative solutions to financial challenges that have a direct bearing on their core business. Creative solutions can ensure that learning and progress occur. However, they provide only a temporary response to larger issues and do not replace the need for appropriate levels of funding that enable a balanced and comprehensive approach to professional learning for staff (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett & Farmer, 2008).

Contradictions between circumstances surrounding the cultural support program and the childcare sector in Australia highlight concern about the assumption that CSWs have knowledge about the childcare sector and are trained to build capacity for cultural competence in childcare staff. The salient feature of diversity in the childcare sector can create difficulties for CSWs to gain knowledge about the range of services and the different structural and curricula approaches they employ. The approach to training also has implications for building cultural competence in others. Assumptions about prior experience and the training of CSWs cannot be separated from other assumptions in this article, particularly, assumptions about time and access to families.

Assumption 2: Time and access to families

The second assumption is that capacity building of childcare staff can be achieved in a limited time frame with limited access to the child's family. CSWs are allocated a set number of hours to enable staff to support the transition of children into services (MDA, 2007). The exact hours allocated to a CSW was not openly discussed by participants during the interviews, although the teacher, Meg, commented to the MDA representative that she had worked with a CSW "...for the past 10 weeks" during programmed group times (MDA Representative Interview 1; 05/09/08). Access to staff and families outside of set hours is not made available and extensions of time are uncommon, as indicated in the CSW's comment:

Well, so far with the children that I have been working with in the different centres, mine has been the number of sessions that they [the MDA] have given me. There have been no extensions so far. (CSW Interview 2; 18/09/08)

This comment signifies that variance in the level of support for individual staff and children and their families may not be accommodated in the scope of the cultural support program. This is despite recognition from the CSW that the amount of time

needed “...depends on the needs of the child. It depends on where I am and with whom I am connecting” (CSW Interview 2; 18/09/08). Limited support time may create further disadvantage because different experiences in being part of a minority group require flexible forms and levels of support from key services (ARACY, 2008). Inadequate time for support may work to further isolate some children and families, and disrupt attempts by professionals to create cohesion within and across key stakeholder groups. Childcare services are often the first point of contact for families who are socially isolated (OECD, 2006). Adequate assessment of needs and individualised support by professionals is crucial at this time so that families benefit immediately from contact with the service. As childcare centres provide families with primary networks for building quality social relationships within their community (OECD, 2006), it is also important that conditions of access and time frames allow for building trusting and mutually beneficial relationships.

For staff, constraints on time can hamper how they are best able to utilise the support of a CSW. The teacher noted the following in her reflection:

All discussion and planning of appropriate activities/ideas between the CSW and I was done during contact time with children. Therefore, it was often interrupted and disjointed. (Teacher Reflection; 09/09/08)

The teacher’s comment indicates that the quality of professional interactions with the CSW was compromised due to a lack of time to plan and discuss ideas outside of contact time with children. Sustained or systematic collaborations between professionals are recognised as an effective form of professional training and support (Bredeson, 2003). Professional support can be compromised when interactions are disjointed or frequently interrupted (Bredeson, 2003), as in the teacher’s comment above. For this reason, adequate time for educators and

CSWs to plan experiences and discuss responsibilities and reciprocal expectations prior to contact time with children is essential. This preparation can alleviate contrasting perspectives about roles and, as a result, unwarranted pressures that impact professional collaborations (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003).

Group activities provide prime opportunities for capacity building in terms of having two professionals working collaboratively to support each other and the child. These times may not, however, allow for interactions with the parent who is more likely to be at the centre in the early or latter parts of the day. The teacher indicated in one of the authors' conversations that she generally requested that the CSW visit the centre during group activities because this was when support was needed most. When reflecting on how information about a child's cultural background was shared between the parent and the CSW outside of these times, the teacher said "...they never had an opportunity to compare notes" [about their cultural backgrounds] (Teacher Reflection; 27/10/08). No contact between the parent and the CSW makes it impossible for a CSW to "facilitate effective linking with the family" (MDA, 2007, p. 8), which is one of the requirements of the CSW role. It also raises concerns about the assumption that a CSW can convey information about a child's culture to staff, particularly when access to the family is limited or non-existent and outside the control of the CSW.

