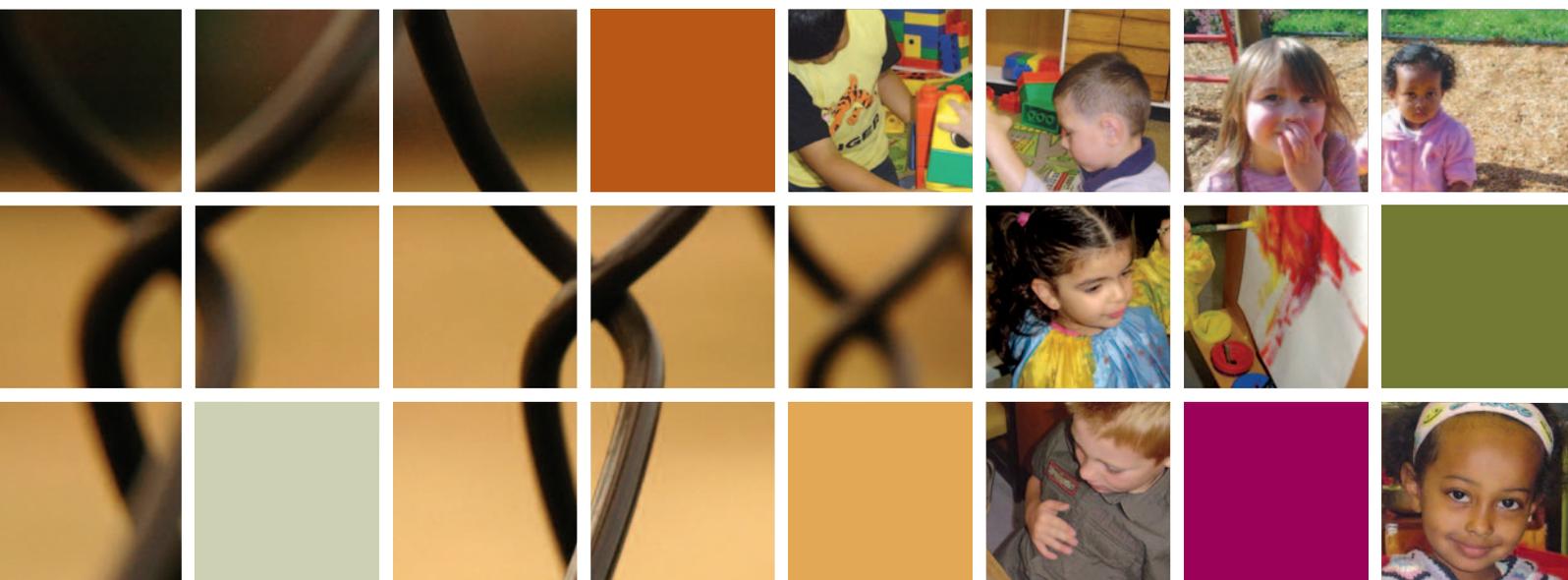


Outside the School Gates

A community report prepared by **Deborah Warr**

A model for tackling disadvantage and promoting participation in preschool education at the Meadowbank Early Learning Centre



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Broadmeadows UnitingCare



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SUMMARY

Since 1978, an early learning centre hosted by Meadowbank Primary School in the outer Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows has become the site of intense community engagement activities for children and families in the neighbourhood. With clear understanding that circumstances outside the school gates impact on children's learning prospects, the Meadowbank Early Learning Centre (MELC) offers an innovative and exemplary model of an organic community hub that is responding to household contexts of socio-economic disadvantage and other vulnerable circumstances among local families. As a community hub, the MELC offers a physical and social setting that enables organisations to provide integrated services, resources and activities targeting families with young children. The program is also integrated into the school structure with staff working across the MELC and school activities. A community hub model for the delivery of early childhood services is capturing the interest of policy makers in Australia and elsewhere (McCain & Mustard 1999). This report provides insight into key aspects of a community hub that has been developing at the MELC. It explains the network structure of the community hub, outlines features of the early learning program, presents insights into the needs of local families, discusses processes for community engagement, and describes the positive outcomes that are being generated. To illustrate these issues, the report draws on interviews that were conducted with staff, parents and local service providers.

