

Centre for Community Child Health



Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness

Full report

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Exploring the impact of Community Hubs on school readiness: Full report
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Glossary

BVPS	Broadmeadows Valley Primary School
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CCCH	Centre for Community Child Health
CSPS	Coolaroo South Primary School
DBCPS	Dallas Brooks Community Primary School
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
NCHP	National Community Hubs Program
SHPS	Sunbury Heights Primary School
VEYLDF	Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

Introduction

About community hubs

The community hubs model is a place-based and citizen centric approach to supporting migrant and refugee families in their local communities (Wong, Press & Cumming, 2015). Developed out of a successful trial in the City of Hume (Melbourne, Victoria) which finished 2014, there are currently 39 hubs embedded in primary schools (government and Catholic schools) and community centres across Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland (Community Hubs, 2016). Community hubs support migrant and refugee families in relation to children's learning and development and provide knowledge, training and social opportunities for these families (Hume City Council, 2016). They act as a gateway to services, information and learning, and enable families to increase their connections with their local community.

Designed to enhance social inclusion and cohesion, the National Community Hubs Program (NCHP) was independently evaluated in 2014-2015 (Press et al., 2015). The evaluation found that the NCHP was making substantial progress towards the program's intended outcomes:

- Migrant children enjoy and succeed in school and achieve optimal health, development and wellbeing;
- Migrant families function well, have the capacity, confidence and skills to nurture child learning and are connected, active participants in the community and workforce;
- Schools respond to the needs of migrant children and families; and
- Community services respond early and effectively to migrant child and family needs.

Exploring school readiness project

Building on the findings of the 2015 evaluation, the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) was engaged by Community Hubs Australia to explore the impact of community hubs on children's school readiness through a rapid review of the relevant research evidence, case study inquiry and analysis against the research evidence.

This report outlines the project methodology before presenting findings from the relevant background literature in relation to school readiness and issues facing CALD children and families in relation to school readiness. It then presents findings from four community hubs and a summary of the effects of these community hubs on school readiness. These sections are followed by an analysis of how the case study findings align to the research evidence and implications for practice, policy and research.

Methodology

Research evidence methodology

The project involved a rapid review of the school readiness research evidence, updating the Centre for Community Child Health's Policy Brief on *Rethinking School Readiness* (2008). This was done by searching for research literature published on school readiness and transitions to school since 2008, using Google Scholar, PubMed and Proquest.

A pragmatic search for quantitative data and peer-reviewed studies was undertaken to complement the rapid review and contextualise school readiness issues for migrant, refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families in Australia. Quantitative data was sourced from various federal and state government bodies such as the Victorian Department of Education and Training, the Commonwealth of Australia, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Additionally, Google Scholar and ProQuest were used to search for relevant peer-reviewed studies.

Case study methodology

A purposeful sampling strategy was adopted for the qualitative case study inquiry. In consultation with Community Hubs Australia, five community hubs were invited to participate in interviews to capture insights into the impact of community hubs on school readiness. Hubs were selected based on their length of operation and co-location with primary schools, as it was assumed longer-standing and primary school based hubs would offer rich perspectives on any change in school readiness.

Four community hubs participated in the project, in five semi-structured group or individual interviews (via phone and in person). Participants included school principals (n=4), an assistant principal (n=1) and hub leaders (n=4). Interview questions were designed to elicit significant change stories (see Appendix A), however the most significant change methodology (Davies & Dart, 2005) was not followed. Participants were also asked to share their views on lessons learned and areas for improvement. All hubs were located within Hume City Council, one of the fastest growing and most diverse municipalities in Victoria, and had been operating for at least four years.

What does the evidence tell us?

School readiness

What is school readiness?

At the child level, school readiness is usually conceptualised as the level of functioning in children's cognitive, social and physical skills that permits them to benefit maximally from formal instruction and related classroom experiences (eg. Bierman et al., 2017; Morrison & Hindman, 2012). This level of functioning was traditionally thought of as a simple outcome of maturation or chronological age, and hence the focus was on particular qualities and capacities in the child (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994; Kagan & Rigby, 2003). Once these were demonstrated (or achieved), the child was considered to be ready for school. The implication was that early childhood services and communities did not have any role to play in promoting school readiness, nor did schools have to do anything about getting ready to meet the child's needs (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008).

This view of school readiness has been shown to be too limited. Readiness does not lie solely in the child, but reflects the environments in which children find themselves – their families, early childhood settings, schools, neighbourhoods, and communities (Kagan & Rigby, 2003). School readiness is a multidimensional construct, involving the interplay of children's individual characteristics and the contexts in which they live as they grow and develop (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Dockett et al., 2010; Emig et al., 2001; Sayers et al., 2012). School readiness incorporates three major components: children's readiness for school, schools' readiness for children, and the capacity of families and communities to provide the necessary opportunities, conditions and supports to optimise children's development and learning (Dockett et al., 2010).

Despite this recognition of the multidimensional nature of school readiness, there is a prevailing tendency to focus mainly on the need to prepare children for school: even when the terminology of transition is used, there remains an underlying focus on readiness, particularly children's readiness for school (Dockett & Parry, 2013). There are also ongoing debates about what experiences children need to gain the level of functioning needed to benefit from the learning and social experiences schools provide (Fisher et al., 2011). This is compounded by pressure from parents. Anxious to do the best for their children, parents want more academic content and more direct teaching in the early years (Christakis, 2017; Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016; Gopnik, 2016; White, 2012). However, the evidence indicates that premature formal academic instruction in the early years is inconsistent with what we know about how young children learn and is less effective than other approaches that treat the child as an active rather than a passive learner (Christakis, 2017; Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016; Gopnik, 2016; Katz, 2015).

Why is school readiness important?

School entry involves a key transition for all children and a time of potential challenge and stress for children and families (Hirst et al., 2011). This transition is not just *to* school, but *from* home, childcare, preschool and kindergarten. It is a transition not just from early care and learning environments, but often from small-scale to large-scale interactions, from highly personalised to less personalised relationships, and from environments with a limited range of ages to an institution with children of many ages. It is a transition to a different learning, education and care paradigm. How well children are prepared for this transition is important as it impacts on their long term outcomes (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Hirst, 2011; Sayers et al., 2012)

In Australia, children enter school with marked differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills needed for success in the school environment (Brinkman et al., 2012; Goldfeld & West, 2014). These initial differences are predictive of later academic and occupational success (Boethel, 2004; Cunha & Heckman, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2007; Le et al, 2006). This is partly because skills develop cumulatively, so that those acquired early form a sound basis for later skill development (Cunha et al, 2006).

The success of schools is undermined when children begin without the necessary core skills and experiences. Schools struggle to overcome these initial differences in children (Cunha et al, 2006; Karoly et al, 2005). Schools therefore have a vested interest in ensuring that children arrive at school ready to continue learning. School 'un-readiness' is expensive (Bruner et al, 2005): later attempts to compensate for un-readiness are less effective and may be more expensive than providing the resources, programs and supports needed to ensure that children start school ready to continue learning (Cunha et al, 2006).

The impact of children arriving at school without the skills needed to take advantage of the learning experiences provided by schools extends beyond the initial years of school; the likelihood of successfully completing school, gaining employment and becoming a productive, socially adjusted citizen can be traced back to a child's skills at school entry (The Future of Children, 2005). Life trajectories for children become increasingly difficult to change as differences in skills and abilities become entrenched and initial differences between school ready and school unready children are amplified (Cunha et al, 2006).

What does the research tell us?

A successful start to school is linked to later positive educational and social outcomes. Children who have a positive start to school are more likely to regard school as an important place and to have positive expectations of their ability to learn and succeed at school (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Margetts, 2007; Peters, 2010).

Starting school successfully depends upon 'school readiness', that is, children arriving at school with the knowledge, skills and personal qualities needed for them to take advantage of the learning and social opportunities that schools provide. Transition programs can also help ensure a successful start to school. The evidence regarding these two processes will now be reviewed in turn.

Factors promoting school readiness

The research suggests there are a number of factors that either facilitate or hinder school readiness; these can be at the level of the individual, the family, early childhood services, schools and the community. At the individual level, there are a number of factors that contribute to poor school readiness, including being born very low birthweight (Roberts et al., 2011) or having a chronic illness (Bell et al., 2016). At a more general level, the factors known to promote school readiness include the nature of children's relationships with caregivers, the quality of their home environments, and attendance at high quality preschool programs.

The importance of relationships. Children learn from birth (Bennett, 2007; Meisels, 2006), and what and how they learn depends upon the nature and quality of the relationships they have with their parents and caregivers, and the richness and variety of the experiences they are provided during the early years. The key factor in promoting children's school readiness in all environments – families, early childhood services, community settings and schools – is the nature of the relationships they experience. The primary mechanisms through which children acquire underpinning skills are the social relationships they form with parents, caregivers, teachers and peers (Cozolino, 2012; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Thompson & Raikes, 2007). As Cozolino (2012) states, the human brain is 'a social organ of adaptation', and 'humans have evolved to be linked to and learn from other brains in the context of emotionally significant relationships.' Thus, relationships are our natural habitat, and 'our ability to learn is regulated by how we are treated by our teachers, at home and in the classroom'.

Impact of home environments. The home environment and family background characteristics (including maternal education, single-parent status, and mental health) are important factors that are linked to school readiness. Parent engagement in their children's home-based, and community-based activities contribute to all areas of school readiness (Janus, 2011).

Family resources, including income, the amount of parenting time available, and families' personal support networks also affect the experiences and opportunities available to children and thereby contribute to school readiness. Children from financially disadvantaged families are at greater risk of poor school readiness, due to the much higher rates of risk factors evident among this group and the accumulation of risks experienced (Edwards et al., 2009).

While many family background factors are not in themselves readily amenable to change – for example, maternal education - their effects on the child's development can be modified with family-focused interventions or programs, thereby improving outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children (Boethel, 2004; Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). There are a number of programs that have proven effective in helping parents become more nurturing, manage their children's behaviour more effectively, and promote their children's language and literacy.

Preschool attendance. Participation in high quality early child care and education programs can also contribute positively to children's development during the early years and therefore to their school readiness (Boethel, 2004). There is consistent evidence that children who have participated in high-quality preschool education programs gain significant long term benefits (Farrar et al, 2007; Fox & Geddes, 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). These include higher levels of completed education and subsequent employment, greater stability in relationships and lower rates of mental illness (Farrar et al, 2007). While the evidence indicates that all children benefit from high quality pre-school education, the gains are greatest for children from disadvantaged family backgrounds (Cunha et al, 2006; Sylva et al, 2004). Evidence shows that two years of preschool has more impact than one, especially for the children most likely to be developmentally vulnerable (Fox & Geddes, 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

Australian data shows that children who do not attend any early childhood program lagged behind their peers in school readiness skills (Claessens & Garrett, 2014; Goldfeld et al., 2016). The children who are most likely to miss out on early childhood education experiences are those from socio-economically disadvantaged families, Indigenous children, children from NESB families, and children living in remote areas (Baxter & Hand, 2013).