The assumption that capacity building can be achieved in a limited time frame with limited access to the child's family disadvantages stakeholders at the centre. Limited access to families affects the quality of the information conveyed by CSWs and the extent to which they can facilitate interactions between staff and families and build competence in childcare staff. Issues of time and access influence how CSWs and staff perform their professional roles and, as a consequence, can disadvantage children and families they support.

Assumption 3: Individual Support

Practices related to the assumption that children benefit most from receiving support from CSWs individually in the child care context can also contribute to issues of disadvantage and isolation. This third assumption stems from the requirement that CSWs work with children individually; often separate from other children and activities occurring in the classroom. The CSW reflects on this situation in what follows:

The key aim of having the bi-cultural worker in that setting is for the interests of the child, yet for the worker to be effective in the larger context, to be competent and to be really effective with the child, the worker needs to be able to connect with the other children in the wider context because, after all, is the child not part and parcel of the wider context where the children are? He or she needs to be in contact with the other children within that wider context. (CSW Interview 2; 18/09/08)

When these comments are juxtaposed with the role of the CSW as one who "...according to the rules...is not supposed to be involved with all the other activities that the children are involved with that are brought about by the workers" [staff in the room] (CSW Interview 2; 18/09/08), questions arise about how children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can be supported through practices that isolate them from aspects of the program. Similarly, it is difficult to know how Anglo-Australian children can be supported to explore different epistemologies when peoples and practices from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are isolated from the curriculum (Hickling-Hudson, 2003). The two comments from the CSW reflect how the transition process can be positioned as an 'add-on' to the existing program. This emphasises differences between regular or mainstream activities and experiences for children from diverse backgrounds and suggests exclusion rather than

inclusion. Reducing or limiting social access can compound isolation because multicultural emphases are added to existing frameworks rather than reconstituting their form. In this sense, diversity becomes more of an 'issue' for programming than a resource (Kalantzis, 2005).

The rules governing the role of the CSW also contrasted with the perspectives of the teacher and the child's mother, both of whom align with the CSW's comment about the need for a more holistic approach to the child's inclusion in the program. From the mother's perspective, social interactions with peers are important for her child: "...a cultural support worker can support my child in several ways. In play time, to mediate for my daughter with the other children" (Mother Interview 3; 18/09/08 translated by the CSW). The mother also expressed a desire for "...changes in the play games area, possibly to have more of it [Chinese games], or add to it, to reinforce it, in relation to her daughter and the other children" (Mother Interview 3; 18/09/08 translated by the CSW). Meg, the teacher, noted in her reflections that she "...had thought about using [the CSW] as a cultural resource for the whole group. [She] wanted to plan and set up group activities, involving [the child] and [the CSW], embracing their culture" [in the program] (Teacher Reflection; 27/10/08). These comments show intent to use culture as a resource for building relationships between groups of people, thus creating opportunities for a mainstream childcare program to serve the interests of all children. Affirmations of a child's culture as a resource can work to elevate their positioning amongst peers (York, 1991). On an individual level, this outcome can translate to the development of a child's "positive self esteem" and "pride in their own language and culture" – two key focus areas of the MDA program (MDA, 2007, p. 8).

To achieve and maintain a focus on relationships between children in the transition process, key stakeholders at the centre are placed in a position to defy or be creative with rules governing the role of the CSW. This is evident in the CSW's admission that "...you

cannot not be involved [with other children]...I cannot say that I am only with this particular child and not with the others. That is just unrealistic” (CSW Interview 2; 18/09/08). As early childhood settings are spaces for social and cultural interactions, there is a need for all stakeholders to be critically aware of how rules or policies are constructed and how they guide approaches to culturally inclusive practices.

