Evaluation of the Supporting Parents - Developing Children Project

Literature Review

The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute and Researching Futures

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Supporting Parents - Developing Children

Supporting Parents - Developing Children: A focus on Literacy, Language, and Learning is a three year project that aims to connect culturally and linguistically diverse families with early years learning and provide opportunities for training and employment for parents. The objectives of the Supporting Parents - Developing Children project are to:

- Increase participation of culturally and linguistically diverse families in innovative early years development and engagement programs and services focused on literacy, language, and learning.
- Foster social cohesion through the engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse families in early years service programs.
- Build a partnership approach to strengthening social cohesion in southern Hume.
- Create training and learning pathways for culturally and linguistically diverse parents and carers participating in southern Hume City.

The project is coordinated by Hume City Council and funded by:

- The Scanlon Foundation
- Australian Government
    - Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations
    - Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
    - Department of Human Services (CRS)
    - Department of Immigration and Citizenship (Adult Migrant English Program)
- Victorian Government
    - Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
    - Department of Premier and Cabinet
    - Victorian Multicultural Commission.

Supporting Parents - Developing Children is comprised of the following four programs:

1. Flexible Mother and Child English Language
2. Bilingual Storytime
3. Playgroup Enhancement
4. Supporting Early Years Hubs.

All four programs in the Supporting Parents Developing Children project take place in Southern Hume. Southern Hume is an area within the Hume City Council region of northern metropolitan Victoria, Australia and includes the suburbs of Broadmeadows, Campbellfield, Coolaroo, Dallas, Jacana, and Meadow Heights.

Evaluation of the Supporting Parents - Developing Children Project

The Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) Education Institute in collaboration with consulting firm Researching Futures were engaged in late 2011 to conduct an evaluation of the Supporting Parents - Developing Children project. A brief introduction to each of these organisations is provided below.

The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute

The RCH Education Institute works in collaboration with young people, families, schools, and education and health professionals to ensure that children and young people continue to engage in learning and remain connected to their school community throughout their health journey. The work of the RCH Education Institute is enabled by funding from the Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The goal of the RCH Education Institute is to build the knowledge base of health and education professionals and the broader community through a strong research agenda, a comprehensive interdisciplinary professional learning program and targeted education support services for children and young people and their families.

The RCH Education Institute provides both an evidence base and practical application to create learning environments across the hospital where patients are engaged, interested and curious, just as they would be if they were at school. RCH teachers create vibrant learning spaces and individualised learning opportunities to assist children and young people in their growth and development as learners. These teachers also provide advice about educational issues to children and young people and their families in a range of specialist clinics.

The RCH Education Institute research program focuses broadly on the learning, development and wellbeing of children and young people in out-of-school settings such as hospitals, and in schools and the community. Our interest is in translating this evidence for use in policy, programs and day-to-day practice, with the ultimate aim of improving educational outcomes and the overall wellbeing of children and young people.

Researching Futures

Researching Futures is a research agency that has been designed and positioned to respond to the changing social, economic and political environments of regional Australia. Researching Futures has undertaken projects across these environments informing policy development and new practices from an unequivocal and grounded focus on and within one of the most representative Australian provinces – the region of Greater Geelong.

Researching Futures is about capability development. Capability development for a knowledge era economic paradigm is central to Researching Futures research and facilitation projects. The research activities of Researching Futures have involved projects with schools, Vocational Education and Training and adult education sector institutions, universities, and health and community services providers.

Researching Futures is about informing local solutions at the regional level of Australian society and facilitating the uptake of these solutions. In this respect Researching Futures has undertaken research and evaluation projects initially grounded in the Greater Geelong Region of Victoria. Informing and facilitating local solutions in this region has the potential to inform local solutions elsewhere. Researching Futures is provincial in its location, but it is also concerned to impact upon state and national policy development, and upon developments in other regions. A number of its recent projects have had this broader

scope.

Researching Futures seeks to contribute to the innovative and creative developments within 'linked-up' approaches to Australia's governance. These approaches are currently being explored within and across the three levels of government with an agenda to better coordinate service provision to regional communities. Researching Futures is positioned to support this inter-governmental agenda for greater coordination through projects that build understanding about how this agenda can be advanced in practice.

Evaluation objectives

The evaluation focused on measuring the achievements and processes by which the Supporting Parents - Developing Children project has been effective in:

- Increasing participation of culturally and linguistically diverse families in early years development and engagement programs.
- Fostering social cohesion through the engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse families in early years service programs.
- Creating training and learning pathways for culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Literature review

The purpose of this literature review was to identify national and international practices and initiatives that may inform the evaluation of the Supporting Parents - Developing Children project. This specifically focused on identification of similar programs and elements of these that were successful in engaging and producing meaningful outcomes for newly arrived and culturally and linguistically diverse families, including:

- Increasing participation in early years development and engagement programs
- Fostering social cohesion through the engagement in early years service programs
- Creating training and learning pathways.