The benefits of preschool attendance depend upon the programs being of high quality. The features of high quality programs are well understood (eg. Elliott, 2006; Weschler et al., 2016). High quality care/education is characterized by adult-child interactions that are responsive, affectionate and readily available; well-trained staff; ratios and group sizes that allow staff to interact adequately and appropriately with children; and a developmentally appropriate curriculum with educational content (Bennett, 2007; Elliott, 2006; Melhuish, 2003).

The kind of preschool curriculum that benefits all children (but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds) is an *effective intentional curriculum* (Klein & Knitzer, 2006, 2007) that involves active engagement with children (Kagan & Kauerz, 2006), provides nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships with early childhood staff (Melhuish, 2003), integrates child care and education (Centre for Community Child Health, 2007; Elliot, 2006), is responsive to cultural diversity (Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000), and fosters social, emotional and regulatory skills (Hyson, 2004; Klein and Knitzer, 2006, 2007). Cultivating 'soft skills' is increasingly recognised as important for academic success (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016) as well as later workforce success (Lippman et al., 2015).

In early childhood settings, approaches that treat the child as an active rather than a passive learner and that recognise the critical role of play are more effective than didactic teaching (Christakis, 2017; Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016; Gopnik, 2016; Katz, 2015). For young children, play is the way in which they learn (Fisher et al., 2011; Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, 2008; White, 2012). Approaches such as *playful learning* (Fisher et al., 2011; Hirsh-Pasek et al, 2008) and *guided play* (Weisberg et al., 2013) bridge the gap between didactic teaching and free play, and are more effective in providing children with a grounding in literacy and mathematics (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008).

What this evidence suggests is that the best approach to promoting children readiness for school is an oblique one: instead of trying to teach children pre-academic skills directly, we should concentrate on providing them with the kind of environments and experiences that maximise their innate learning capacities (Gopnik, 2016). Moreover, since we cannot specify precisely the skill levels that predict successful adaptation to formal schooling, nor what combination of skill levels across language, social and physical domains constitute an absolute level of readiness (Morrison & Hindman, 2012), efforts to teach the necessary skills directly are unlikely to be very effective.

Factors promoting effective transitions

Smooth transitions from early years programs to schools can be facilitated by effective transition programs, and by ready schools.

Transition programs are important for ensuring that all children make a positive start to school (Dockett, 2001, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2014). School-based transition practices produce more positive academic achievement outcomes, and are particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Schulting et al, 2005). Transition to school is more than just what schools do to 'orient' children and their families to the school, often characterised by presenting information to parents and children (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Rather, transition to school can be thought of as a process that starts years before children actually commence school, and continues beyond the point at which the child commences school (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

The key features of effective transition programs include relationships, parent and caregiver involvement, school involvement, collaboration between educators.

Relationships are at the core of positive transition to school experiences (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Peters, 2010). Successful transitions depend on the nature of the relationships between all involved. For children, their friendships, peer relationships and the relationship with their teacher appear central. Children, whose teachers take time to get to know them, affirm their culture, recognise and build on their prior learning, and see promise rather than deficits, reflect many of the features of a successful transition that will support their learning. Respectful, reciprocal relationships between the adults involved are also key factors in a successful transition (Peters, 2010).

Parent and caregiver involvement in the school community is another important element. This is important not only to support children during the transition to school, but is also associated with long-term school success (Hirst et al., 2011). Identifying and reducing potential barriers to participation can help to promote parent and carer involvement in transition activities and children's ongoing education.

School involvement in transition programs is vital. Schools have an important role in supporting children and families during transition. This includes not only supporting children, parents and carers to understand the changes, expectations and practicalities (e.g., uniforms, starting and finishing times etc.), but also assisting children and families to adjust to the social and emotional demands of starting school (Hirst et al., 2011). Helping parents and carers to become more aware of potential challenges and common behavioural responses as children adjust to change, and providing information and practical strategies for supporting children can help to promote positive parenting practices and support children's mental health and wellbeing during this important period. Strategies and activities that schools can implement to support children and families during transition are described by Hirst and colleagues (2011)¹ and by Dockett and Perry (2014).²

Collaboration between educators is another important feature. Building relationships between primary school and preschool educators involved in transition is a key factor in promoting continuity and a sense of belonging for all involved (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Hartley et al., 2012; Hirst et al., 2011; Skouteris et al., 2012). This sense of belonging is not only important during transition but is also a protective factor for children's mental health throughout school (Hirst et al., 2011).

The transition to school is particularly problematic for vulnerable children (Feinstein & Bynner, 2004; Rosier & McDonald, 2011; Sylva et al, 2004). Therefore, special consideration needs to be given to supporting the transition to school of children from families with complex needs, children with disabilities, children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Particular challenges faced by CALD children and families are discussed separately in the next section.

Importance of ready schools. To ensure a smooth transition from early years services, schools need to be able to provide options that meet the diverse needs of the children they enrol and their families (Hirst et al., 2011; Petriwskyj, 2010; Pramling & Samuelsson, 2012). Creating a welcoming environment for each child is critical – as Peters (2010) observes, 'almost any child is at risk of making a poor or less successful transition if their individual characteristics are incompatible with the features of the environment they encounter'.

Exactly what this involves has not been thoroughly investigated. As Dockett and Perry (2013) found, most research has been directed towards the development and validation of measures to assess children's readiness, and much less attention has been paid to measures examining the readiness of schools or educators. As outlined by Ackerman and Barnett (2005), ready schools provide necessary supports for children, have teaching and learning programs that support the professional development of teachers, and are adaptable.

School readiness issues faced by CALD children and families

Vulnerability at school entry

On the basis of 2012 AEDC data, the Productivity Commission's Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Inquiry Report (2014) found that children from backgrounds where English was not spoken at home faced a higher

¹ <https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/sites/default/files/public/Transition-to-Primary-School-A-literature-review.pdf>

² <http://docs.education.gov.au/documents/continuity-learning-resource-support-effective-transition-school-and-school-age-care-2>

probability of being developmentally vulnerable. It reported that over 60 per cent of CALD children who were not proficient in English were developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains at school entry, and alarmingly, over 90 per cent were developmentally vulnerable in one or more areas. By comparison, approximately 20 per cent of CALD children who were proficient in English were assessed as developmentally vulnerable in one or more areas (compared to over 20 per cent Australia wide), while less than 10 per cent were assessed as being vulnerable in two or more areas (compared to approximately 10 per cent Australia wide). Revealing similar trends towards heightened vulnerability of CALD children at school entry, 2015 AEDC data showed that 10.7 per cent of children from non-English speaking backgrounds in Victoria were developmentally vulnerable (compared to 7.8 per cent across the state), and that only 58.2 per cent of all children from a non-English speaking background (compared to 84 per cent of children in the state) were on track on social competence (Department of Education and Training, 2016).

These AEDC findings are in line with a growing body of evidence which indicates that children who begin school with limited proficiency in the language of instruction at school are more likely to experience poorer outcomes across a range of health and developmental domains that exceed language and academic challenges (Dawson & Williams, 2008; Dowdy, Dever, DiStefano & Chin 2011; Goldfeld, O'Connor, Mithen, Sayers, & Brinkman, 2014; Han, 2010). For example, a recent Australian study (Goldfeld et al., 2014) found that children who were not proficient in English when they began school were significantly more likely to be developmentally vulnerable across four AEDC domains (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, and language and cognitive development) at school entry. The unique vulnerabilities experienced by CALD children were raised in the 2015 State of Victoria's Children Report (Department of Education and Training, 2016) which reported that children from non-English speaking backgrounds demonstrated higher rates of antisocial behaviours, peer problems and emotional symptoms, than the general population upon school entry. Furthermore, results from the 2015 Victorian School Entrant Health Questionnaire (SEHQ) show that Victorian children from CALD backgrounds are also more likely to be rated by their parents as experiencing poor health (1.6 per cent, compared with 0.7 per cent of all children); assessed as being at high risk of developmental and/or behavioural problems (15.8 per cent, compared with 14.5 per cent of all children); and have poor oral health (Department of Education and Training, 2016).

Additional evidence suggests that children from CALD families often present with speech problems and language delays in their native language, possibly as a result of disadvantage and social isolation (Rogers & Martin, 2004). Rogers and Martin (2004) found that gaps between CALD children accessing MCH services and attending preschool also meant that many problems may not be picked up until preschool - or even later for families who do not send their child to preschool. They found that behavioural problems amongst young CALD children appeared to be increasing, or becoming more extreme, so that they were observed more often by service providers, particularly in child care. It was also noted that increasing numbers of CALD children are being cared for by "informal" carers such as grandparents, which contributes to the child's social isolation, with little access to other children or playgroups.

Evidence also suggests that the heightened developmental vulnerability of CALD children at school entry may be exacerbated over time, given research which shows that inferior early childhood outcomes are likely to have compounding consequences (Johnson, Beitchman & Brownlie, 2010). This is evident in Victorian NAPLAN data from 2008 and 2009 which shows that the proportion of refugee students who met the education standards for reading, writing and mathematics (in years 3, 5 and 7) was lower than the state average (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011). Similar results were found in Queensland where CALD year 3 students undertaking the NAPLAN test lagged far behind the state average. Similar disparities were repeated for Year 5, 7, and 9 students, in reading, writing and numeracy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010).

One of the most commonly cited factors that contributes to the above noted discrepancies relates to the issue of poverty. Goldfeld and colleagues (2014) argue that the increased likelihood of CALD children residing in

lower-income households and more disadvantaged areas must be seriously considered. Given existing evidence which shows that CALD families face disproportionately high rates of unemployment and poverty (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Parliament of Australia, 2014) there is strong grounds for the assertion that CALD children are amongst those living in the most economically disadvantaged areas of Australia. Research by the Victorian government shows that refugee children in Victoria are more likely to live in poverty than other children across the state: 50.1 per cent of refugee children compared with 14.3 per cent of all Victorian children (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011). Results from the 2015 AEDC national report show that children living in the most economically disadvantaged areas of Australia are more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those living in the least disadvantaged areas (four times as likely to be behind in language and cognitive skills) (Productivity Commission, 2016).