For the MDA, the policy guidelines must address the needs of stakeholders but also protect the interests of employees; a conundrum recognised by the CSW in the following comment:

Well, it [the guidelines] is supportive in the sense that they [the MDA] are trying to protect us from unnecessary liabilities and that is a good thing. Yet, on the larger end of it, it is not what they have, it is what they don't have that is limiting in the sense that we are working with human beings, not machines, not animals...[human beings] build relationships and interact, interact with them, to draw out the best they can offer. (CSW Interview 2; 18/09/08)

Here, the CSW acknowledges the need to be protected by policy and, against this, how exclusions in policy – what the guidelines don't have – limits his role. In the interview, the CSW did not openly describe what he thought was excluded from the MDA's guidelines, despite gentle probing from Meg, the interviewer. From the CSW's comments about how human beings engage with each other, we (the authors) surmise that exclusions relate to an holistic approach to interactions and the building of relationships between groups of people in the childcare context. For the cultural support program, relationships have the greatest impact on outcomes for the program and the stakeholders involved. Stakeholder needs can only be met, however, when there is greater flexibility in guidelines that set down approaches to inclusion for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The assumption that children benefit most from receiving individual support from CSWs is underpinned by practices that reflect approaches to diversity in mainstream educational curricula. Supporting and evaluating children individually has merit. However, greater scrutiny of the value of supporting children as individuals is required against more contemporary approaches to education that recognise a need to focus on relationships in and between groups of people as much as individual capacities (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). Children from diverse backgrounds do benefit significantly from regular interactions with persons who are a part of their culture or share cultural attributes (Diller & Moule, 2005). It is how these children and the CSWs who support them are positioned in the cultural support program and by childcare staff that requires careful attention.

Assumption 4: Experts in cultural knowledge?

As outsiders entering the childcare program with a particular skill base, CSWs may be positioned by staff as ‘experts’. This is possible given that a component of the CSW’s role is to *evaluate* the cultural competence of staff for the purpose of assisting them “to develop and maintain culturally and linguistically responsive programs” (MDA, 2007, p. 8). In this sense, authority can be attached to the external ‘expert’ who enters a childcare centre to determine the capacities and needs of those who work there.

In Australia, assumptions about CSWs as cultural ‘experts’ can be compounded by the cultural positioning of childcare educators. This is because the teaching service does not reflect the diversity of the population, which is predominantly white and monolingual (Reid, 2005). This demographic can work to affirm and uphold the construction of CSWs as cultural ‘experts’ because culture is often constructed in Western countries as ‘difference’. ‘Difference’ is positioned outside of what counts as rational in Western ideologies because difference is seen as anything that is not white and middle-class (Hollinsworth, 2006). When

difference is expressed in cultural terms, the identity of a group and its members is premised on a 'shared' culture, a 'common' identity (Burnett, 2004) making it possible that CSWs and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are seen as representatives of a singular cultural group. Such ideas indicate that a culture can be "defined and tidily packaged, and therefore 'known'" (Phillips, 2005, p. 2). A similar understanding was evident in the teacher's reflection:

I assumed [the CSW] would have extensive knowledge about [the child's] cultural heritage because he spoke the same language as she did. [The CSW] was assumed, by me, to be a cultural expert without the opportunity to find out about what cultural background he was supposed to be an expert on. (Teacher Reflection; 27/10/08)

A component of the role of the CSW is to convey information about the child's culture (MDA Representative Interview 1; 05/09/08). In this sense, the CSW is positioned more powerfully than the child and can become a cultural 'expert'; one who is able to disseminate a body of knowledge previously inaccessible to educators who seek to 'know' a child's culture in order to support transition into the program. How a child's cultural background comes to be 'known' is controlled largely by the CSW. Staff unable to converse directly with a child or their family rely heavily on an 'expert' (the CSW) to communicate cultural understanding. Relaying cultural knowledge in this manner can be somewhat unitary and could lead to unjust or dominant (hegemonic) interpretations of a child's cultural background. Such hegemonic interpretations are often based on cultural stereotypes.