Key features of the community hub model developed at the MELC

- Acting as a key contact point for families and local service providers, and facilitates families being linked to a range of services, resources and opportunities.
- Grounded in empathetic understanding of the circumstances of local families.
- Effective in engaging with families who would otherwise be unlikely to seek preschool education for their children.
- Encourages and supports parental involvement in the program through its 'open-door' policy.
- Uses leadership as a significant factor in the program's effectiveness. The Co-ordinator pursues partnership opportunities, connects with people across the community, is flexible and reflexive in responding to issues that arise, and offers positive modelling for staff and families.
- Families from culturally diverse backgrounds appreciate the warm and welcoming atmosphere of the MELC and the staff's sensitivity towards, and capacity to address, culturally specific issues.
- Continues to be presented with significant challenges that include the unmet needs of children who are not participating in, or irregularly attending, preschool programs, and obtaining specialist medical and social care for families when problems are identified.



INTRODUCTION

In all neighbourhoods, prevailing community circumstances influence the opportunities that are presented to children in their homes and classrooms. A good example of this is evident in the fund-raising activities that are available to schools in different neighbourhoods. In 2005, Melbourne newspaper *The Age* ran a story on funding-raising fetes at which primary schools in some neighbourhoods are raising \$50,000 on annual fete days. Silent auctions of weekends away at beachside holiday houses, hiring luxury cars for an afternoon and even Botox treatments are proving to be useful sources of revenue for lucky schools. In the neighbourhood where I live, the school fete raised around \$6000. In some neighbourhoods, however, where household budgets are stretched to the limit providing for everyday needs, schools are reluctant to impose further demands on parents' pockets and revenue-raising events such as fetes are out of the question. In this and many other ways, the circumstances of families outside the school gates are significant contexts for what happens inside classrooms.

Research from the United States of America indicates that early childhood programs can have considerable and enduring impact on educational achievement and socialisation (Friendly & Lero 2002; Barnett 1995). Low rates of participation in preschool programs are putting some children at a disadvantage when they start primary school. Preschool programs and commencing primary school are important developmental and social transition points for children and their families and educational and social benefits are enhanced when children and their families are supported through these transitions (Friendly & Lero 2002). A recent report on preschool education in New South Wales (Vinson 2006) has highlighted that children from higher income households are more likely to attend preschool and kindergarten programs

than children from lower-income households (66 per cent compared to 49 per cent, respectively). However, early childhood programs are likely to be especially beneficial for children from low-income families and programs should be designed to meet their needs (Carbone *et al.* 2004).

There remains limited understanding of why vulnerable families are less likely to access preschool and other child and family services, but barriers are likely to include difficulties experienced within families, limited knowledge of available programs and services and feeling uncomfortable in unfamiliar situations. In its *Access to Preschool 2004 Report*, the State Government initiative BestStart that addresses disadvantage in early childhood, noted that factors such as lack of transport and perceptions of the value and aims of preschool deterred some families. For families living in vulnerable circumstances, support will be particularly critical for overcoming barriers to participation. Community hubs provide infrastructure for potentially addressing some of these issues because they allow for improved integration of local service delivery, facilitate communication and exchange of practice wisdom and resources among service providers and the community, and are sites that families regularly visit in their everyday routines.

The MELC has been putting these ideas into practice for some time now and offers a pioneering example of a community hub that is improving children's educational outcomes in contexts of intersecting disadvantages. The MELC has been particularly successful in enrolling into its preschool program children who are otherwise unlikely to access mainstream preschools. It has been assisting children in their transition to primary school, linking families to services when needed and supporting families to be involved in school and neighbourhood communities. Key aspects of how the MELC operates as a community hub include:

- Strong ties with Meadowbank Primary School.
- Embedded in a dense network of partnerships with local agencies and organisations.
- Takes lead roles in developing and participating in local events, projects and celebrations.
- Empathetic and compassionate understanding of the circumstances of local families.

Each of these aspects is explored in this report but it is useful to begin by describing the neighbourhood setting of the MELC.

