

# Maribyrnong City Council Education and Care Research Project

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# Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

The opinions and viewpoints expressed in this document are those of the author and are in no way intended to imply endorsement of Maribyrnong City Council or the Education and Care Project Steering Group.

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# Background

The City of Maribyrnong is a culturally diverse and vibrant municipality experiencing significant population growth, residential development and demographic shifts. There is a projected increase of 30% for children under 12 in the next 15 years.

These changes create opportunities for social and economic development in the municipality. However, they also create a number of complex challenges for local residents in areas such as housing affordability, access to community services and facilities, and opportunities for employment and education.

In May 2015, Maribyrnong City Council (MCC) became signatories to the Victorian Child Friendly Cities and Communities Charter (the Charter). Commitment to the Charter ensures that a wide range of child friendly initiatives can be supported and implemented such as consultation with children and families. The outcomes of this research project will strengthen the council's ability to address the Charter principles.

Local families have access to a mix of early years education and care services, including kindergarten, long day care, occasional care and family day care. Anecdotally, there appears to be an information and understanding gap about the value of early years services in producing positive educational and social outcomes for children. This can have a particular impact on newly arrived and refugee families.

For a cohort of local families, particularly those in the settling phase for their housing, health and transport needs, to be able to navigate the complex early years system can be daunting. The Maribyrnong Early Years Alliance (MEYA) have identified this issue as having particular resonance for Maribyrnong City and have committed to supporting further exploration through data sharing and joint planning.

In recent times MCC has been active in implementing a range of strategies to better engage with local families, particularly those who are vulnerable to disadvantage. These actions include targeted outreach through the Bicultural Project and Central Registration System (CRS) Outreach Program. The aim of these actions is to provide families with the necessary information and assistance to use the CRS which is administered by MCC on behalf of local community managed education and care services.

Statistics provided by Department of Education and Training (DET) show kindergarten attendance for 2016 in the City of Maribyrnong was low at 85.0% compared to the state average of 96.2%. This was a significant drop to previous participation rates.

# Project Team

The Federation University Australia (FedUni) research team was led by Dr Tim Harrison and comprised Ms. Courtney O'Loughlan and Ms. Ashay Baget as Research Assistants.

## Dr Tim Harrison

Tim had a very hands on role in the project. He directed the research project, undertook a significant amount of fieldwork, liaised with the community and stakeholders, and wrote the final report. He has extensive experience in researching sensitive groups, such as low-SES communities, marginalised young people and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Tim has previously authored a research report on participation in kindergarten in Melton City in 2013, which also had an emphasis on CALD participation.

## Ms. Courtney O'Loughlan

Courtney has just submitted her Master of Arts by research for examination. The research project explored the issues surrounding school refusal in a rural municipality. Courtney has worked with Tim as a research assistant on a number of research projects over the past two years. Courtney provided support to the research team, arranged fieldwork schedules and undertook part of the demographic analysis.

## Ms. Ashay Baget

Ashay joined the FedUni team as the CALD Research Assistant. Ashay is a degree qualified youth worker, as well as having qualifications in children's services. Ashay has worked in a range of roles in CALD communities in the West of Melbourne. As CALD Research Assistant she worked with the research team to assist in sensitive and astute navigation of CALD communities and recruitment of participants in the research project.

# Project Methodology

The final research methodology used to undertake the research project was developed in conjunction with the Steering Group and was refined as the project progressed.

The research plan was based on the following key elements:

- A detailed demographic analysis of kindergarten and early childhood education participation in MCC, based on a replicable methodology
- A comprehensive literature analysis of national and international literature relating to kindergarten participation, with an emphasis on CALD groups
- A community engaged participatory action research model that provided understandings of CALD families' early childhood education and care choices

## Research Plan

Phase One: Understanding Kindergarten Participation Data and Literature Review.

This phase of the project provides a basis for understanding the issues surrounding kindergarten participation in the City of Maribyrnong. The data analysis serves to provide a shared 'baseline' understanding of participation rates and issues surrounding measurement of participation for researchers, industry stakeholders and community. This shared understanding informed, and was informed, by subsequent elements of the research project.

The understanding of the participation data attempted to include the following elements:

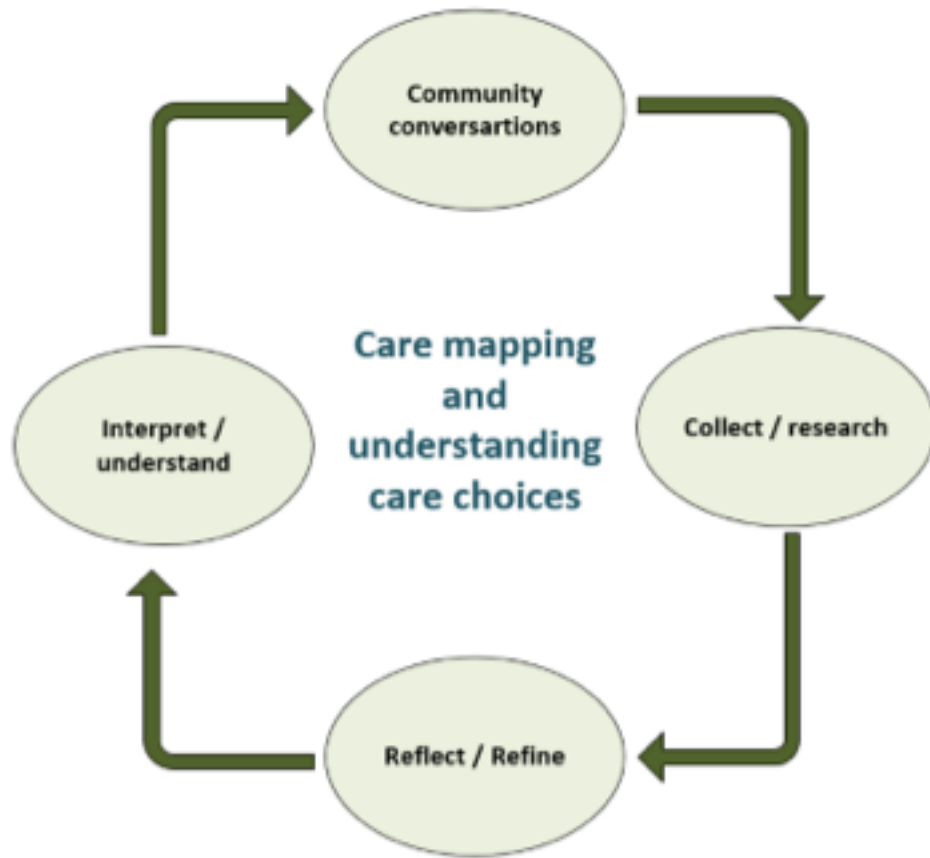
- Attempting to determine a 'working' participation rate. It is important to note that this may vary from the official participation rate
- A comparison of various data sets, including CRS data, seeking to understand / explain differences
- Identification of 'leakage' points, including the impact of families accessing alternate services in neighbouring municipalities, impacts of out-migration and active nonparticipation

As the project developed it became apparent that the data did not tell the whole story of kindergarten participation in Maribyrnong and that qualitative data provided better pointers to what was happening with the DET participation data.

A detailed literature review relating to key aspects of the project was undertaken to inform the research project and position it within broader social and cultural contexts. This literature review had an emphasis on CALD communities and relationships to early childhood services.

## Phase Two: Client mapping and understanding CALD care choices

This element of the research project utilised a community engaged participatory action research model. The diagram below demonstrates how this model was intended to work within the Education and Care Project.



**Community engaged participatory action research model**

### Community Conversations

The purpose of the community conversations was to engage the various communities of interest in the research project and to provide some initial data to begin to frame further more detailed investigations.

## Bicultural Team Conversation

An initial meeting was held with the Bicultural Team from MCC to scope out the key issues for CALD families. This provided key themes to be pursued through further interviews and focus groups

## CALD Conversations

In order to ensure that opportunity for the voices of CALD participants to be heard clearly in the initial research, a number of CALD conversations were facilitated, to ensure that there is an opportunity to participate and be heard. These sessions were supported by the locally employed CALD Research Assistant and targeted identified cultural groups within the municipality.

## Industry Forums

The preliminary findings of the CALD Conversations were brought to an industry forum representing a broad group of professionals from the early years sector in the municipality. This Forum was for briefing purposes and to engage in some early 'sense making' of the outcomes of the CALD Conversations processes.

## Steering Group Briefing

At the conclusion of the Community Conversations element of the research project, the Project Steering Group were briefed on the outcomes and key themes emerging from the initial Community Conversation phase.

The community and industry intelligence derived from the initial phase of the project informed the nature of the research questions to drive the next phase of the research project.

## Collect / Research

As the name would suggest the Collect / Research phase of the project relates to the more detailed research process. The direction of this process will be influenced by three key factors:

- the outcomes of the Community Conversations phase
- the advice of the project Steering Group
- the information needs of MCC

The data collection was undertaken by the research team by conducting one on one interviews. Participants in this phase of the research project were drawn from the community. There was an emphasis on engaging members of the CALD community, through the CALD Research Assistant and based on recommendations from MCC. The two forms of data collection were aimed at providing an opportunity for people to contribute more detailed data in a manner in which they were most comfortable.



## Reflect / Refine

The Reflect / Refine process represents the 'sense making' phase of the project where the researchers worked with the data collected in the first two phases and began to thematise it and draw some preliminary conclusions. This was developed into a format where it can be presented back to key stakeholder groups.

## Interpret / Understand

The final phase of the community engaged action research cycle, is where the thematised findings are reported back to the community, key early childhood industry stakeholders and the Steering Committee to ensure that the findings represent the key ideas communicated to the researchers. This in turn created an opportunity for the researchers to 'fact check' the findings of the action research. This reporting back will take the form of briefings to various stakeholder and community groups.

## Phase Three: Final Report

The final report provides a comprehensive written report which covers:

- A detailed analysis of the kindergarten participation data
- A summary of national and international literature relating to kindergarten participation, with an emphasis on CALD participation
- Reporting on the client based mapping and understandings of CALD participation derived from the community engaged participatory action research
- Recommendations for increasing participation rates in early childhood services

# Literature Review

The following material is presented as a review of the available literature relating to choices in education and care as they effect participation in preschool programs in the year before schooling. Given the context of the current study, there is a strong focus on families from CALD backgrounds with particular attention given to their experiences and perspectives in choosing, accessing and participating in early childhood education and care programs, such as kindergarten.

An initial review of the literature is an important step in the research process. The findings from broader state, national and international research studies provide points of comparison for the research project. Whilst commonalities between experiences are expected, there is also an expectation that the knowledge produced from this study will be novel in the sense that it is responsive to a specific place and provides a local understanding of the issues pertaining to kindergarten participation.