Access and engagement with early childhood services

Although national and state data pertaining to CALD and refugee children's engagement with early childhood services (such as preschool and MCH) is not routinely collected, available data indicates that participation rates for this cohort is noticeably lower than that of the national average (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, 2009; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013; McDonald, Turner, & Gray, 2014; Productivity Commission, 2014).

As indicated in the section above, the benefits of all children attending preschool in terms of promoting school readiness are well established. For instance, a recent study by the University of Melbourne (Warren & Hasiken-DeNew, 2013) used data from the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children (LSAC), and found that children who attended preschool scored higher in NAPLAN tests at Year 3 than their peers who did not. By comparison, 2015 data showed that 30.3 per cent of children from non-English speaking backgrounds who did not attend preschool were developmentally vulnerable on two or more AEDC domains, compared to 11.9 per cent who did (Department of Education and Training, 2016).

A study of Australian social trends by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009) shows that in 2009, 73 per cent of children who spoke English at home attended preschool or a preschool program, compared with only 60 per cent of children who spoke a language other than English at home. Similarly, a 2004 inquiry, commissioned by the Australian Education Union found that children from CALD backgrounds were notably less likely to access preschool. A number of submissions from stakeholders (e.g. teachers, community groups and families) raised these issues, suggesting that families who have recently arrived in Australia often do not comprehend the complex system of preschool and school (Walker, 2004). The inquiry also found that CALD children have significantly lower access to preschool programs in many areas around the country.

More recently, the Productivity Commission (2016) released data pertaining to the proportion of non-English speaking children aged 3–5 years enrolled in a preschool program. Results supported a similar trend in gaps between the number of non-English speaking children in the community and number of non-English speaking children enrolled in a preschool program (note that enrolment does not equate to attendance).

Table 1. Percentage of CALD children enrolled in preschool programs (2014) and in the community (2011)* in Australian states and territories and overall

CALD children	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	AUS
% enrolled in a preschool program, 2014	19.4	13.3	7.6	N/A	11.2	2.8	29.6	N/A	11.1
% in the community, 2011	23.7	23.4	13.2	17.7	15.4	7.4	19.6	39.3	20.0

* 2011 ABS Census data was compared to available 2014 preschool enrolment data sourced from territory and state governments.

Such trends are echoed by state and community-based research which indicate lower early childhood education and care (ECEC) participation and engagement rates by CALD children. For example, a Victorian study (Rogers & Martin, 2004) found that CALD/refugee children were less likely to attend preschool or supported playgroups. Results from their study showed that 80 per cent of eligible children in a local housing estate (which had the highest number of newly arrived CALD families) had not attended preschool. Similar results were found in New South Wales (Institute of Early Childhood Macquarie University, 2010).

Of significant concern, the Victorian Department of Education and Training (2016) found that CALD children were more likely than other cohorts not to engage with ECEC services. Participation is also particularly low amongst children from refugee backgrounds (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011). For CALD/refugee families who are newly arrived to Australia, awareness of early childhood services such as maternal and child health (MCH), preschool or parenting support can be challenging as there are no formal mechanisms through which services can be notified of and make contact with CALD families (Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture., 2004).

A review by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence Early Years Project found that MCH nurses often stated that CALD/refugee families were less likely than other cohorts to engage with their service (Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth, & Nelms, 2004). In 2002, similar feedback was provided by MCH nurses in Victoria (Rogers & Martin, 2004), while a more recent study by KPMG (2006) found that MCH was less accessible and less able to service CALD families due to issues relating to language barriers and cultural responsiveness – resulting in families discontinuing use of the service. The review also found that CALD families did not to seek referrals for parenting services as often as other vulnerable groups.

Family awareness of early childhood development, learning and the importance of ECEC

Engagement with positive early childhood development opportunities can buffer many aspects of disadvantage, including later learning problems and developmental delays. As such, it is essential that this knowledge, and its practical implications for parenting, are universally available and understood by all parents and caregivers (Winter, 2010), particularly those caring for vulnerable CALD children.

A number of cultures strongly endorse the idea of a sound education for their children, but not necessarily at the preschool level. Rogers and Martin (2004) reported that CALD families, especially those who were relatively new to Australia and/or non-English speakers, were often unaware of the importance of ECEC, and even of its existence. Many parents also had little to no understanding of child development, and lacked the personal resources to meet their child’s developmental needs without assistance.

A 2010 Australian national survey (Winter, 2010) of CALD parents with children birth to age eight found that these parents were less likely than other parents to be aware of the importance of the early years, including

engagement with ECEC services, and the value of home-based learning. For example, results of the survey showed:

- 18.4 per cent of refugee/CALD parents said that the first five years were not very important for children's future learning, compared with 3.7 per cent of other parents;
- Refugee/CALD parents and grandparents were more likely than other parents to believe that parent/child engagement did not greatly impact a child's brain development (44.7 per cent and 33.3 per cent respectively);
- 44.7 per cent of refugee/CALD parents believed that young children received all the nutrition they required regardless of whether they ate breakfast, fresh fruit and vegetables every day;
- Refugee/CALD families were over-represented amongst parents who expressed that touching (holding, rocking and cuddling) was not important for very young children (26.3 per cent);
- 50.0 per cent of refugee/CALD parents said that television was better for children than playing;
- A higher proportion of refugee/CALD parents disagreed that children learn from observing others (10.5 per cent);

Tellingly, the National Preschool Education Inquiry (Walker, 2004) found that CALD families sometimes assumed that if preschool was not part of school, then it must not be important. It also found that other priorities for newly arrived families, particularly those living in low socioeconomic areas or in poverty, often superseded issues relating to early childhood development. Similarly, upon widespread consultation with the community, the Multicultural Development Association (2012) found that community leaders, parents and families from refugee background had little awareness of early childhood education programs and in particular, there was little awareness around the benefits of early childhood education.

These findings were echoed in Victoria where upon consultation with immigrant health paediatricians and African Think Tank leaders, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2011) found that the primary focus for newly arrived families was general health. They found that CALD families did not usually raise concerns regarding the development, emotional wellbeing and behaviours of their children in early discussions; and health care providers needed to make time to enquire about such things. Discussions with a key community group emphasised that CALD parents were often occupied with settlement related issues and trying to cope with day-to-day matters. As such, pressing issues such as housing and employment took precedence over parenting support, preschool, MCH and other early childhood development issues. Paediatricians also identified multiple instances of systems not catering to non-English-speaking families, noting that discovery of significant developmental issues is likely to be delayed when the developmental concerns are attributed to learning a new language.

There is also evidence that CALD families can lack of awareness around the importance of play-based activities for school readiness. Warr (2008) argues that many CALD families place a greater value on academic achievements and may not see the value in play-based activities. As such, they may perceive kindergarten as a place only for play and thus not essential or valuable in terms of their children's education.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for CALD families to have negative perceptions of institutional services such as MCH and ECEC. For example, many newly arrived refugee families are survivors of torture and trauma and can associate institutional services with their trauma. Moreover, the concept of professional service delivery where a perceived stranger provides advice on child rearing or other issues that are traditionally perceived as private family matters can be uncommon or 'un-natural' in some CALD communities where such things are often only dealt with in the confinement of the family or community setting (Centre for Community Child Health., 2016).

What has been the effect of community hubs on school readiness?

Case studies

Principals and hub leaders were invited to share the most significant changes they had observed in school readiness by children, families, early childhood services and schools, and how these changes came about. Four case studies showcasing the selected hubs' work to promote school readiness and the effects of this work are presented as follows.

Broadmeadows Valley Primary School, Hume, Victoria

Broadmeadows Valley Primary School (BVPS) was established in 2009 within the Dimboola Road education precinct, following the merger of four local primary schools. From the outset the community hub was integrated into the school setting, with a philosophy that *'the hub is the school and the school is the hub'* (former hub leader, BVPS). An immediate focus of the hub was to build community connections to the new school. The former hub leader suggested that the cutting-edge school grounds were initially intimidating for some parents and that it was important to *'use the hub to demystify some of that and to actually walk people into the learning spaces and the classroom spaces'*, helping children and families feel more comfortable in the new environment.

Promoting children's learning

BVPS has high expectations for every child's learning and recognises the importance of children having a safe and secure learning environment. This involves providing children with the opportunity to develop relationships with staff prior to commencing school:

It's about making authentic connections with the people who are going to be caring for you in the next five to six years. (Acting Principal)

The school runs playgroups and works with the on-site early learning centre and kindergarten program to facilitate these connections and familiarise children with the school environment from a young age. By spending time in the different spaces and getting to know different teachers, children arrive at prep settled, happy and comfortable:

For me, what I see is an ownership of the space, and the school already...this is their school...they're really happy to be here, and to connect to teachers who they're familiar with, who they've already had heaps of conversations with. (Acting Principal)

For us it's really paramount that we get that right, and that we get it right leading up to them coming. It's not about just fronting up, and then off we go, it's all the work that [the hub leader] does. Making sure that they're safe and secure in their environment...That initial work, and connection with the playgroups, the early learning centres, the kinder, begins to give us that whole picture stuff. (Acting Principal)

Teachers commented that the school's transition program means that children are easily separated from their parents, understand routines and are able to listen to instructions. The Acting Principal also reflected on changes in literacy skills and school readiness more broadly:

I think there's been some significant growth in their literacy skills initially, and I think their readiness to learn has changed over the time as well. We've got kids ready to learn on day one really that have been through the early learning centre, through the transition. We're not wasting time getting them ready for learning. (Acting Principal)

Transition activities have also resulted in teachers better understanding the children arriving at school:

I think forearmed is forewarned, we know about these little people that are coming to our school. We know about them as learners as well, and we're ready to kick off the minute they get here. We're not fussing around finding out. We'll find out more obviously, because they'll be with us five days a week, but that familiarity already has been amazing, and the impact it's had in determining a relevant and authentic learning program for those kids. (Acting Principal)

Learning for all

BVPS also seeks to lift the profile of learning for families. The hub offers various adult education classes and has established Parent Ambassadors, where parents are invited to become advocates of the school, leading various events and encouraging the engagement of other community members in the school. They also provide feedback to the school on behalf of families and provide input into decision making, such as selecting the new hub leader. Parent Ambassadors are often recruited from families attending playgroup at the hub and many gain increased confidence and engagement with the school as a result of their role.