This review of the literature focuses initially on policy and research relevant to the =evaluation foci 2 & 3; that is, foregrounding research-based commentary on social cohesion policies and related adult education initiatives.

The final section of the literature review returns to the program-related developments in the early childhood education domain for newly arrived and culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Victoria and the relationship between these programs and policy aspirations for greater social cohesion.

Policy context

The context for the development and implementation of Supporting Parents - Developing Children reflects acknowledgement by all levels of government of the importance of early years learning, and of the specific needs of newly arrived and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. This context is informed by the Australian Government's early childhood agenda that aims to provide Australian families with high-quality, accessible, and affordable integrated early childhood education.

Hume context

Hume City is located on Melbourne's northwest fringe, approximately 20 kilometres from the Central Business District and includes the suburbs and localities of Attwood, Broadmeadows, Bulla, Campbellfield, Clarkefield (part), Coolaroo, Craigieburn, Dallas, Diggers Rest (part), Gladstone Park, Greenvale, Jacana, Kalkallo, Keilor (part), Meadow Heights, Melbourne Airport, Mickleham, Oaklands Junction, Roxburgh Park, Somerton, Sunbury, Tullamarine (part), Westmeadows, Wildwood and Yuroke (Hume City Council, 2012).

Compared to the average community in Victoria, Hume is characterised by compounding layers of disadvantage, including low socio-economic status. According to the 2006 SEIFA index of disadvantage, Hume ranks as the fourth most disadvantaged municipality in metropolitan Melbourne (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Additionally, Hume City has the second highest rate of unemployment in all Melbourne Local Government Areas (LGA) and high levels of crime against both a person and property (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Department of Health, 2012). Hume also has a large proportion of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with a mix of approximately 140 different nationalities and over 120 languages other than English spoken in the home (Hume City Council, 2012). Nearly a third of all residents living in the Hume LGA were born overseas and a quarter are from non-English speaking backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Many families residing within Hume have only recently settled in Australia and may be adjusting to an unfamiliar culture and learning a new language (Warr, 2007).

In the 2007 Community Indicators Victoria Survey, respondents were asked to rate their

satisfaction with feeling part of their community on a scale from 0-100 (Community Indicators Victoria, n.d.). For the Hume LGA specifically, respondents reported a slightly lower average sense of community connection compared with the Victorian response average (67.1 and 70.7 respectively) (Community Indicators Victoria, n.d.).

In the 2008 Victorian Population Health Survey implemented by the Victorian Government Department of Health, respondents were asked about community participation, and less than 50% of respondents indicated they had attended either a local community event or participated in organised sport (39.5% and 45% respectively) Only 43% of respondents felt there were a wide range of community and support groups and 46% felt there were ample opportunities to volunteer in local groups Less than half also reported being members of organised groups including sports, church, community groups or professional associations. Over 70% however, felt that they had easy access to the recreational and leisure facilities available in the Hume City area and 77% felt their LGA had good facilities and services including shops, schools, childcare, and libraries (Victorian Government Department of Planning and Community Development, 2010).

Newly arrived and culturally and linguistically diverse families

Newly arrived families and those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds may experience disadvantage in a variety of ways, including being part of a minority group within Australia, their experiences prior to migration, needing to learn a new language, issues having professional qualifications and experience recognised, and varying forms of racism (LDC Group, 2011). Australia is a linguistically diverse country; over 160 languages are spoken, one in four Australian residents were born overseas, and approximately 15 per cent of children speak a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999, 2006).

Migrants who are parents not only need to re-establish themselves within a new country, they also need to support their children through the process of re-establishment (LDC Group, 2011). Parenting in a new country within an unfamiliar culture and new language presents a variety of challenges, including maintaining cultural integrity, and communication and language barriers (Green, Renzaho, Eisenbruch, Williamson, Waters, Bianco, & Oberklaid, 2008). Parenting roles and strategies may be different within an Australian context, and parents may struggle to adapt, particularly at a time during which they may have less support from extended family or the community (LDC Group, 2011). Similarly, families may have limited proficiency in English, and some also may not be literate in their first language (Warr, 2007). Limited language skills may make it difficult to gain awareness of services or become involved in community activities (LDC Group, 2011), and evidence demonstrates that language is fundamental to accessing information and connecting families with resources (Green et al., 2008).