## Key ‘local’ studies

Presented below are three relatively recent ‘local’ studies which may assist in understanding kindergarten participation patterns in Maribyrnong City. A report published in 2004 by the Victorian Government titled *Breaking Cycles, Building Futures: promoting inclusion of vulnerable families in antenatal and universal early childhood services* (Department of Human Services, 2004), is also briefly discussed. Whilst it is now over a decade since its publication, it still clearly outlines some of the structural and specific barriers faced by families in accessing early childhood services, and assisted in providing some context for the current study.

## Breaking Cycles, Building Futures: Promoting inclusion of vulnerable families in antenatal and universal early childhood services (2004)

This report provides a review on the implementation of the first three stages of the Best Start project. Importantly, for our work in Maribyrnong City Council, the report outlines some findings related to barriers for ‘inclusion’ (although, the language utilised in this report will be ‘participation’).

Two broad sub-groupings of barriers were identified:

### Structural barriers:

- Knowledge of services
- Cost barriers
- Location and transport
- Service availability and eligibility
- Opening hours and appointment scheduling
- Service quality
- Cultural sensitivity, service user expectations and preferences
- Service provider attitudes and behaviours

## Barriers specific to children, their parents and their situation

- Children with additional needs
- Mobility and homelessness
- Impact of mental health problems and stress
- Service user attitudes and behaviours

## Melton Kindergarten Participation Project (2012)

This report looks at families' experiences of participating in kindergarten at a more local level, in Melton municipality on the urban fringe of Melbourne. Using qualitative data collection methods, in the form of critical ethnographic interviews, it heard the narratives of a small sample of families in the area, including a focus on CALD, indigenous and low-SES families. It builds upon the general understandings of barriers presented in the Breaking Cycles, Building Futures work, and identifies further barriers specific to this community. These were grouped under three inter-related groupings; social/systemic/experiential barriers.

- Transport barriers
- Kindergarten hours and locations
- Access to information about kindergarten
- Perception of costs
- Significant 'bad' experience
- Satisfaction with other child care
- Parental autonomy
- Perceived lack of detrimental impact of non-attendance.

## Increasing participation of vulnerable children in kindergarten: A framework for action in Brimbank (2011)

This study provides some interesting insights as it occurred in a neighbouring municipality using a similar research process of small, qualitative case studies and local approaches. The insights it provides into barriers to participating in kindergarten help to understand the landscape in Maribyrnong to some extent.

## Broader literature

Here, a broader selection of the research literature is presented in relation to the barriers to early childhood education and care for their children at a national and international level. Maribyrnong City Council is home to a diverse population of people from a range of backgrounds. The literature reviewed responds to this with a strong selection of research on CALD and migrant experiences of participating in kindergarten and other early education and care services.

As in many other countries around the world, Australia has seen recent government initiatives established which encourage families to enrol their 3- to 5- year old children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. In November 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education (NPECE). Under this agreement, all state and territory governments committed to achieving universal access to preschool by 2013 (Baxter & Hand 2013, p. 1).

Underpinning this is an acknowledgement that the early years in a child's life "set the neurological and biological pathways that can have life-long impacts on health, learning and behaviour" (ibid). Evidence from a growing body of research indicates that the benefits to children of participating in high quality early childhood education and care programs are more palpable for those children from higher relative disadvantage (O'Connor et. al., 2016; Page, 2016; Taylor, 2016).

The most up to date national statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) provide the following detail on preschool\* enrolments in the year prior to school entry:

*In 2016, there were 344,676 children aged 4 or 5 years old enrolled in a preschool program in Australia. Of these children, 280,646 (81%) were aged 4 years, while 64,027 (19%) were aged 5 years. It is estimated that there were 315,869 children aged 4 years [old] resident in Australia as at June 2016 and 305,378 children aged 5 years. This indicates that 89% of children aged 4 and 21% of children aged 5 were enrolled in preschool programs.*

*Of the total number of enrolled children aged 4 or 5 years, 43% were enrolled in a preschool, 51% were enrolled in a preschool program within a long day care (LDC) centre, and 6% of children were enrolled in programs across more than one provider type.*

What is clear from the research literature, from national enrolment patterns, and from the participation rates in kindergartens in individual local government areas, is that there is a differential level of access and/or participation in ECEC services, both nationally and internationally (Baxter & Hand, 2013; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). There is a growing body of research that examines what the barriers and facilitators are for families in accessing ECEC services, with corresponding growth in research which seeks to understand the experiences of structurally disadvantaged families/communities (Grace, Bowes and Elcombe, 2014; Dolan & Sherlock, 2010; Riggs et. al., 2012; New, Guilfoyle and Harman, 2015; Grace, Walsh and Baird, 2016).

Research similar in scope and purpose to this project talk about the emergence of "locally responsive or place-based approaches to intractable issues that are impacting on children's early experiences...as policy makers and service providers grapple with the traditional siloed service delivery models within health, education and welfare, particularly in places of complex need and high disadvantage" (Hopkins, Lorains, Issaka and Podbury, 2014, p. 2).

\*Nationally preschool is a term that refers to enrolment in kindergarten services/program. Some states use preschool, while others use kindergarten.