Hegemonic views of culture fail to recognise individual experience and the full range of languages, practices, identities and politics employed within each cultural group (Diller & Moule, 2005). For the MDA, language provides one means by which to 'fit' a CSW with a

child. This shared attribute is often relied upon when organising placements due to the challenge of pairing CSWs with centres, made all the more difficult because of the "...range of abilities and different strengths and different skills" [of CSWs] (MDA Representative Interview 1; 05/09/08). Assumptions about language can affect how a culture is 'known'. Consider an example the teacher recalled in which she assumed that the CSW "...would simply be able to translate [a message] written in English into Mandarin. He informed me that he couldn't help because there are so many dialects of written Mandarin and he did not know which one [the parent] would understand" (Teacher Reflection; 27/10/08). Language barriers are a primary reason that centres access a CSW in order to support communication with a child and their family. For this reason, it is possible that staff, like the example of the teacher, could construct the role of CSWs as professional interpreters or translators, able to speak on behalf of a child and their family to convey cultural knowledge and understanding.

In the excerpt where the teacher asked the CSW to translate a message, there is an assumption that the CSW was qualified to interpret and guarantee accuracy in translation. This type of thing is of concern to the MDA, a professional body fully aware of implications in terms of incomplete or inaccurate translations of legal documents (i.e., an enrolment form or medication form), critical incidents (i.e., child injury or food allergies) and personal information passed between an educator and a parent (MDA Representative Interview 1; 05/09/08). The MDA Handbook (2007) states that "CSWs are not accredited translators and their primary role is not to act as interpreters" (p. 8). Confusion can occur, however, when the role of the CSW is explained as one who assists families "by supporting communication" and "providing support when completing documentation necessary for the provision of childcare" (p. 8). This ambiguity is expressed by the CSW in the explanation of his role as "...a sort of an unofficial translator of the language between the consumer of the service and the service provider" (CSW Interview 2; 18/09/08). Ambiguity in definitions of the role of CSWs can

create uncertainty and allow stakeholders to draw on interpretations they feel respond to their needs, regardless of the MDA's official line.

One interpretation of the role of the CSW that is linked to both the notion of a cultural 'expert' and cultural stereotypes is that the CSW is an individual carer for a child from a culturally or linguistically diverse background. In Interview 1, the MDA representative stated that it is often necessary to work directly with staff leaders about interpretations of the CSW guidelines because:

...a lot of times they kind of think the CSW is there to look after the child... [they think] 'I have a Sudanese child; I need that Sudanese worker to look after the Sudanese child'. And then the group leader goes and does everything else in the room and leaves that worker to look after that child, and that's certainly not the role. (MDA Representative Interview 1; 05/09/08)

This scenario has clear links with the assumption that children benefit most from receiving support individually from CSWs in the childcare program. The focus for analysis here is how interpretations of the CSW role, in conjunction with the concept of *culture*, inform practices that can be isolating for the child and the CSW. For example, this scenario provides insight into how particular interpretations of staff can contradict the philosophical intent of the CSW program – cultural inclusion. In this scenario, the intention is for the child to be excluded from the 'main' group because of the perceived need that the child requires specialist or 'expert' attention and care from a person from the same geographical or 'cultural' location. 'Expert' attention is expected to occur in isolation from the rest of the children and the educator. Thus, the child and the CSW are excluded from the regular program by meanings attached by staff to cultural 'difference'. By inference, staff in this scenario used cultural

‘difference’ as a means to exclude *themselves* from their primary role as educators of *all* children in their room.

Interpretations such as this one are not indicative of all childcare centres and staff. However, they require careful consideration in terms of the emphasis placed on the role of the CSW to support childcare staff to build capacity for cultural competence (MDA, 2007). The experiences detailed above can occur intentionally and unintentionally and are relative, in one sense, to the cultural positioning of the educator – in the Australian context, primarily white and monolingual. For childcare staff to build cultural competence, they require a strong sense of self, and an understanding of the ways in which they position and interact with young children and their families and other professionals on the basis of ethnicity and culture (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006).