We've had a parent at our school who has been fairly quiet, fairly, you know, unobtrusive I suppose is the word. Supports her child, but as the relationship grew with this particular child, which was the older boy, her confidence and trust in us increased as well. This little boy has autism, and was taken out of the autism school, and brought into mainstream. There was an older girl actually... Then, we had the little one who participated in playgroups, and again was connected through [the hub leader], and the school, and the parent became more confident through the interactions with [the hub leader]... she's become a parent ambassador. She was on the interview panel for the new hub worker. (Acting Principal)

Both the hub leader and Acting Principal spoke of the effect of active parent involvement in schools on children:

When kids can say that they're comfortable, and they're ready for learning, and that's fine, but I think it brings it to another level when they can say, "My mum and dad are functioning all right in this place." We're looking after them too. That must give kids a different level of readiness for school. That level of anxiety, that angst, that uncertainty must dissipate. (Acting Principal)

If you talk to the kids, do you like that... Mum comes to school or Dad, they love it. They're proud of it, they think it's important. It's special, they get a badge, all of that sort of stuff. (Hub Leader)

Other hub activities, such as vocational workshops, have given families personal insights and boosted their self-confidence. The former hub leader used one woman's story to highlight significant achievements many families have made:

[One mother] had an older child, really significant family violence, so she'd just left her partner and had another little boy and no English. She was really embarrassed about her level of English... we worked with her and we just made her feel like she belonged ... we did a workshop called Lasting Gifts which was about finding a career pathway. ...it was a penny dropping moment for her because she had never worked... She found her strengths were

based around sort of the caring professions. ...She just suddenly sort of lit up, just like this candle in her. She's a parent ambassador as often as she can be but she's so busy now because she's got all of these classes with a view of going to TAFE and doing a certificate in community services. ...Her English is ever improving. ...she'll tell you had she not been in that playgroup, she would still be at home. Her little boy is delightful and so proud of her. ...And she's aware of what she wants for her kids now in a different way. ...She had a car accident and we were talking about it. She said, "Twelve months ago, one year ago, I would have been devastated and not known what to do." She managed the insurance, she was able to purchase a new car, she managed the TAC claim. We've helped with all those things but she said, "I would have just not done them. I would have just gone on without a car and that would have been it." She felt like that she could do it and that she had enough resourcing and support to do that. Someone from the Turkish women's group went with her to purchase the car to just have another person there. (Hub leader)

Family engagement

Both the hub leader and Principal remarked on the effect of hub practices on family engagement in the school. They spoke of families feeling welcomed and becoming more comfortable over time as they got to know school staff:

Her son hasn't been in playgroup for probably three years now and she still will talk in and greet many and say hello and she's happy. She seems to feel viewed and visible in that relationship. (Hub leader)

As trust and relationships have grown, families have been observed to be less nervous and anxious and have accepted different forms of support, such as an interpreter, to enable their school involvement:

She's not a mum who's taken up other opportunities in terms of the hub but she turns up to all the events. She's happy and she's smiling and she makes sure she's at parent teacher interviews and that sort of stuff... we've been able to talk about having a translator, having things translated and having an interpreter, which she sort of would never, was too embarrassed to even ask for before. (Hub leader)

Importantly, the school has seen an increase in parent attendance in hub, community and school activities. The Acting Principal commented on high levels of participation in parent-teacher interviews (90 per cent attendance) and in open learning days.

The school has also focused on helping families understand their role in supporting children's learning and communicating school's expectations so that the school and family can work together to optimise the child's learning.

Early entry points

Playgroups have provided an opportunity for families to gradually learn about how kindergarten works and the importance of early learning:

Her older son hadn't been to kinder and she didn't plan sending [her younger child] to kinder either because she just wasn't sure how it worked and how to fill in the form and how to negotiate all of that. Because our playgroup's based over this kinder program there we could get the kinder teachers to come in and have a chat. Gently through the year before anybody has to fill out any forms and then when the forms are due we could say, "How do you feel

about that? These are the things that he might get out of that experience and for you these are the things" and talk about drop offs and pick ups and structure and taking direction from another adult, all that sort of stuff. She said that's what she'd like to do. We were able to help her fill in the forms to do that. We were able to help with the orientation, support that. We were able to say you're doing an amazing job, you did it. (Hub leader)

The school has also recognised that playgroups act as an important feeder to kindergarten enrolments, and in turn, to school and has actively sought to encourage playgroup and kindergarten attendance. The hub leader reported that three or four years ago, only 12 of the 28 prep students had attended kindergarten. The following year, 25 of the 36 prep students had attended kindergarten. Children and families who aren't attending kindergarten, such as particular cultural groups, are also actively targeted in hub activities.

Better understanding families

Through the hub's work, teachers were reported to have a greater awareness of family circumstances and the cultural and linguistic diversity that exists within the community:

I think what it has done is raise the awareness of our teachers of how many different languages we have here. And of that, a little bit of understanding around what it might be like to not be able to participate in that as freely as you'd want and that cultural stuff around what's polite to ask and not. That our job is to kind of break that down and really offer, really give them something that makes them want to support their kids and give them some currency in that...we're constantly building that understanding that when people don't return notices or do exactly what it is that we ask when we send home a notice in English that there's some reasons why. (Hub leader)

The school has proactively identified and responded to parent needs, for example, observing that parents were reluctant to ask questions at parent teacher interviews and in response:

We got a bunch of questions that are perfectly wonderful to ask and then translated them into nine or ten different languages and have them available every time there is a parent teacher conference. So they can just have a look through and kind of get permission, ask them, don't ask them, whatever but these are some of the things you might want to think about. (Hub leader)

Attempts have also been made to be more strategic what orientation information is conveyed and how it is delivered to new parents starting school, involving Parent Ambassadors and building parent networks.

We were probably being a little bit, oh just conventional about here's your pack with all your information. Now we hold off on some of that and we do some more informal sessions and we get our parent ambassadors to come and sit with the parents. They talk as parents about what are you worried about, this is what I worried about so the information is transferred differently and less this is what you need to know. (Hub leader)

Lessons

Reflecting on lessons learnt over the years, the hub leader remarked that every interaction with families matters and that it was important to continually monitor, and repair when necessary, the school's relationship with families.

I think the lesson for me is that it's ongoing work. It's never ... you're never done. That you can never assume what people understand to be true. Constantly kind of discovering that and then responding to it. That for every great thing that you do, every moment you make someone feel comfortable and supportive, it only takes one negative experience to destroy ten moments of that. Just being really sensitive to that. (Hub leader)

The role of parents as advocates and community connectors has not only supported the school's initial engagement with families, but has also helped the school to overcome conflict or mistrust.

They can have one bad experience with someone at reception or ... and you lose them. You lose them and they talk for other parents. Their trust in you drops away. Now we have our parent ambassadors that trust in us that's bold enough and great enough that they don't ... when there's a negative experience from one parent, it doesn't influence them. They're fantastic. They'll talk about it. They'll come ask us, but there's not ... that's not there, but that's years of work. We keep working at that and we keep stating it. I think they're probably the key lessons. (Hub leader)

Hub or school spaces were also noted to have an effect on enabling family engagement and promoting peer to peer networks. Extra effort was needed to engage families when spaces for families to gather were not available.

Improvements

Areas identified for improvement included increased family engagement at school, moving from participation at events and conferences to teachers working side by side with parents, and further efforts to reach families not attending or not aware of the hub. It was suggested that translated messages about the impact of playgroups and early learning on children might help to spark further interest in the hub.

Coolaroo South Primary School, Hume, Victoria

The Coolaroo South Primary School (CSPS) community hub is driven by a vision 'to work closely with families, find ways to bring them into the school and work in partnership' (Principal). Established in 2006, the hub began life as a response to the challenge of changing local demographics and a need and desire to develop the community's trust in and relationships with the school.

Relationships and connections

The Principal attributes the CSPS hub's success promoting school readiness to its whole of community approach and the key people involved: 'it was really about the relationships... people felt comfortable and then started talking about what their needs actually were.' The hub leader emphasised the importance of getting to know families personally, to understand the best ways to help them feel comfortable seeking support, assistance and social connections through the hub. Rather than relying on one size all attempts at communication and engagement:

I remember even way back in the early days, we used to translate all our notices and everything else and try and improve communication. We would get them translated into Arabic, translated into Turkish. Then, it was a long time before we realised that so many of our families, many of families, were then to embarrassed to ask about what it said because they actually weren't literate in their own language, and so translating it actually made it worse in a way because I felt too embarrassed to say, "I can't read these." The communication wasn't happening. That really has been about developing relationships and

people feeling comfortable enough to ask whatever the issue might be because everybody is profoundly different and quite significantly different. Us, as a school, trying to meet all different needs. (Principal)

By establishing positive interpersonal relationships and trust with hub staff, the hub has enabled children and families to develop familiarity and confidence within the school environment:

We've got the kindergarten on one side, the playgroup on another. The prep teacher might walk in and out. The kinder teacher might walk in and out. They're already getting to know the faces, the names of these very significant people that their child will actually meet when they're five. The children also make friends in playgroup, then move on to kinder, then most of the time they're in the same or similar classroom when they're in prep. I think the children's confidence and the parents' confidence [are] established from a very early stage. (Hub leader)

Family school readiness

Relationships formed with families through the hub have provided opportunities to connect them with early learning opportunities such as playgroup and preschool. These relationships have also created a space for families to learn about the Australian school system and the important role of parents in children's learning from the early years, continuing into school:

For parents, it's still part of their journey...understanding their role in their children's learning, that they are their children's first teachers. They continue to be the most significant teacher in their child's life. They don't just drop the children at the front door, push them in, but that learning continues...For some families, it's been understanding schooling in Australia because it's much different to what they have experienced. (Principal)

Relationships were noted as particularly important when supporting families of children with additional needs to prepare for school:

It's so hard to have that conversation if you don't have a rapport with the family because it's hard enough for an adult to hear about their child having maybe a learning difficulty or a social, emotional not developed in that area or whatever the case may be. ...if you've built that rapport you can actually tap into that topic and that area in such a subtle way that you can get to a result much quicker. (Hub leader)

And established relationships have also provided important pretext for incidental conversations about parenting and children's learning:

It's the conversations that I've had there that I think open the opportunity for conversation about, okay well going to bed early is important. Having a good breakfast is really important. Me playing math games with my child is really important. Even if they haven't had any exposure to playgroup, kinder, or whatever, and they just come in for the first time, it's just a really good conversation starter and what's expected of them as a parent. (Hub leader)

The Principal and hub leader noted that increased confidence and connectedness have been among the biggest changes for families related to school readiness, as a result of their involvement with the hub:

[Through] having more participation and being engaged in their children's learning, it's helped to build the confidence of families too. I know of a particular parent who brought her children here for kindergarten, would pass by the office and have her head down just so no one would say hello to her because she was really embarrassed to speak in English because she didn't find herself adequate enough. We worked with this mother for a long time, and just kept insisting on making her talk and speak in English. ...[now] she's off doing courses here, there, and everywhere...One who again was similar, had newly arrived from the Middle East, too afraid to say hello to anyone. Now she's a playgroup leader in another school. Any opportunity she gets she goes off to learn more and learn more and learn more. She's done a Certificate Three in Children's Services here. ...It's opening pathways to parents in lots of different avenues. I think the more they deal with the school, the more of a connection they have here, the better decisions they're able to make and build the confidence. (Principal)

They spoke of the many indirect benefits for children from having happier, more confident parents who are engaged and connected within their community, including being more ready to learn: *'We say that happy family, happy children. ...overall in terms of children's learning, that's going to make a difference.'* (Principal)

Promoting family-school partnerships

At CSPS, the school considers it vital that all staff are on board and contribute to the inclusive atmosphere. The hub has to redefine the school's expectations around parent engagement:

It's not just about the numbers of people who are actually helping. It's knowing that they can confidently ask a question or call or they'll be contacted or someone will ring them back. It's even the little things like when children are away, the teacher rings to see if they're okay. Our phone calls and our communication is not just because something's going on. It's us knowing about a family's circumstances... It's not just about the kids learning on the ground. It's a lot more than that. It's about their well-being as people. (Principal)

The emphasis on inclusion, together with the hub's work in promoting parent engagement with the school has supported teachers to work in closer partnership with parents to support children's learning at school:

You're often seeing parents enter the classroom more so than what we ever did in the past. Teachers are a lot more open to inviting parents in for a cooking session or an exchange of learning session where a parent might be able to teach the children how to do a certain thing. It's happened in the cooking area where a teacher said, "Do you want to come and help me in my class to do this?" Whereas in the past, [the] parent wouldn't have the confidence to actually do that. The teacher wouldn't have the confidence to invite them in. (Hub Leader)

In-keeping with a strong commitment to working with families, the school recently engaged an architect to re-design its main entry to best engage families the minute they walk through the door.

The CSPS Principal and hub leader both emphasised their view that the hub was just part of the school's journey towards creating an inclusive community to support all children's learning and development:

I think for me it's really co-opted the word community for the whole school...I think it's raised the expectation and the level of service delivery for teachers as well. I think they're a lot more community minded today as they were in the past, and it's not just about the community hub. It's the KidsMatter. It's that framework, and then feeling the hub into that.

...The word community just gets talked about a lot more now. We don't see parents here and students here and staff. We're in it together. (Hub leader)

Children's school readiness

As was the case with families, increased confidence was also the biggest change the Principal and hub leader observed in children being ready for school since the implementation of the hub. The hub's work to promote children's early learning through playgroups and kindergarten has resulted in more children separating from their parents and becoming comfortable in group settings at an earlier age. The Principal and hub leader explained that before the hub was established, the start of the year was a very stressful and difficult time for preps, their families and school staff at CSPS: *'...there were always tears. There was always uncertainty. It just was what you just prepared yourself for.'* But these days, they don't expect it. With exposure to early learning environments, children are now working through separation issues and learning school-like routines at two years old at playgroup, not at five years old on the first day of school. They reflected that now if there is distress it is unusual and *'it's from someone who's coming into our community and starting afresh'* (Principal, CSPS).

Similarly, parents are also increasingly more familiar with the school environment and routines through exposure to their children's involvement in early learning:

When preps used to start, that first week they had their shortened days, the parents used to stay on the school site. We'd give them tea and coffee and food, and we'd chat. It was for two reasons because the children wanted to know that their parents were close by, and the parents wanted to know that they were close to their children. Now, they drop them off [and] they come back a couple of hours later, and they pick them up. We don't do that on site stuff anymore while the children are actually starting school because the families, most of them, they know us, and everything's already in place... We're not new faces. (Principal)

Having noticed benefits at CSPS, the Principal was delighted that similar changes in children's school readiness have been acknowledged by another school in the area, who commented positively on the preparedness of children attending their school after participating in hub activities at Coolaroo South.

The hub leader explained that following positive changes in children's readiness for school, the focus at CSPS is now shifting to promoting children's kindergarten readiness:

For next year, we're [putting] more resources into playgroup itself in terms of paid staff ... [because] we've realised the importance of being kindergarten ready. I do believe that we will see significant differences in the children because if they're ready for kindergarten and they can start that learning in kindergarten. Then, take that learning into prep, whereas we've spent many years just trying to get the children prep ready ...now we're able to start earlier for a better end, which will make a difference. (Hub leader)

Support service coordination and collaboration

Working within the hub model has facilitated connections with early childhood education and care services, early intervention and other support services and workers around issues affecting individual children's school readiness at CSPS. Hosting and participating in network meetings has assisted workers to get to know each other which has enabled good working relationships and information sharing, facilitating efficient support for families. However, the hub leader, CSPS indicated that there was still a lot of work to be done to promote service coordination and information sharing could still be a challenge with some kindergartens, particularly with frequent changes in staff:

One of the challenges we just experienced this morning is we've got a child coming from another kindergarten sitting who we prep next year hopefully but has some significant special needs, and we're trying to get that information. We're just struggling with it. My coworker is planning to actually go down there and get that information because if we wait we're going to miss our opportunity to apply for this child. Without that additional support then how much can you offer the child? ... if we had the rapport with that particular kindergarten, it would have been a lot easier to get, but we don't know who the person is, [we're] meeting her for the first time. The information has taken three weeks already, and we just don't have it. (Hub leader)

The Principal emphasised the significant advantages of having a kindergarten service on-site at CSPA, expressing a strong view that *'kindergartens should be in schools. It just makes sense. Because any of the children or families that might have been flagged [at the on-site kindergarten], we've known about now for six months.'*

Lessons

Overall, understanding the most effective ways to engage families has been one of the biggest learnings:

It's not across a counter or across a desk. It's about sitting down and having a conversation as a friend rather as a client. ...some schools...they see their families as clients rather than as equals and working hand in hand. It has to be the right person who understands that importance too and doesn't mind because the job becomes so varied. You don't mind anything because it might be taking someone and having a coffee for the first time. Nothing might actually come out of that, but it's a little bit of bonding to start with, so that maybe the next time, who knows. (Principal)

The Principal and hub leader agreed that hub implementation at CSPA has been a journey. The Principal indicated it has taken time for a whole school approach to inclusion and family support to become firmly embedded at all levels of CSPA. While this process has been enabled by the work of a stable, committed team, the Principal was confident that solid foundations are now in place for this culture to continue beyond the current group of staff.

Improvements

While there have been great successes promoting school readiness at CSPA, the hub leader reflected that there will always be an ongoing need to adapt and improve hub activities and processes to meet community needs:

I still feel we have a long way to go in what we're doing. We've got to still be open, to be flexible, I guess because our community is always changing too. It's also meeting the needs of the community and being open to that. I don't know that there's anything specific. I think just an openness to being flexible and possibly needing to change the model to make it work, again, depending on the needs of the community. (Hub leader)

Continuing to collaborate with services and offer families opportunities to access services was another area of focus for CSPA moving forward, along with allocating more resources to playgroup to improve and further promote kindergarten and school readiness. Finally, the Principal and hub leader reflected that measuring success was an ongoing challenge and potential area for improvement:

...it's been hard probably to measure success too. You have to be prepared for that because you do have to justify your resource allocation and funding and things like that. Sometimes it's hard to actually have real outcomes that aren't just anecdotal things as evidence. ...We have a very transient community. That's just the nature of community. I don't think sometimes we get the benefit of seeing the success down the track, but I am very confident that it's there. (Principal)

Dallas Brooks Community Primary School, Hume, Victoria

The Dallas Brooks Community Primary School (DBCPS) community hub is part of the 'ethos and vision' of the school. The hub was established in 2007 to provide the community with a space where they could feel comfortable accessing support and to promote a 'love [of] learning, whether it's in playgroups, school ...or whether it's adult learning. It's that lifelong learning' (Principal). The hub aims to put children at the centre, supported by family and community, recognising the critical connections between these different levels to support children's school readiness.

Engagement and wellbeing

Engagement and wellbeing are central to the DBCPS strategic plan. Activities like cake decorating and craft have been important to engage families at the hub, creating a space for socially isolated mothers to form relationships with hub staff and other families in their community. Activities have provided important opportunities for families to build their English skills and confidence, and for the hub leader to get to know families and gain their trust. The hub leader reflected that it was by establishing this trust that she has then been able to introduce the idea of playgroup and kindergarten to families, helping them to understand the importance of early learning with a view to promoting their capacity to support their children's future school readiness:

We've had the sports hub during the year and lots of the Mums ...came with their little ones and we say, 'Well, I haven't seen you at the playgroup' or 'You don't come to cake decorating.' ...In craft, we try to encourage them to talk English as much as possible, that the more they do things like that, the more they integrate into our community, but also are not fearful that next step into playgroup, kinder or school. (Hub leader)

Engaging families at the hub during the early years through to kindergarten, then to school, provides an opportunity to educate otherwise isolated families around the importance of early education and being involved in their children's learning and development:

The notion of the playgroups, starting so young, is that the parents see that education at that level is so important. Just having that value... That play is so important in a child's development. Starting from the playgroup, it's really promoting it to the next level, to three year old kinder, then to four year old kinder. It's just naturally feeding it into the school. (Assistant Principal)

The DBCPS Assistant Principal noted that refugee families face particular challenges engaging with school and that relationships built at the hub could be an important connector into the school:

Given that we've got a high number of refugees and families that are seeking asylum, they often see the school as a very scary place because it's government. That's just breaking down that barrier and making them more comfortable in the environment. We had a circumstance where a parent didn't want to take on services offered to her, in fear of

[having] her visa cancelled... before it becomes a big issue, [the hub] can step in and be proactive, rather than reactive. They're the benefits of that connection. (Assistant Principal)

The DBCPS hub provides families with opportunities to receive broad support from a range of services as well as training and education, supporting their overall wellbeing. The hub offers assistance to the whole community, guided by need, with a holistic philosophy to strengthening the community:

We've had VASS in, Victorian Arabic Social Services. We've had Centrelink come. We get different groups in and do like a coffee club. ...There's a Women's Health Week in September and I think I can get someone to help sponsor us for that, where we could get doctors in to talk about women's health in general. I'm talking to [Registered Training Agencies] at the moment, we run Certificate courses and things like that because I want more education. (Hub leader)

We have people walk off the street that we help. It's not just about the school. If they want to help with their Centrelink forms or they have an intervention order that they want us to help with, then we do all that as well. (Principal)

The DBCPS Assistant Principal and hub leader described a particular incident where a mother who had suffered significant trauma was suffering from flashbacks. By working together with the school to address the family's needs, the hub leader was able to sensitively offer the mother a referral to Foundation House, which she accepted. The school also worked with the hub to provide her child with play therapy. Meanwhile, another mother from the craft class spontaneously became a vital social and emotional support to the family, demonstrating the benefits of the hub's efforts to promote peer relationships through group activities for families. The DBCPS Principal emphasised the importance of a holistic approach to family support through the community hub model to support children and positively impact the environments in which they are raised: *"I think when the family's connected and they feel safe, their children are a lot happier"*.