A 2016 study, using Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data across 2008 and 2011, charted retrospective preschool attendance levels in the 2008 and 2011 cohorts of prep students. The study found that no significant increase in kindergarten attendance occurred over this time, with attendance rates remaining stable nationally. Further, at a subpopulation level, children from CALD backgrounds, indigenous children and children living in disadvantaged areas all had a lower chance of attending preschool in the year before school. They state: “There are a myriad of factors that influence parents’ decision to enrol their child in preschool, including parental beliefs and preferences, child characteristics, and cultural values” (p. 35), a finding supported in other studies (Neilsen-Hewitt et. al., 2014).

In 2011, a project was undertaken that involved talking to Chin families (from Burma) in western metropolitan suburbs of Melbourne, The Early Childhood Access and Participation Project (Foundation House, 2011). The dialogue between service providers and users identified the ways that “culture can influence access to early childhood services” (p. 5) as well as discussing practices that might ‘discourage’ access. The report spoke about the ways that service use may not be taken up by Chin communities where “childcare services may feel culturally unsafe to communities which have a communal and family approach to caring for children” (p. 9). In addition, other research has found that 18.4% of refugee/CALD parents believed the first five years were ‘not very important for their child’s future learning’ (Winter & Luddy, 2010, p 18). By comparison, just 3.7% of other parents felt this to be true.

Other insights from this project, regarding Chin families’ participation in ECEC services was the notion that newly arrived and resettling families’ may not have adequate or consistent access to information about kindergarten. MCH nurses are important channels to provide this information, but in communities where participation rates in this (MCH) service were low or under-utilised such as for Chin families’ this mechanism has its short-comings, with many families’ not receiving this information at all. This is supported by research conducted in Brimbank (Burchell, 2011) and other research on patterns of MCH usage in migrant communities (Renzaho and Oldroyd, 2013; Riggs et. al. 2012).

Language and cultural aspects play a very large role in whether CALD families, newly arrived or not, participate in ECEC services (Hopkins et. al. 2014; Dolan & Sherlock, 2010; Riggs et. al., 2012; Greenberg, Adams & Michie, 2016; Adams & McDaniel, 2012). Families who participated in other qualitative research on ECEC access and usage stressed the need to be with people of a similar cultural background as themselves (Hopkins et. al. 2014). This was mediated where ECEC services, supported by local councils, utilised bicultural/bilingual workers to overcome some of the specific communication and cultural barriers to accessing services (Riggs et. al. 2012).

Whilst there has been an increase in interpreter services and multilingual supports within the Australia service provision model over the last several decades, recent research which talks to CALD service users reports that “access to interpreters remains problematic in settings such as health education and care” (Hopkins et. al., 2014, p. 8). Linked to this is the sense of ‘shame’ that may attach to having low English language skills

Another cultural consideration is the emotional dimensions of migrant mothers' involvement in their children's education, including kindergarten in the year before school. Research conducted with Muslim Iraqi mothers found that "reserves of cultural and emotional capital can be both consolidated and diminished through the process of migration" (Al-deen & Windle, 2017, p. 110) with some women left feeling like 'bad mothers' if they perceive themselves as being unable to support their children's educational participation. Here, it is not only the child who benefits from strong connections to ECEC services, but the wider family as well.

The issue of cost, although often not cited as a significant barrier to their children attending ECEC services, does arise as a barrier to full participation in kindergarten programs (Burchell 2011; Grace & Bowes, 2010; Dolan & Sherlock, 2010). This becomes more of an issue where cost intersects with visa status. The variability of migration status, such as citizenship eligibility and permanent vs. temporary visa status created some significant barriers for some families. This was especially so for people who had come to Australia on student visas, or whose spouse had (Hopkins et. al. 2014).

Transportation, and lack of reliable and convenient transportation, is another barrier that frequently arises in the research literature. In Brimbank (Burchell, 2011) notes that when kindergarten services are not within comfortable walking distance from the place of residence, many families experiencing structural disadvantage "may lack motivation, ability or resources to sustain their child's participation in kindergarten in another neighbourhood" (p. 10). Grace and Bowes (2010) raise the issue of the inflexibility of starting times at a lot of kindergarten services as also impacting on families' who rely on public transport usage to consistently participate (i.e. attend) kindergarten.

This inflexibility of starting times, and the perceived shortness of the sessions (especially for the three year old kindergarten programs) was also commonly cited as a barrier to participation. The impacts grew where one, or both parents were working (Baxter & Hand, 2013).

# Demographic and Data Analysis

This project is driven by Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) data on kindergarten participation, which indicates that kindergarten participation in Maribyrnong City is below state average. It should be noted that the apparent decline in rates of participation in Maribyrnong City are mirrored in the decline in average state-wide participation rates.

The key data of concern is provided in the table below:

	Maribyrnong by year			State average 2015	State average 2016
	2014	2015	2016		
Participation rate	89.6%	87.5%	85.0%	98.1%	96.2%

At the beginning of this project there was a sense that the variance between Maribyrnong City participation and the state average could be explained, at least in part, by a statistical error or anomaly. It was then hoped that some form of 'correction' could be made to the data to create a 'working' rate of kindergarten attendance that was closer to the state average.

As the project progressed the idea that something was 'wrong' with the DET data that could be 'corrected' was replaced by an understanding of the complexity of measuring the kindergarten participation rate in Maribyrnong City. The lower official (DET) participation rate was a combination of a range of factors which rendered simple interpretations of this single measure somewhat meaningless.