The depth of critical awareness about one’s own cultural background influences how educators receive, interpret and action information provided by a CSW about children and their families. It also impacts the relationship between educators and the CSW, who are highly likely to have different cultural backgrounds. The educator in this study identified as white and monolingual. In her written reflections about the CSW’s request to bring in a special object on his last visit to the centre, the educator wrote:

I assumed that [the CSW] was going to bring in a multicultural artefact relevant to [the child’s] background, or his own. [The CSW] unwrapped his object to reveal a plastic Christmas tree... [He] talked to the group about moving from Canada and having to pack up all his things...this is how the Christmas tree came to Australia...Realising that my expectations of [the CSW] were too high, I asked

him if he could bring in an artefact which was significant to festival/ celebration from his family's cultural heritage¹. (Teacher Reflection; 09/09/08)

This reflection shows how a white teacher's interpretation of cultural 'difference' affected her assessment of the CSW's capacity to bring cultural knowledge and understanding to the program. This comment is also a reflection of political responses to cultural diversity in Australia that have focussed historically on tokenistic, celebratory aspects of cultural diversity rather than more genuine efforts for inclusion (Hollinsworth, 2006). The meanings attached to the teacher's reflection detract sharply from the notion of the CSW as the cultural 'expert'. While the concept of cultural 'expert' can be problematic, the influence of the teacher's own cultural background on her perceptions of the role and capacity of the CSW as a contributor to the program should not be understated; and neither should the influence of broader historical, social and political circumstances that impact the teacher's understandings about, and responses to, cultural diversity.

Assumptions about the positioning of CSWs and children in the childcare program link with the capacity of staff to understand how constructions of culture position people in particular ways. This understanding forms the basis of cultural competence (Diller & Moule, 2005). When childcare staff are supported to understand how insight into self and others, in

¹ In the final interview for the PhD study, the teacher, Meg, indicated that the reflexive process for data analysis in the teacher research study had "...been mind opening" and provided key moments for learning about culture. When asked to comment on her learning, Meg responded "...in terms of myself, I think it's the realisation that you, yourself, have a culture and that you're not the middle thing that everyone else revolves around and is different from" (Final Interview, Meg; 16/12/08). This response is typical of white individuals who have developed critical understanding about the influence of their own cultural background on their attitudes, practices and interactions with others (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006).

combination with broader societal perceptions, affects the ways in which they mediate cultural understandings through interactions with other professionals, children and families, all stakeholders at the centre level will benefit from involvement in the cultural support program.

Recommendations

The four assumptions outlined in this article were linked with outcomes of disadvantage and isolation; two issues shown to contribute to a lack of social cohesiveness within the childcare context and the wider community. From the analysis presented, we suggest that structural components of the cultural support program including policy and training, as well as responses to the program from childcare staff detracted from the key aim of the program – to support the development and maintenance of a culturally and linguistically responsive curriculum. On the basis of these conclusions, the following two recommendations are provided in the interests of all stakeholders:

- That policy for the cultural support program is more flexible in terms of time and access for stakeholders;
- That childcare staff and CSWs are afforded sustained professional learning opportunities focussed on building cultural competence.

The first recommendation calls for greater flexibility in policy for cultural support programs. Greater flexibility counters issues with time and access and allows for a more individualised, comprehensive approach to supporting stakeholders. Policies that are less prescriptive allow for more contextualised responses from professionals who action them, resulting generally in more equitable outcomes for those receiving professional support (Luke, Weir & Woods, 2008). To achieve more equitable outcomes, sound professional judgement is required. This

leads to the second recommendation for a more comprehensive approach to professional learning for cultural competence. The nature of this learning is incremental and requires a sustained approach centred on self-evaluation (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). Adequate funding and time are required, but more importantly, broad recognition that cultural competence is a professional imperative (Diller & Moule, 2005) for professionals working alongside each other and children and families from diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

Four key assumptions about the cultural support program and the role of CSWs were revealed in the data: a CSW's knowledge of the childcare sector and their capacity to build cultural competence in other professionals; time spent with families and staff during program implementation; the positioning of the child in the program; and constructions of the role of CSWs as cultural 'experts'. The discussion showed that these assumptions work together to reduce the effectiveness of the cultural support program, and outcomes for stakeholders and society more broadly.

The early childhood field is positioned well to reduce disadvantage and contribute to social cohesiveness by supporting educational attainment for young children from immigrant backgrounds. This small teacher research study has shown, however, that further research about approaches to professional learning and policy development in support programs is required to ensure that the educational needs of these children are met in childcare programs. This is critical if the aim is to build capacity for cultural competence in professionals who work alongside and support young children and families from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds as they transition to childcare programs.

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