Preparing for school

The DBCPS hub has a strong focus on providing a solid foundation for children in the early years: *'...the more that we can give them in the early years, the more successful they'll be'* (Principal, DBCPS). Many years ago, before the hub was established, only 50 per cent of preps enrolled at the school went to kindergarten in their year before school, and so the start of the school year could be traumatic: *'they'd all be screaming and they would not settle for two terms. Well they'd never left their parents. Some of them still had bottles'* (Principal, DBCPS). The Principal noted that children's connections with their parents could be particularly strong in CALD families due to the challenges of language and limited exposure to other adults or children as a result of social isolation.

In stark contrast, now most children who start school at DBCPS are involved in early learning through the hub at much younger ages. After attending playgroups, three year old and four year old kindergarten, starting prep is no longer most children's first experience of being away from their parents in a group environment. The DBCPS Principal reflected noticing there had been significant improvements in children's abilities to follow simple routines they need to understand at school, and this meant they arrived at school ready to learn: *'you can see they know how to sit in a circle. They know that they have to put their bags somewhere. All of those basic routines are already there, so it makes the learning happen a lot faster than what it would, had they not had that.'* The hub's playgroups and other activities link in with the kindergarten on-site and the school, following the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) from zero to eight years.

Integration and structured transition

The Principal, Assistant Principal and hub leader described a joint effort on the part of the hub, the kindergarten and the school to ensure that children and families are integrated into the life of the school from an early age, participating in community activities such as Book Week and sports events, so that they feel part of the community and become familiar with the school environment and learning spaces: *'The kinder room is quite small, compared to the school. [But the children] don't feel intimidated because they've already been there. 'Oh yeah, this is the big school,' some of the kids say'* (Hub leader, DBCPS).

To enhance their preparedness for school, children engaged at the hub participate in two terms of structured school transition before their first year of school at DBCPS. In addition, it is also standard practice at DBCPS for all children at the on-site ECEC service to be assessed by a speech pathologist prior to starting school. Reports are then shared with prep teachers (including teachers at other schools) to ensure they are ready for the children when they arrive. To smooth the transition further, kindergarten staff attend the first day of school with the new preps, to provide further continuity for the children between kindergarten and school.

The hub also provides transition mornings for parents in the lead up to their children starting school. A recent session involved hosting a nutritionist who spoke to parents about constructing healthy lunchboxes, engaging parents in the practical aspects of supporting their children at school. These, together with the two terms of structured transition activities and speech assessments, exemplifies the hub, school and kindergarten's commitment, as a community, to adapt transition practice to children and families' needs.

Implementing these strategies has vastly improved preps' transition to school. The Principal reflected that at recent transition sessions *'there was just a couple of teary children...sometimes they're not the ones that we've had [at playgroup or preschool] here, they're not familiar with the school'*.

Lessons and improvements

At DBCPS, the primary learning has been around the benefits of working with families to help them best support their children's learning and development:

We believe that the education starts from zero. The importance of it and the brain development between zero and five, it's optimum. We can start teaching the parents how children learn at an early age. It's not only helping the child, it's helping the parent be a better parent. (Principal)

The Principal felt strongly that more funding for three year old kindergarten was necessary for the hub to improve its support of children's school readiness, in addition to the playgroups currently offered:

They're talking about disadvantage and catching up to children that are advantaged, then they need to start funding the three year olds. We used to have probably two full groups of three year olds. We only have one now and within that cluster...because they can't afford it. That's why our playgroups are so important. They're still getting educated there and we believe, we pay people to run them. They're not just volunteers. (Principal)

Finally, the hub leader indicated that a lack of childcare could be problematic for some mothers attending hub activities and that this was something to consider in future.

Sunbury Heights Primary School, Hume, Victoria

The Sunbury Heights Primary School (SHPS) community hub was established in 2012. Originally focused on 'providing things' for families through activities like a breakfast club and homework club, the work of the hub has evolved over time to be fully integrated with the life of the school and now plays a key role in facilitating parent engagement with the school and the wider community.

The Principal considers the SHPS hub's most significant contribution to school readiness has been improved parent engagement, parents feeling valued and improvements in children's learning. She reflected that children are coming to school 'more happy, healthy and resilient' and that 'people are saying that education is moving forward' as a result of the support offered to families through the hub, including playgroups and broader support connecting families to kindergarten and school.

Parent engagement and capacity building

The SHPS hub has promoted school readiness by engaging families in community activities early and enabling families to build relationships and familiarity with the school, before their children reach prep. The hub leader considered that relationships were central to her role: 'It is just about relationships really. Having good relationships with people, because if you do then it will make for a successful school place for the kids and the parents.'

At SHPS, engaging parents as partners in their children's learning has been key to building their capacity to support their children at school: 'we want to work with them in partnership and we want to know what is important to them in raising their children' (SHPS Principal). The Principal noted that it is important that parents feel 'that we value what they know as parents, respecting what they know and them trusting and respecting us with their kids.' In this spirit, prep transition sessions for families at the hub have included talking about families' hopes and dreams for their children and encouraging parents to think about what they want from the school for their children. The hub leader also does home visits to provide extra support and reassurance to families before their children start school. This provides families with an additional opportunity to ask any outstanding questions and provide any additional information or help they need in the lead up to their child's formal transition to school.

Both the Principal and hub leader reflected on significant changes in the lives of several parents who had been involved in education courses at the hub and the long term benefits of this for their children's learning, and recognised that it was the hub model that had enabled this to occur:

There were nine parents from our school who were trained, who gained their Certificate Three in Education Support, and ...six parents here who did [another] course at the hub, so that's instrumental to kids in learning to see that their parents value learning and are actually working in education. (Hub leader)

If ... I didn't have somebody like [the hub leader] working within that environment, somebody who was welcoming and supportive of families, and outward-facing, then certainly [engaging parents in education and learning] wouldn't be as significant... having someone [for families] to communicate with, someone who wasn't a teacher... [it enables us to be] more focused on families. In a school we get so busy, and even though we want to do all of that, I don't know if we really always do that. (Principal)

They also reflected on how playgroups provided an opportunity to focus families' attention on their children's learning and development: 'At first... it wasn't very directed... Then we made it about, well the playgroups and the hub is about getting your kids ready for school' (Principal, SHPS). In the beginning, some

parents engaged more naturally with their children than others, though the hub leader explained that in a supported group environment parents learned from each other, forming relationships in the process. Core activities at the SHPS community hub playgroup are structured to help families learn how to engage their children in reading as well as to provide families with ideas for early learning activities to do at home. The hub leader said that seeing their children learn in playgroup was a positive experience for families: *“when the parents come in and they see their children counting numbers and they say, ‘oh my goodness!’”*.

The Principal indicated that the families involved in the hub’s playgroups now take school and learning more seriously. In fact, four parents from the hub’s first playgroup are currently represented on the school council (out of 12 positions): *‘we didn’t approach them ...they wanted to be on school council ...I think just we would have been begging people before’* (Principal, SHPS). This big change was facilitated by these families having a closer connection to the school and relationships within the school community, through their involvement in the hub. The Principal noted: *‘I think our families have pride and confidence in our schools now.’*

Changes for children

The SHPS hub leader shared a key story that demonstrated the impact of the hub’s playgroup on one particular child’s readiness for school, by facilitating gradual exposure to the school environment through a trusted relationship:

There was a child in kinder and wasn't coming to the playgroup. He was very clingy to Mum. I think the teacher actually said to the parent, “you should take him to the playgroup they are having at Sunbury Heights on Monday because you'll be going to that school”. Initially the child just sat on Mum's knee, didn't engage in anything at all. [He] slowly started to move away from Mum. What we do [at Sunbury Heights] is [take the children] from the playgroup to the [school] classrooms ...they just get to meet with the school environment... They do that throughout the year ... The children were all going to art and he didn't want to come. ...He finally said he would come. I said to him, “if you don't want to stay there, I promise I'll bring you straight back to Mum”. When we got to the art room, all of the children put a smock on ...he started to cry. I said “okay I'll take you back to Mum”, so I took him straight back to Mum. The following week, we tried it again and it was more successful. It was almost like the child learned to [separate] ... When he came to school in prep he was fine. He settled in really well because he initially had come to know his environment [through] a very slow process. But at the end of the day, it is about the child and these are the things that happen. Through playgroup and then school, it makes the child's transition really easy. That is just one story from a child who really ... If you saw this child, even the kinder teacher was worried, but now he is fine. He is going to school now and never looked back. (Hub leader)

Generally, the Principal and hub leader believe that the playgroup’s focus on early numeracy and literacy has assisted children to develop the skills they need to thrive at school: *‘encouraging them to love to read from an early age. They are never too young to read or love to read’* (hub leader, SHPS). This, coupled with introducing children to the school environment at a young age and getting to know older students (grade five and six) as ‘buddies’ during kindergarten, are examples of how the hub has helped make the transition to school more fluid, helping children to be prepared for school before the school year starts.

Kindergarten and school: integration and adaptations

Information sharing and working together have been the main benefits of the hub model for local kindergartens and teachers at SHPS in promoting school readiness: *‘we talk closely with them, that’s the main thing’* (hub leader, SHPS). The Principal explained that relationships between the hub, the school and

local kindergartens were close, and just as occurs with the playgroup, *'[the kinders] actually bring the children down to teach at the school to the library on a Friday'*, enhancing children's familiarity with the school. These relationships are well-established, so much so that one of the retired kindergarten teachers now helps run some of the playgroups at the hub, contributing valuable skills and experience.

At SHPS, the establishment of the hub provided an opportunity to think about how the school could *'make prep transition better'* and about *'what is the most we can do to make it so that everybody comes to school?'* (Principal, SHPS). A key strategy initiated by the hub was to delay preps starting school by one or two days (after all the other year levels), allowing time for each child and family to meet their teacher individually, ensuring all prep assessments are conducted before children start:

We've changed our assessment in the beginning of the year, [children] don't come to school straight up so they all can be assessed properly and start off on a level playing field. [Otherwise] some kids might be assessed on the first day, and someone [else] doesn't get an assessment until the end February. ...so the prep kids can come [with] their parents and meet with each of the prep teachers, so that is another way it engages the families within the school as well. (Principal)

Additionally, the Principal explained that at SHPS, teachers' involvement in support of the whole child was *'not negotiable'* and that the hub model has contributed to the collective community culture of caring holistically for children and families.