## Measuring underlying Year Before School (YBS) population

The table below indicates the movement in kindergarten participation data at SA2 level for Maribyrnong City between 2015 and 2016. Braybrook, Maribyrnong (SA2), West Footscray - Tottenham and Seddon-Kingsville showed significant differences between the two years. It is important to note that DET casts doubt over the reliability of SA2 level data due to potential errors in estimating small populations.

SA2 (suburb)	2015	2016
Braybrook^	93.7%	81.2%
Footscray	73.2%	75.6%
Maribyrnong^	80.0%	87.7%
Seddon-Kingsville^	92.9%	77.0%
West Footscray – Tottenham^	91.4%	102.4%
Yarraville	89.8%	87.5%

^suburbs with significant variation in kindergarten participation rates between 2015 and 2016.

This is even more pronounced where rural municipalities with very small populations are examined. It is important to note that YBS populations in both municipalities is less than 100. It does however demonstrate the pronounced impact that variation in measurement of YBS population can have on official statistics.

Municipality	2015 Participation	2016 Participation
West Wimmera	70.5%	102.5%
Yarriambiak	84.0%	114.7%

There is always some contention around measurement and estimation of population data, depending methodology and sampling employed. This is demonstrated examining the following additional data, drawn directly from the DET data sheets for 2015 and 2016.

Year	Estimated YBS Population
2015 (ABS)	1092
2016	1157
2017 (ID)	1052
2018 (ID)	998

(DET 2015; DET 2016a)

The ID estimates of population for 2017 and 2018 are significantly less than the ABS provided data for 2016. Maribyrnong City data indicates sustained, significant increases in YBS population for the period between 2016 and 2041.

It is fair to assume that the lower official participation rate for Maribyrnong City is in some way attributable to difficulty in accurately estimating the underlying YBS population in the municipality. It is not possible within the scope of this research project to attempt to provide estimates closer to actual YBS population, due in part to population shifts and boundary crossing identified in the qualitative component of this study.

This position is supported by a recent Victorian auditor General’s Report (2017) which states, ‘DET can overstate or understate kindergarten participation data because ABS population estimates of specific age groups in small areas and areas experiencing rapid population growth are less accurate. This could result in participation being over 100 per cent, as shown in Figure 3K. Further, the data only captures attendance at a point in time, rather than ongoing attendance’.

## AEDC

The AEDC provides data relating to a significant number of elements relating to early childhood development. It is important to note that AEDC data is collected once a child reaches the first year of primary school and in the case of 2015 represents a sample of 970 children. This data provides a clear picture that multiple mechanism for



education and care of pre-school aged children are used by families in Maribyrnong City. From the data provided it is also clear that a number of families utilise multiple ways of managing education and care responsibilities for young children. Of more significance it is not possible from this data to understand how many families only use playgroup, long day care, family day care, and family care, such as grandparents or other relatives, or nannies rather than a combination of those mechanisms and kindergarten care.

Early education	2012 (%)	2015(%)
Playgroup	16.9	12.0
Day Care	18.7	13.0
Preschool or kindergarten	81.6	89.4
Family Day Care	2.5	2.0
Grandparent	10.0	3.5
Other relative	4.5	1.0
Nanny	1.1	1.2
Other	3.0	0.9

## Seeking to understand the data

It has been earlier indicated that this study does not seek to refute the DET data on kindergarten participation, rather explain it in a context that has meaning for the work of Maribyrnong City. The table below provides a summary of the key data provided by DET in its reporting on Maribyrnong City.

	Maribyrnong 2015	Maribyrnong 2016
Number of children attending first year kindergarten	955	983
Estimated YBS population	1 092	1157
% Participation rate	87.5%	85.0%
Variance from Vic average	10.6%	11.2%
Number of children travelling out to access kindergarten services	164	181

To provide some perspective on the scale of the issue, to improve the kindergarten participation rate by 1% in 2016 required an additional 12 children to be enrolled. For example the difference between 85% and 86% kindergarten participation in Maribyrnong City is an enrolment of 12 children. It does not take identification of the absence of very many children from kindergarten to begin to understand the participation data within the context of Maribyrnong City.

In football terms, we can start to chase some 'one percenters' to try to explain the variation between Maribyrnong City's performance and the state average, in part at least. The source of these 'one percenters' began to become clear in the qualitative element of the study, which is discussed in the next two sections of the study. The 'one percenters' will be revisited after discussion of the qualitative data.

# Research Process: Qualitative Data Collection

There was a significant amount of qualitative data collected as part of this project. This data was collected in a range of different ways based on the initial research methodology of Interviews and Focus Groups. Each of the data collection opportunities is briefly mentioned below.

## MEYA Forum

The research team presented to the MEYA forum at the commencement of the Education and Care Project. There were in excess of 30 Maribyrnong Early Years stakeholders present. The Project was introduced and some discussion held around issues to be explored and possible reasons for the lower than average kindergarten participation rate in Maribyrnong City were workshopped.

## Bicultural Team focus group

Early in the Community Conversation phase of the project there was a focus group held with five MCC Bicultural Educators and 3 Bilingual Storytellers, making up the Bicultural Team employed by Early Years at MCC. The cultural backgrounds of the team are representative of the local communities residing in Maribyrnong City.

## CALD Playgroup interviews/focus groups

Interviews and focus groups were undertaken with five CALD playgroups involving the following participants:

Playgroup One	8
Playgroup Two	7
Playgroup Three	6
Playgroup Four	6
Playgroup Five	7

## Service Providers

Interviews were held with seven service providers representing sessional kindergarten and long day care services in suburbs with higher and lower kindergarten participation rates.