Children from CALD families, particularly those who speak a language other than English at home can experience a range of barriers to learning, including speaking English as a second language, and family circumstances associated with recent settlement in Australia (Goldfeld, O'Connor & Barber, 2012). These children need to simultaneously learn English as an additional language as well as keeping up academically with their peers. Research has indicated that while oral/conversational English can be learned quite quickly, proficiency in 'academic English' - the language skills required to effectively engage with the school curriculum – can take much longer to master (Goldfeld, Mithen, Barber, O'Connor, Sayers, & Brinkman, 2011). Additionally, children with limited English skills may also experience increased levels of stress due to discrimination, stigma, and trouble accessing the curriculum, potentially contributing to poorer behavioural and psychosocial outcomes (Araújo Dawson & Williams, 2008; Dowdy, Dever, DiStefano, & Chin, 2011).

Early years learning

A child's experience during the early years not only affects their immediate health and wellbeing, but also provides a critical foundation for the entire life course. What children learn in the early years forms the basis for future skill acquisition and development (CCCH, & TICHR, 2007; Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2006; Richter, 2004). Physical, social, and cognitive development during the early years strongly influences a child's health, basic learning, school readiness, and educational attainment (Dyson, Hertzman, Roberts, Tunstill, & Vaghir, 2009). Additionally, a child's early language skills and literacy have been linked to the ability to communicate, socialise, and establish relationships (Hopkins, Green, & Strong, 2010).

A child's development is impacted by the quality of the environments within which they live and learn, particularly through the relationships they have with parents and caregivers, and the nature and quality of these relationships are major determinants of subsequent intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioural, and moral development (Moore, Fry, Lorains, Green, & Hopkins, 2011; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Family and other caregivers are the main providers of the relationships and experiences that form a child's learning environments (Moore et al., 2011). In this way a young child's growth in all aspects of health and learning, depends on the capacity of their parents or other caregivers to understand, perceive and respond to the child's needs (Richter, 2004). Therefore, to effectively promote children's development, parents and other caregivers need to have the knowledge and skills to provide environments that protect, nourish, and promote development and well-being (Moore et al., 2011). A corollary to this insight is the promotion of parent support and education, including the encouragement of parents' reading and parental encouragement of children's reading (Vinson, 2009). With regard to families who speak a language other than English at home, further to the introduction to speaking and reading in English is the importance of nurturing a child's first language. This is seen to be essential for cultural integrity and academic development (Clarke, 2011).

It is well established in research literature that education cannot be separated from the other developmental domains of young children, and that best practice pedagogy incorporates a holistic understanding of the many literacies that children acquire in the early years and the settings across the home-early school-years spectrum (Hopkins, Green, & Strong, 2010). Early years programs may address one or more developmental domains, including cognitive, language, social, emotional, and physical development, and are a fundamental element of success in childhood and future learning and achievement (Heckman, 2000; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). While the quality and appropriateness of early years programs are core considerations in determining whether they improve outcomes for children (Dyson et al., 2009), high quality early years services can have a significant, positive impact on children's short-term and long-term development, including school readiness and performance in later life (Boethel, 2004; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; The Future of Children, 2005). Research indicates that spending at least two years in preschool programs improves school readiness, and that every month of preschool after age two is associated with better intellectual development, and improved independence, concentration, and sociability (Moore et al., 2011). A child's long-term success in school therefore derives from their learning experiences before school and the ongoing learning environment in the early school years (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2007).

Transition to school

Commencing school is an important developmental and social transition point for children. Starting school requires children and their families to negotiate a multitude of changes across learning, physical, and social environments, and in their relationships and identity

(Docket & Perry, 2001, 2007; Fabian, 2007). These changes present children and their families with both opportunities and challenges, and while the transition to school may be a positive experience, the more dramatic these changes are, the more difficult it can be for children and their families to transition to school successfully (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008).

Evidence has suggested that a positive start to school sets children up for ongoing positive educational experiences and future life opportunities (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Specifically, the culture of the school is critical in supporting this transition and shaping the practice and thinking of children. If children effectively understand the specific school language and social knowledge (i.e. expected ways of behaving), they are more likely to cope with the demands of school (Fabian, 2007). These children tend to like school more, look forward to attending, and show steady growth in their academic and social skills. If children do not experience a positive transition to school however, and cannot manage the demands of this new environment, then their engagement in school activities and even their attendance can be negatively affected (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008).