Lessons and improvements

The main learning at SHPS has been the benefits of having the hub integrated as part of the school, rather than a separate standalone entity focused on discrete programs.

In terms of improvements, the Principal noted that SHPS was currently working with Hume City Council on a proposal to develop a first-class, multi-purpose facility with spaces for government and non-government services to run activities and programs, funded by the Federal Government. The new centre would enhance the facilities available to SHPS hub families, including more outreach services, community kitchen space and other activities and programs: *'That is going to be really fantastic if we get that. It will provide social inclusion and participation for our families so that is fantastic'* (Principal, SHPS).

Summary of findings

Overall, the four hubs provided numerous examples of positive changes in children's readiness for school, schools' readiness for children and in family conditions and environments that influence children's learning. The following presents a synthesis of key findings across the hubs in relation to the three components of school readiness, as well as common features about how these positive changes were achieved.

Children's readiness for school

Children's smooth transition to school and their increased confidence and familiarity with hub and school environments was highlighted as a significant change created by hubs. Principals and hub leaders spoke of how early education experiences and hub transition efforts minimised children's distress and promoted a sense of belonging and wellbeing when starting school.

What I see [about children] is an ownership of the space, and the school already...this is their school...they're really happy to be here, and to connect to teachers who they're familiar with, who they've already had heaps of conversations with. (Acting principal)

All hubs reported general improvements in children's skills and abilities upon school entry (since commencement of the hub model) and attributed this to their increased exposure to and participation in early learning programs and activities. Improvements included English language skills, including the capacity to follow instructions, early literacy and numeracy, and the ability to follow school routines.

You can see they know how to sit in a circle. They know that they have to put their bags somewhere. All of those basic routines are already there, so it makes the learning happen a lot faster than what it would, had they not had that. (Principal)

I think there's been some significant growth in their literacy skills initially, and I think their readiness to learn has changed over the time as well. We've got kids ready to learn on day one really that have been through the early learning centre, through the transition. We're not wasting time getting them ready for learning. (Acting Principal)

Interviewees commented that these changes in children's school readiness had been marked. Multiple hubs commented that the start of the school year was now a far smoother period for new preps, their families and school staff, compared with the experience prior to hub implementation.

Schools' readiness for children

An early focus on transition has also resulted in teachers gaining a better understanding of children and families arriving at school. Teachers were reported to have greater awareness about the circumstances of migrant and refugee families and the degree of cultural and linguistic diversity in the local community.

I think what it has done is raise the awareness of our teachers of how many different languages we have here...a little bit of understanding around what it might be like to not be able to participate in that as freely as you'd want. That cultural stuff about what's polite to ask and not...We're constantly building that understanding that when people don't return notices or do exactly what it is that we ask when we send home a notice in English, that there's some reasons why. (Hub leader)

This enhanced understanding of children and families' needs at school commencement has accelerated the development of relevant learning programs and led to adaptations in practices such as parent and teacher interviews. Although few specific strategies or resources schools used to cater for the diverse needs of children once they started school were raised, broader strategies, such as the need for all staff to foster an inclusive and welcoming school environment, have been implemented.

Family conditions, environments and supports for children's learning

Positive changes in families' social and emotional environments were described in interviews, with increased parent confidence, a sense of belonging and wellbeing all recurrent themes across the hubs. Principals and hub leaders emphasised that family engagement with hub activities and community services had led to these changes in self-confidence and wellbeing. They considered this to be foundational to families' abilities to function positively within the school community and, in turn, support an effective transition to school. Many stories of families engaging in adult education programs, such as English language and vocational training, enabled through increased self-confidence, were also shared.

[Through] having more participation and being engaged in their children's learning, it's helped to build the confidence of families too. I know of a particular parent who brought her children here for kindergarten, would pass by the office and have her head down just so no one would say hello to her because she was really embarrassed to speak in English because she didn't find

herself adequate enough. We worked with this mother for a long time, and just kept insisting on making her talk and speak in English...[now] she's off doing courses here, there and everywhere. (Principal)

Stories of increased parent awareness of early learning and an improved understanding of the expectations and practicalities of school, critical to supporting a smooth transition to school, were raised.

Her older son hadn't been to kinder and she didn't plan sending [her younger child] to kinder either because she just wasn't sure how it worked and how to fill in the form and how to negotiate all of that. Because our playgroup's based over this kinder program there we could get the kinder teachers to come in and have a chat. Gently through the year before anybody has to fill out any forms and then when the forms are due we could say, "How do you feel about that? These are the things that he might get out of that experience and for you these are the things" and talk about drop offs and pick ups and structure and taking direction from another adult, all that sort of stuff. She said that's what she'd like to do. We were able to help her fill in the forms to do that. We were able to help with the orientation, support that. We were able to say you're doing an amazing job, you did it. (Hub leader)

Several participants commented on effect of family involvement in the school in terms of the sense of pride children showed in their parents when leading a school activity: *'they're proud of it, they think it's important'* (Hub leader).

Hubs also spoke of providing parents with developmentally appropriate activities to undertake at home with their children, however specific examples of changes in the home learning environment were not provided.

Common features of the hubs' approach

Principals and hub leaders spoke of implementing responsive, relationship-based approaches, informed by the needs of their communities, to achieve these changes. Common features within hubs' approaches were: relationship-building practices; family engagement; an early focus on transition; flexibility and adaptability; and coordination.

Investment in relationships

Principals and hub leaders reflected that the hub model has facilitated the development of relationships between families, services and schools, which has had a powerful role in promoting family involvement in the hub and school. Authentic and responsive relationships with children by both hub and school staff has also been a central feature of hubs.

All interviewees observed that it took time to form genuine, trusting relationships with families, particularly since many migrant and refugee families could be isolated, unaware of early childhood services and/or fearful or distrustful of formal institutions. They indicated these relationships were fundamental to enhancing parents' capacities to support their children's learning and transition to school, by providing an avenue through which effective support could be delivered. The following observation illustrates the importance of the relationships developed at the hub for refugee families in particular:

Given that we've got a high number of refugees and families that are seeking asylum, they often see the school as a very scary place because it's government. That's just breaking down that barrier and making them more comfortable in the environment. We had a circumstance where a parent didn't want to take on services offered to her, in fear of [having] her visa

cancelled... before it becomes a big issue, [the hub] can step in and be proactive, rather than reactive. They're the benefits of that connection. (Assistant Principal)

Family engagement

A dedicated outward facing role and the development of warm, trusting relationships between families and hub workers has underpinned families' participation at the hubs and, in turn, at school and more widely in the community. The benefits of family involvement and a school and family 'alliance' to promote children's learning have been increasingly recognised through the work of hubs.

Interviewees consistently observed that increased engagement with hubs through structured activities and incidental conversations had assisted families to develop their capacity to engage with services, including schools, as well as confidence and motivation to be involved in education. This included families developing their understanding of the importance of taking an active role in their child's education; as well as enhancing their own English language and vocational skills:

[Through] having more participation and being engaged in their children's learning, it's helped to build the confidence of families too. I know of a particular parent who brought her children here for kindergarten, would pass by the office and have her head down just so no one would say hello to her because she was really embarrassed to speak in English because she didn't find herself adequate enough. We worked with this mother for a long time...[now] she's off doing courses here, there, and everywhere...One who again was similar, had newly arrived from the Middle East, too afraid to say hello to anyone. Now she's a playgroup leader in another school... she's done a Certificate Three in Children's Services here. ...It's opening pathways to parents in lots of different avenues. I think the more they deal with the school, the more of a connection they have here, the better decisions they're able to make and build the confidence... We say that happy family, happy children. ...overall in terms of children's learning, that's going to make a difference. (Principal)

The establishment and ongoing promotion of a culture of inclusion at the hubs was also emphasised as critical, with principals and hub leaders noting that all staff from teachers to administrative staff must be on board with an inclusive and family-centred approach for it to be effective and break down barriers for families.

When the kindergarten was first onsite, the families came in the gate and they used to walk around [the back]. That was probably one thing we quite consciously said 'No. We want them walking through the door. We want to eyeball. We want to say hello. We want to do meet and greet and smile at parent and child as they walk through to the room'... They were conscious things, and now it just happens. ...when we started, the staff in the office didn't want the parents coming through or the toddlers or the little ones because it was noisy... It's about all staff being on board and understanding the importance of smiling...There's been a big transformation for us. The open space, the friendliness, we don't get anyone saying 'but that's not my job. I won't do it'. ...It's something I'm very conscious now when we're employing new staff always... You've got to have that right personality ...natural friendly, helpful. (Principal)

Early focus on transition

All hubs described the need for children and families to begin to prepare for the transition to school at a young age, not just in the year before school, and described facilitating this by helping families to understand the benefits of early learning and providing connections to early learning opportunities.

We've got the kindergarten on one side, the playgroup on another. The prep teacher might walk in and out. The kinder teacher might walk in and out. They're already getting to know the faces, the names of these very significant people that their child will actually meet when they're five. The children also make friends in playgroup, then move on to kinder, then most of the time they're in the same or similar classroom when they're in prep. I think the children's confidence and the parents' confidence [are] established from a very early stage. (Hub leader)

Hubs offered children a range of early education experiences (e.g. playgroup, supported playgroup, kindergarten) and reported that the model had contributed to more CALD, migrant and refugee children participating in playgroups and kindergarten in their communities.

Flexibility and adaptability

Principals and hub leaders indicated that services and schools have increased recognition of the need to adjust and adapt practices to better support the diverse needs of children and families. At all hubs, participants reported kindergartens and schools working together to adapt school transition processes to improve the transition experience for children and families. Adaptations hubs reported to enhance transition and improve school readiness included:

- conducting playgroup and kindergarten activities in school spaces, involving some school children and staff to provide continuity between playgroup/kindergarten and school;
- inviting younger children and families to participate in school activities such as Book Week and sports days;
- offering a longer series of prep transition sessions for children extending over terms three and four, rather than just in term four;
- offering multiple practical transition sessions for families (e.g. creating healthy lunchboxes);
- offering families informal opportunities to meet and chat with 'Parent Ambassadors';
- offering families home visits before their child starts school;
- conducting speech assessments for all children transitioning to school and supplying reports to prep teachers;
- delaying prep start by a few days until all relevant assessments have been completed for all children; and
- providing families with sample questions they might ask teachers at parent-teacher interviews.