## CALD Families

In an attempt to reach families who had made choices other than kindergarten for their children we asked the Bicultural Team to undertake some interviews in their communities of parents not associated with CALD playgroups or directly associated with MCC services. There were 24 families interviewed in this process.

# Telephone interviews

Some families whose children were engaged in kindergarten programs were interviewed via telephone in order to provide a ‘mainstream’ family voice to the project. There were nine families interviewed by telephone.

# Playgroup Facilitators

There were nine Playgroup Facilitators and Bicultural Team Members interviewed for the project. This was very beneficial as they have contact with a significant number of families and were able to provide some insights based on this contact.

The following summary identifies the numbers of families or direct care providers who were interviewed or involved in a focus group in undertaking this project. The MEYA Forum participants were not included in the totals as they were involved in a large group workshop rather than individual interviews or small focus groups

MEYA Forum	>30
Bicultural Worker Focus Group	8
CALD Playgroup families	34
Kindergarten / Day care providers	7
CALD families	24
Telephone Interviews	9
Playgroup facilitators	9
Total Participants	91

It is important to note that there was a very high number of families from CALD communities engaged in this research project. This was a deliberate strategy adopted by the researchers and the Project Steering Group. The rationale for this decision was based on the cultural diversity of Maribyrnong overall and the fact that lower rates of kindergarten attendance is evident in suburbs with greater cultural diversity and potentially lower socioeconomic status.

# Emergent Themes

The data collected yielded a very broad range of opinion about kindergarten, its advantages and access issues. It is important to note that families who engaged with the research project all either sent their children to four-year old kindergarten programs or intended to send their children when they reached the appropriate age. There were however a number of pointers to why families may make the choice not to send their children to kindergarten. Families were also quite open about the things that make it difficult for them as a family to engage with kindergarten programs.

For the purposes of this discussion distinctions between sessional kindergarten and long day care based kindergarten programs will not be made, unless specifically referred to.

## Three-year old kindergarten

A significant number of families participating in the research project made the decision not to enrol their children in three-year old kindergarten programs. This was generally for four key reasons:

- It was viewed as expensive and families did not perceive value for money
- People from their family or cultural community did not send their children to three-year old kindergarten
- Families saw value in other programs, such as those run by Council, to engage young children
- In some cases short session times caused too much disruption to family routines

Where families did send children to three-year old kindergarten it was generally because families or members of their cultural community sent their children as well and had good experiences. Families saw social and educational benefits for their children in the experience. It is important to note that this benefit was most often expressed in terms of social development.

## High participation suburbs

Suburbs with higher participation such as Maribyrnong, Yarraville and West Footscray tended to be gentrifying areas of the municipality, where parents possessed higher levels of social resources to deploy in navigating kindergarten participation for their children.

Discussions with families and service providers in these areas indicated high levels of parental involvement in making choices around their children's education and care, levels of comfort in the kindergarten or child care centre environment and active engagement in choice around modes of care that suit family circumstances and desires.

The patterns of engagement, comfort and familiarity exhibited matched those experienced by the majority of middle Australia. The higher rates of participation are relatively easy to explain as they mirror the experience

of many other people in similar suburbs across Melbourne. For this reason this study has focussed more on the experience of the low participation suburbs to explain the lower overall rates of kindergarten attendance in Maribyrnong City.

There was however one significant issue identified by sector professionals and some families, which pertained to high participation suburbs. Among more affluent and socially connected families there were strong preferences for particular kindergartens and child care settings to the exclusion of other options. Some centres had significant waiting lists while others had vacancies. Some parents were prepared to find alternative care arrangements and wait until a place became available in higher status centres. Depending on how long parents were prepared to wait this behaviour could potentially lead to children missing a substantial part of the kindergarten year.

## Low participation suburbs

The suburbs with lower participation rates are those with higher cultural diversity and correspondingly lower socio-economic status. These are suburbs such as Footscray. This is not intended to cast the study in a 'social deficit' light – it is a reflection of the realities of participation. It is reasonable to see that lower participation in kindergarten programs in Maribyrnong may be a function of two factors:

- Cultural understandings of family, education and care
- Socio-economic / cultural barriers to participation

This is again supported by the Victorian Auditor General's Office report (2017), which states:

*There is also untapped demand when families of kindergarten-age children do not actively seek kindergarten services for a variety of reasons, including cultural beliefs or practices, or families not knowing about the services available.*

## Cultural understandings of family, education and care

Seeking to discuss lower kindergarten engagement through the lens of cultural understandings of family, education and care does in no way suggest that parents from CALD backgrounds are not interested in understanding kindergarten as an important element in the education and care of their children.

As previously noted, almost every family interviewed as part of this research project indicated that their child had attended kindergarten, was currently attending or they had concrete intentions to send younger children to four-year old kindergarten in some form.

Families interviewed were generally able to articulate sources of information about four-year old kindergarten and local processes, such as CRS, for application and enrolment. Sources of information about kindergarten indicated by families are as follows:

- Family
- Friends / cultural community
- Immigration case workers
- Playgroup
- MCH
- Immunisation programs

It is very important to note that most families interviewed indicated family, friends and their cultural community as key source of information about kindergarten.

Most families interviewed were able to identify clear reasons why kindergarten was good for their children and their family. These tended to be based on ease and access to appropriate child care and the educational and social aspects of kindergarten for their child. The choice of mode of kindergarten attendance is certainly a balance between the needs of the child and the practicalities of family life. There is a sense that families made strategic choices about mode of kindergarten attendance.