The Victorian education system is designed around the expectation that parents should and will be involved in schools and education (The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2007), and research indicates that children make better progress academically and socially if their families are actively and positively involved in their learning activities across the home, early childhood (Weiss, Caspe & Lopez, 2006, as cited in Centre for Community Child Health, 2008), and school settings (Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy & Weiss, 2007; Caspe, Lopez & Wolos, 2006/07, as cited in Centre for Child Community Health, 2008). Similarly, Successful school transitions are also more likely to result in families being actively involved in their child's education, and in teachers and families appreciating and valuing each other (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008).

While it is generally the case that involvement in schooling is low in new and emerging culturally and linguistically diverse communities (The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2007), successful school transition is partially dependent upon how well the school culture is understood by the parents and family, and how trusting and respectful families are of the school (Clancy, Simpson & Howard, 2001, as cited in Centre for Community Child Health, 2008). Parents and carers whose own experiences of school were negative may have little understanding of or support for the school, making it important for schools to establish positive relationships with families even before school starts, and to maintain these during and after the transition to school (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008). Thus the relationship between the child, their family and the school community (including the teaching staff, other parents and other children who attend the school) is vitally important in assisting the children of newly arrived and CALD families to successfully transition to primary school. The way these relationships are cultivated must help newly arrived and CALD families to feel accepted as valued members of the school (and ideally, broader) community.

Social cohesion

This feeling of belonging to, being accepted by, and being included in a community or group is academically referred to as social cohesion. This notion has no one single definition, principle, dimension or indicator, however common elements in the definitions in the literature include the concepts of relationships, community, interactions and participation. At the most basic level, *"social cohesion is viewed as a characteristic of a society dealing with the connections and relations between societal units"* (Berger-Schmitt, 2000, p.2). Such units can include individuals, groups, and associations. As this notion relates to connections and relations, the strength of social relations, shared values, common identity, and a sense of belonging and trust are important characteristics in the process of developing social cohesion.

According to The Scanlon Foundation (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2007, p.25), there are

three common elements in the various definitions of social cohesion. These include:

1. A shared vision: social cohesion requires universal values, mutual respect and common aspirations or identity to be shared amongst the societal unit.
2. The property of a group or community: social cohesion often describes a well-functioning group or community in which there are shared goals, responsibilities, and readiness to co-operate.
3. A process: social cohesion is not just an outcome, but a continuous process of achieving social harmony.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics adopts the Berger-Schmitt and Noll (2000) definition of social cohesion, stating that it can be understood as the bonds and relationships people have with their family, friends, and the wider community. On the basis of this definition, social cohesion is fostered through day-to-day interactions between people in a community that builds trust and reciprocity between them. For these reasons, issues relating to social cohesion have been conceived in the broadest possible terms, including addressing differences based on ethnic or cultural backgrounds, economic status, gender inequality, ageism, rurality, and family structures (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2007).

There have been numerous efforts to determine the factors important in developing or facilitating social cohesion. In 1998, Jenson described social cohesion as having five dimensions: 1) belonging, 2) inclusion, 3) participation, 4) recognition, and 5) legitimacy. In 1999, Bernard added a sixth dimension: equality. Other authors have considered the concepts of social exclusion and inclusion only as making up the notion of social cohesion, however most authors now agree that while social exclusion and inclusion form a part of this notion, consideration of only these factors falls short of the mark in defining the links and interactions between societal units that give the full story of social cohesion (Berger-Schmitt, 2000).

Social cohesion thus can be viewed at both individual and group or community levels. At a group level, organisations such as The Scanlon Foundation measure whether or not a community is socially cohesive based on their responses to questions related to belonging, social justice, immigration, tolerance, and sense of self-worth. The SP-DC project is however largely working at an individual level of social cohesion through the provision of supports and activities to help individuals to make links and bonds with others in the community and provide a place for the trust and belonging to develop for individuals. In this way, more specific questions related to an individual's sense of belonging to their community(ies) is more appropriate.

An Australian analysis of social inclusion and social exclusion within the context of culturally and linguistically diverse communities - such as is apparent for the SP-DC project, concluded that culture, language, migration history, English proficiency, and religious differences may contribute to outcomes indicating social exclusion and therefore a lack of social cohesion (Hayter, 2009). The very nature of the programs developed for the SP-DC project are therefore vitally important in addressing these factors and providing the appropriate circumstances for social cohesion to be developed and fostered. For example the Flexible Mother and English Children Language program provides CALD parents the opportunity to improve their English proficiency and learn about different cultures in a supported environment.

For the purposes of the evaluation of the SP-DC project social cohesion will therefore be assessed at an individual level primarily in terms of community engagement and belonging. To do this, participants attending SP-DC programs will be asked questions relating to the strength of their relationships, and feelings of belonging in the City of Hume and broader communities, both prior to and since they have started participating in the SP-DC programs.

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