Coordination

Hubs spoke of improved coordination between services and schools to achieve the common goal of improved children's learning. This incorporated information sharing, network meetings, joint activities and programs, and different professionals working together to facilitate holistic support for families and their children. Some hubs noted coordination with secondary services, such as speech pathology and nutrition, had also developed since the hub's inception. However, hubs were not immune from common coordination challenges, particularly when there was a high turnover of staff.

Lessons and improvements

Principals and hub leaders reflected on the journey of their hub and the lessons learned. They emphasised the importance of effective and early engagement of families and the time it takes to build an inclusive culture across the entire school and community. Participants also learnt about the benefits of taking an integrated approach to promoting school readiness and children's learning by working closely with schools, services and the community and the importance of clear transition pathways from playgroup to kindergarten and on to school.

Improvements hubs considered might assist their work to promote school readiness included continuing to be flexible and adapt to changing community needs; the need for outreach to reach and engage additional families; investing more resources into early learning (i.e. playgroups and three year old kindergarten); providing childcare for families attending adult-focused hub activities; improving community facilities; and better measuring success to maintain sufficient funding and resourcing for ongoing activity.

Alignment with pilot evaluation findings

Findings about the role of the selected community hubs in promoting school readiness are in strong alignment with the results of the pilot evaluation of the National Community Hubs Program (Wong, Press & Cumming, 2015). The pilot evaluation found that hubs are making a difference to families' parenting, connection to school, and sense of empowerment; as well as children's development and engagement with early learning and school. Specifically, it found evidence that families felt confident and supported in their parenting, and in providing activities that would help their children learn and grow. Evidence also suggested that families knew more about school; and felt more connected with school and the local community. For children, the pilot evaluation found evidence of improvements in early language and literacy, wellbeing and behaviour; and that children were familiar and comfortable with their school.

The pilot evaluation also investigated the difference hubs had made for schools. Results provide evidence of the enhancement of school staff's capacity to work in collaborative partnership; increase in school capacity to respond to families' needs and aspirations; and importantly, that families felt listened to at school and comfortable learning at their children's school. There was also evidence that school staff's awareness of and connections to early years and other community services had increased; school and local community services were more connected with one another; and that school and local community services worked collaboratively to develop shared visions and/or plans to work with migrant families.

While it is not possible to generalise the present project's findings beyond the four hubs that were examined in Hume, the strong alignment between themes raised by participants as important to promoting school readiness in this project and findings from the pilot evaluation strengthen the validity of case study findings.

How do community hubs align to the research?

As described in the review of the research literature on school readiness presented above, much of the research and analysis in this area has focused on ways of building children's skills and on transition programs to ensure a smooth entry into the school system. School community hub models have the capacity to achieve all of this and more.

The idea of schools as community hubs has been a subject of interest in in the US (Horn et al., 2015), Canada (Arimura et al., 2015) and Australia (McShane et al., 2012; Simons, 2012; Wong et al., 2015). However, there is no fixed model of what they deliver or how they are configured, and therefore no hard evidence of their efficacy. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence from various demonstration projects, such as the Toronto First Duty Project (Arimura et al., 2011), that community hubs can be an effective way of promoting healthy child development and learning, seamless transitions to school, and parental engagement with the education system.

The findings from the present study support this general conclusion. Case study findings are considered in light of the research evidence in this section, presented in relation to: factors that promote school readiness; and key processes to ensure successful provision of support.

Factors that promote school readiness

The research indicates that the factors that promote school readiness include positive home learning environments, attendance at high quality early childhood programs, transition programs from early childhood services to schools, and school capacity to meet the diverse needs once they commence school.

Promoting positive home learning environments

Case study findings indicate that staff have provided families with examples of how they might implement developmentally appropriate activities at home, although there was no direct evidence of the extent to which this was effective in changing children's home learning environments. CALD families are more likely to need support in this area. The research shows that caregivers' awareness of the significance of the early years has everyday implications for parenting and the probability of engaging with ECEC services. The research also shows that CALD families, particularly those from refugee backgrounds, are less likely to be aware of the importance of preschool, play-based activities, and home-based learning. Additionally, families who are newly arrived often face concurrent settlement issues which supersedes issues relating to early childhood development.

While the hubs described facilitating school transition by providing practical connections into early learning and promoting the importance of the early years through playgroups and incidental conversations, it is not clear what proactive strategies are being employed to share this knowledge around the importance of the early years with families. Measures that dispel commonly held misperceptions about the importance of play-based learning and early parent/child engagement are identified as significant by the research and must be reflected in everyday practice.

Ensuring attendance at high quality early childhood programs.

The findings indicate that the hubs had contributed to more CALD, migrant and refugee children participating in playgroups and kindergarten in their communities. Families became much more comfortable and confident in the school environment, and felt a greater sense of belonging. However, it is unclear from the findings whether the programs were of the kind identified in the literature as best practice, engaging the children as active learners rather than using direct teaching approaches to teach specific academic skills. There is nothing to suggest otherwise – the study simply did not explore this aspect in any detail.

Providing transition programs from early childhood services to schools

School community hubs increase the likelihood of smooth transitions by providing facilitated playgroups and kindergarten programs on school sites. Although co-location of services is not a guarantee of collaboration, the findings indicate that school and kindergarten staff did, in fact, work together in adapting and improving the transition experience for children and families.

School capacity to meet the diverse needs of new students

Models of school readiness clearly identify 'ready schools' as a key component in supporting smooth transitions to school. There is little in the findings of this study to indicate what specific strategies or resources schools used to cater for the diverse needs of new students once they had started school. This does not mean that schools did not use such strategies, or do a good job of catering for individual differences. However, since the 'ready schools' contribution to improving transitions to school is also relatively poorly covered in the research literature, it would be concerning if schools neglected this area.

Key processes to ensure successful provision of support

The research indicates that key processes needed to ensure the successful provision of school readiness supports are building trusting relationships between educators and parents, collaboration between school and early childhood educators, and linking with other services.

Building relationships with parents

The case study findings indicate that the hub model helped greatly in building positive relationships between staff (both early childhood and school staff) and parents. Inevitably, this took time to achieve, but the positive and trusting relationships that resulted helped ensure greater parental involvement in the early childhood and school programs, and greater capacity to support their children's learning. However, it is not clear whether this was universal result or whether there were some families with whom staff were unable to build strong relationships and who therefore failed to attend regularly or at all. For such families, more active outreach strategies may be needed to engage as many families as possible in the hub activities.

Collaboration between school staff and early childhood staff

The findings indicate that the hubs succeeded in promoting positive collaborative relationships between school and early childhood staff, with many positive benefits for the children's transition to school.

Building connections with other services

The findings indicate that the hub model contributes to a better integrated support system for families although the nature and extent of these connections are not explored in any detail.

Overall alignment

Taken together, the case study findings suggest that the community hubs are largely succeeding in their central task – of ensuring that children arrive at school ready and able to take advantage of the learning and social opportunities that schools provide. All hubs reported marked improvements in children's skills and abilities upon school entry, including increases in early literacy and numeracy, as well as increased capacity to adhere to basic routines necessary for school. These improvements made the transition to school far smoother for new students, their families and school staff, compared with the experience prior to hub implementation.

The findings also show that the school community hubs had benefits other than giving children experiences that will make the transition to school easier – most notably building the confidence of parents to be involved in education, including building their own vocational skills. This is in keeping with reviews that suggest that school community hubs have the capacity to achieve a range of positive outcomes beyond the school readiness agenda (Arimura et al., 2011; Horn et al., 2015; McShane et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2015).

What are the implications?

The evidence stresses the importance of school readiness and the subsequent benefits of children arriving at school ready to make the most of the rich learning opportunities available. Data suggests that CALD children are among the most developmentally vulnerable in the Australian community and that it is important to intervene early before differences in ability gaps become fixed and difficult to close. Such interventions should focus on all three components of school readiness simultaneously: children's readiness for school, schools' readiness for children, and the capacity of families and communities to provide the necessary opportunities, conditions and supports to optimise children's development and learning.

The community hubs model is a promising approach to enhancing migrant and refugee children's school readiness that addresses these three components. The case studies provide insights about the strengths of the

model, including relationship-building practices, family engagement, an early start to transition, coordination and the adaptation of services to better meet the needs of children and families.

The case study hubs provided evidence of:

- Facilitating practical connections into early learning, which appeared to result in the increased participation of CALD, migrant and refugee children in playgroups and kindergarten in their communities
- A smooth transition for children and families, enhanced by the co-location of hubs and schools
- Positive relationships between staff (both early childhood and school staff), parents and children
- Collaborative relationships between school and early childhood staff, with many positive benefits for the children's transition to school
- Action to build family capacity and the quality of the home learning environment
- Building a more integrated support system for children and families in local communities

Project findings about the hubs promoting children's early education experiences, a smooth transition to school, positive relationships between hubs and families and collaboration between schools and services align with 2015 evaluation results (Wong et al., 2015).

The project findings also provide insights about areas for possible hub focus, investigation and/or improvement. These include:

- Ensuring the most vulnerable families are reached and engaged by community hubs
- Investigating and monitoring the quality of playgroup programs and practices, as well as other strategies designed to build family capacity and improve the home learning environment, to ensure they align with best practice
- Investment in strategies that proactively share the importance of the early years with families
- Exploring and/or developing further specific 'ready school' strategies to cater for the diverse needs of children once they start school

Creating evidence-informed resources to support practice monitoring and evaluation, targeting the above areas of focus, and capturing and sharing exemplars across community hubs could provide two main benefits. First, important evidence on the program's implementation and outcomes will be collected and documented. Second, this information could be used to inform local community hub planning and improvements so as to amplify the positive impact of hubs on children, families, communities and schools.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your current role and connection to the community hub?
2. How long have you been involved with the community hub?

*We are interested in exploring the impact of community hubs by collecting **stories** of what you think have been the **most significant changes** in relation to school readiness. Stories should be framed by their context, specify the actors involved, your role (if any), what happened and the outcome. We are interested in knowing what the change was specifically (i.e. what was different), why it is significant to you and what difference has been made (now and into the future).*

3. Looking back over your involvement in community hubs, what do you think has been the most significant change in ...
 - a. Children being ready for school?
 - b. Families being ready for school?
 - c. Early childhood services helping children and families be ready for school?
 - d. Schools being ready for children?
4. From all of these significant changes, what do you think has been the most significant change of all?
5. What lessons have been learned about how community hubs can promote school readiness?
6. Is there anything you think the community hub could do to further enhance school readiness?

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