Interviews with families did identify a range of factors which may provide insight into lower participation rates in Maribyrnong City. These are discussed below:

## Social Isolation

Although few research participants spoke directly about social isolation being a factor in kindergarten non-attendance, it was an issue raised in the focus group with Bicultural Educators. Given that a significant number of research participants indicated that family, friends and cultural community were key sources of information about kindergarten, it is a natural conclusion that socially isolated families will have little access to information about access to kindergarten. Some parents of younger children in playgroups indicated, for example, that they had little or no idea about kindergarten, legal requirements of 'schooling' or access. These are knowledge gaps that are ultimately filled by social engagement.

## Student populations

A number of families arrive in Maribyrnong on student visas seeking reasonably priced rental accommodation close to educational institutions. People on student visa are unable to receive subsidised access to kindergarten places meaning that for students kindergarten may be a cost prohibitive option for education and care. This leads to families seeking alternate, low-cost, more highly government subsidised options.

## Aspirational populations - Move West!

In an almost archetypal 'Australian' way the desire for home ownership leads to mobility in the CALD community of Maribyrnong. There was significant discussion of a move to the outer western fringe of Melbourne in search of affordable housing as families became established. This leads to potential difficulty in 'counting' the number of YBS children in Maribyrnong. Children who are 'counted' in population data at two years old as living in Footscray may be living in Tarneit in the YBS. Leading to a 'missing' or non-participating child in Maribyrnong.

## Alternative models of child care

Alternative models of child-care are often required to meet a range of family needs. There were two key drivers of accessing alternative child care models:

- **Economic:** this was based on a perception that kindergarten was an expensive care model for children and that other models provided more cost-effective care.
- **Cultural Safety:** A number of research participants spoke about CALD families seeking 'cultural safety' in making education and care decisions. This idea of 'cultural safety' includes seeking care options where other people from their cultural group feel comfortable or that are run or facilitated by people from their cultural group. The former category may of course be found in mainstream kindergarten settings in some cases, whereas the latter may require connection with alternative provision, family day care may provide an example of this.

There were a number of alternative models of child care identified through the research process:

- **Family based care (onshore):** pre-compulsory school education and care may be undertaken within the immediate or extended family locally
- **Family based care (offshore):** CALD families may send their children to their country of origin to be cared for by immediate or extended family. This care is for extended periods of months or years, not a short break during the year.
- **'Culturally safe' FDC:** FDC programs may be run by operators from the family's cultural community, where families feel 'cultural safety'
- **'Grey area' 'culturally safe' FDC:** These may be FDC like businesses run by people from a family's cultural community which provide cost effective 'culturally safe' child care options
- **Mainstream options outside Maribyrnong's boundaries:** This may be based on a number of families from a cultural community having long term associations with a particular service provider, a staff member from the cultural community or a bicultural worker engaged in the space creating a sense of 'cultural safety' at the particular location.

## Socio-economic / cultural barriers to participation

There are some socio-economic and cultural barriers to participation in kindergarten programs that were mentioned in interviews with families, the Bicultural Team and service providers. In general families interviewed were able to overcome these barriers and provide an opportunity for their children to engage in a kindergarten program.

### Transport

Transport was quite widely discussed within the context of barriers to participation. A number of families indicated that they chose a service based on proximity to their home, particularly if this avoided the need to access public transport or private motor vehicle. A number of families indicated that they had one vehicle which was generally used for the work commute by one parent. Public transport was often seen as cumbersome and not very direct.

### Cost

Cost or perceived cost of kindergarten programs can often be a barrier to participation. For families on a student visa for example cost is prohibitive and may actively discourage participation. Other families mentioned concern over cost of places in kindergarten programs as a cause of concern. Generally information from family, cultural or institutional sources ameliorated the concern. For families without social resources the perception of cost may remain a potential barrier to participation.

### Cultural / Linguistic Barriers

The discussion above regarding 'cultural comfort' relates to barriers based on cultural and linguistic issues. Several parents, members of the Bicultural Team and service providers indicated that linguistic barriers among parents made the experience of communication and social interaction around drop-off/pick-up times. Language barriers can also provide significant barriers to accessing information about kindergarten options for families, particularly those who are socially isolated.



# Understanding Kindergarten Participation in Maribyrnong City

Despite the initial desires of the researchers to provide Maribyrnong City with a very elegantly crafted model of explaining the participation gap between Maribyrnong City and the state average, we have delivered a somewhat messy, imprecise but qualitatively rich understanding of the ‘problem’. It is not possible to say from the outcomes of this study that the DET data on kindergarten participation is wrong. It is possible for Maribyrnong City to understand the complexity surrounding kindergarten participation within the municipality. This is achieved through understanding two elements:

- Difficulty in estimating the YBS population for Maribyrnong City
- The ‘one percenters’ which emerged through the qualitative study

## Estimating the YBS population

The issues generally related to estimation of the YBS population were discussed in the section on Demographics and Data Analysis earlier in this report.

There is one issue that potentially affects YBS population in Maribyrnong City and that is ‘aspirational’ population movement among families moving from Maribyrnong City to seek affordable housing in suburbs in the outer west of Melbourne. The qualitative study identified this is a significant movement among new arrival families having established permanent residency.

This leads to potential difficulty in ‘counting’ the number of YBS children in Maribyrnong. Children who are ‘counted’ in population data at two years old as living in Footscray, for example, may be living in Tarneit in the YBS. Leading to a ‘missing’ or non-participating child in Maribyrnong and an ‘extra’ participating child in Wyndham City.

This population flow is difficult to measure and forms part of the underlying ‘problem’ of kindergarten participation in Maribyrnong City.

## The ‘one percenters’

The qualitative element of the study provided a number of very interesting insights into provision of education and care in Maribyrnong City relating to the very diverse Maribyrnong City CALD community. Models of care adopted by the CALD community in Maribyrnong were driven by issues of cost effectiveness, cultural safety and capacity of the family to assist in child care, both on and off-shore. These elements of the education and care model are discussed fully in the Emergent Themes section of this report.

These elements of education and care of children, particularly related to CALD communities, provides a means of understanding the difference in participation rates between Maribyrnong City and the state average. These differences are not readily quantified and it is beyond the scope of this study to explore how these may be measured, if this is even practicable in some cases.

Instead the discussion of the impacts of these elements of education and care are seen in terms of 12 children equating to increasing participation in Maribyrnong City by one percent or the 'one percenters'. This is developed as a series of questions below:

Is it feasible that at least 12 children in Maribyrnong (or one percent) are:

- Being solely cared for by immediate or extended family in Maribyrnong or neighbouring municipalities?
- Being solely cared for by immediate or extended family offshore for lengthy periods of time?
- Being cared for in a FDC program where parents do not opt for Kindergarten attendance?
- Being cared for in a 'grey FDC' program based on a desire for cost effective, culturally safe care?
- Not engaged in kindergarten due to social / cultural isolation of family, resulting in informational barriers?
- Not engaged in kindergarten based on family transport issues, including one vehicle families and public transport difficulties?
- Not engaging in kindergarten based on a family incapacity to pay (where parents may be on student visas) or perceived high cost of kindergarten attendance?

These questions do not have precise answers, nor answers that are readily attainable, although Yes is a feasible response. They do provide a sense of the possibility that a significant proportion of the difference between Maribyrnong City's participation rate and the state average can be 'explained' through the issue raised by participants in the qualitative component of the research project. Each of the issues was raised by a significant number of participants in the study meaning that it is likely that they represent significant community issues.

# Recommendations

Given the complexity of the potential reasons for lower participation rates in Maribyrnong City it is difficult to provide a constructive set of recommendations to MCC. For example, it is difficult to point to a model of education and care which overcomes the need to for a family to utilise family networks in their home country for childcare, or one which makes kindergarten affordable to international students or prevents aspirational families seeking affordable home ownership in the outer-West. It is important to understand the ‘one percenters’ but easily implemented solutions too many of them are not readily attainable. Education and Care participation in Maribyrnong City is, in many ways, as a ‘wicked’ problem.

Recommendations have been made in three areas which may support families to make choices around education and care. These are around the following areas:

- Communication channels
- Role and impact of Bicultural Educators
- Importance of playgroups in social connection

## Communication channels

The qualitative study indicated that CALD families sought information about education and care options from the following sources:

- Family
- Friends / cultural community
- Immigration case workers
- Playgroups
- MCH
- Immunisation programs

There is a need to provide access to information about education and care options, including supporting access to the CRS, in Maribyrnong City though these conduits particularly Immigration Case Workers, MCH, Playgroups and Immunisation programs.

## RECOMMENDATION ONE

That Maribyrnong City develop approaches to utilising the Maternal and Child Health and Immunisation Programs as key mechanisms for promoting education and care options to families, from initial contact with families. This includes assistance and support in accessing the CRS.

## RECOMMENDATION TWO

That Maribyrnong City develop strong professional links with Immigration Case Workers with a view to enhancing their role in assisting CALD families in navigating education and care options and accessing the CRS.

### Bicultural Team

One of the very strong impressions left on researchers in undertaking this project was the importance of Bicultural Educators, both individually and as a team, in assisting CALD families in navigating the complexities of education and care options. They have very strong community connections across a very diverse community, have a capacity to understand institutional issues and 'translate' these for the families that they work with and have very clear understandings of cultural safety and 'what is really going on' in the CALD community.

## RECOMMENDATION THREE

That Maribyrnong City continue to support the Bicultural Educator program in supporting CALD families. It is of particular importance in navigating education and care options, providing accurate information about cost and accessing the CRS.

### Playgroups

It is very clear that supported playgroups provide an excellent model in working with CALD families to build social connection and engage families with a range of Council services. Based on interviews it is clear that playgroups are often the first point of contact between newly arrived families and the broader community. Playgroups provide an excellent conduit of information regarding education and care options and provide assistance in navigating the CRS.

Playgroups in Maribyrnong City are generally funded and managed through MEYA partners. It is acknowledged that Federal Government funding for playgroups has reduced in recent years and that their provision is increasingly difficult for service providers on this basis. The Indian cultural playgroup is supported through Council grant funding. DET funds five playgroups, run by MCC, which have very specific attendance criteria.

## RECOMMENDATION FOUR

That Maribyrnong City continues to support existing supported playgroups and consider establishing more playgroups, linked to the Bicultural Team, to support a broader array of cultural groups.

## RECOMMENDATION FIVE

That Maribyrnong City build more comprehensive links between key services, MCH, Immunisation and CRS, including direct service delivery and training for playgroup facilitators in services provided.

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