The neighbourhood setting

The socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the neighbourhood where the MELC is located suggest the special needs of families attending the Centre. Widespread impoverishment associated with high levels of unemployment and under-employment, sole parents struggling to do the work of two people in raising children, and families who have recently settled in Australia, are circumstances that frame children's learning opportunities. Together and separately, these circumstances can limit opportunities to develop a diversity of social contacts and renders families vulnerable to social disconnection and exclusion. Practical circumstances, such as having restricted access to private and public transport, add further risks of becoming socially disconnected and isolated. For many different reasons, families with low household incomes tend to rely heavily on public services and facilities, and local friendship networks.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that in 2001 Hume City, the Local Government Area (LGA) in which Broadmeadows is located, had an official unemployment rate of 8 per cent. However, the unemployment rate in Broadmeadows itself was 19 per cent, and the local neighbourhood in which the MELC is situated was 21 per cent (the neighbourhood has 'natural boundaries' with a railway line bordering it to the west, the Western Ring Road to the south, the busy Camp Road to the north and the expanse of the Jack Roper Reserve to the east). Consequently, there are more households in Broadmeadows that rely on a range of welfare payments as their sole or major source of income, and higher numbers of households managing on very low weekly incomes, compared to the rest of Hume City. Related to these circumstances and compared to the LGA, the neighbourhood has a higher than average proportion of families accommodated in public housing and private rental properties (24 per cent and 13 per cent respectively).

The local population also reflects remarkable ethnic diversity. In a recent community survey of 300 residents (undertaken as part of the State Government's Neighbourhood Renewal strategy to address place-based disadvantage and which was implemented in the neighbourhood in 2004, see Warr & Smallwood 2004), 10 per cent of participants were born in Turkey, 5 per cent in Lebanon and 2 per cent in Iraq. The neighbourhood is also home to the highest proportion of Indigenous Australian families in Hume City. Overall, ABS data show that while some ethnic communities dominate in the area, residents in the MELC neighbourhood nominate more than

thirty-five different non-English speaking countries as their place of birth (Project Partnerships 2003). Many of these families have only recently settled in Australia and are learning a new language and acclimatising to an unfamiliar culture. These circumstances present these families with additional challenges in preparing their children for the rigours and disciplines of preschool and school.

The limitations of low incomes and language differences in neighbourhoods with high proportions of impoverished and multicultural households can mean that it is important to build networks with others both inside and outside the neighbourhood. Social networks extending outside the neighbourhood facilitate exchanges of information and resources, while diverse networks within the neighbourhood promote opportunities for cross-cultural interaction, exchanges of informal social support and the development of social cohesion at the local level. In these different ways, a diversity of social networks among residents can help to prevent socio-economic and cultural disadvantages hardening in particular places or populations.

These contexts present a range of challenges for the MELC. On one hand, the Centre is concerned to deliver a program that enables children, and their parents, to experience the benefits and pleasures of learning. On the other, to generate these positive outcomes the concerns and activities of the MELC must extend outside the classroom and engage with the realities of families' lives. Operating as a community hub enables the MELC to reconcile these objectives. To gain insights into how it achieves these objectives, a small study involving semi-structured interviews with parents, staff and service providers was conducted in late 2005 (although relevant information has been updated to account for the program's restructuring in 2006).

The study aimed to:

- Explore effective practices for engaging families to participate in early learning opportunities for their children.
- Identify how the MELC supports families to develop formal and informal social connections with other families and local community groups.
- Describe effective strategies developed by the MELC for brokering connections between families and social support services.
- Describe key qualities of the Co-ordinator's leadership at the MELC.

THE METHOD FOR THE STUDY

The study involved semi-structured interviews and participant observation methods. Interviews were conducted with parents, staff and local service-providers to identify characteristics of the MELC program, processes for engaging families and outcomes achieved. The 'theme lists' for the interviews with parents asked them to describe how they become involved with the MELC, the perceived benefits for children and parents, and the most positive and negative aspects of the program. These interviews were tape-recorded (except one that was conducted with the assistance of a translator). Notes were taken for the interviews with MELC staff, volunteers and local service providers. These discussions focused on describing the neighbourhood context for the program, processes for working with families, perceived benefits and problems of the program, and examples of working collaboratively with other services and community-based organisations. I also regularly attended program sessions and this provided invaluable opportunities to observe issues unfolding over time, have informal discussions with parents and staff (that were not recorded) and understand the issues of concern as they are embedded in everyday circumstances.



DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Characteristics of the sample

Five interviews were conducted with parents (P): four mothers and one father; and five interviews were conducted with staff in the MELC (the Co-ordinator and a bilingual Teacher's Aide), a Family Services Practitioner in a local social support service, the Project Worker for the local Neighbourhood Renewal project and a full-time volunteer staff member. Four of the parents had children who were currently enrolled in the preschool program and one had children who had previously attended. The ethnicities of the parents were Anglo–Australian, Arabic and Turkish.

Describing the program

In 2005 the program ran as a facilitated playgroup and was conducted over three sessions per week during school terms for children aged 3–5 years. There was fluctuating attendance with twenty children initially enrolled, and this rose and fell at different times across the school year. Up until December 2005, the program operated with two part-time paid staff members: the Co-ordinator and a bilingual Teacher's Aide who speaks English, Turkish and Arabic. Full- and part-time volunteers also assisted in these sessions. In 2006 funding from the Victorian Government's Department of Human Services, and support from Broadmeadows Uniting Care, enabled Meadowbank to offer a ten-hour preschool program and to employ a trained

preschool teacher. Twenty-five children enrolled for the 2006 preschool program, which was restructured to be conducted over two, five-hour sessions each week. As in the previous year, attendance fluctuated over the twelve months. At the beginning of 2007 enrolments in the program have reached capacity and there is now a waiting list.

In 2006 Broadmeadows United Care received funding through the Commonwealth Government's *Communities for Children* initiative to establish the 'Setting the Hubs Humming' project. This project supports and extends the capacity of key community-based sites to operate as community hubs to further improve access to resources and services for families with babies and young children. The funding has also allowed the Co-ordinator to expand community development activities at the MELC community hub. Key programs and activities in the Meadowbank Early Learning Centre model include:

- Four-year-old **preschool program** held over 2 x 5 hour sessions each week (parents can stay during the program in lieu of fees).
- Facilitated **playgroup for toddlers**.
- **Transition to school** group (in addition to preschool program).
- **Sing and Grow** program; **Feelings** program (in additions to/ or linked to the preschool program).
- **Community development activities:** these include outreach to families, organising family-friendly local events, organising visits to health and community service providers; linking in with Primary school teachers to coordinate transition to school.

Parents reported enrolling their children in the program because of its convenient location on the grounds of Meadowbank Primary School, because they had received positive feedback about it from other parents or because older children went there. The program caters for some families that are unlikely to attend mainstream preschools and therefore practises an 'open-door' policy with a strong emphasis on parent participation in the program. To date, the cost for attending the program is kept to a minimum at \$2.50 per week, and to off-set costs parents are expected to provide in-kind support and work for one entire session each week. Parents value the low cost of the program: 'It's important for people who can't afford the big high fees—it's helping the low-income people' (P1). This is likely to be a significant factor in

encouraging families who may perceive preschool as non-essential amidst competing demands on limited household budgets. Once families are engaged, parents are more likely to understand the valuable experiences it offers their children. In return for the low cost, parents are expected to assist with supervising the children's play and structured activities, preparing a mid-morning snack and tidying up. While some parents take on additional responsibilities, attend extra sessions and contribute to the staging of special events or organising excursions, there can be difficulties in persuading others to meet their obligations to assist in minimal ways during the program sessions.

Figure 1 (below) represents the MELC as a community hub that is a contact point for a range of local services, partnership projects and Commonwealth Government strategies. Activities undertaken through these partnerships and collaborations range from those concerned with generally enhancing and promoting health and social well-being, through to prevention, early identification, treatment and continuing care. Note that the Lahinch Street Maternal and Child Health Centre is also being developed as a community hub as part of the 'Setting the Hubs Humming' project. Together these community hubs will enable families to access integrated prenatal, infant and early child services at key local sites.

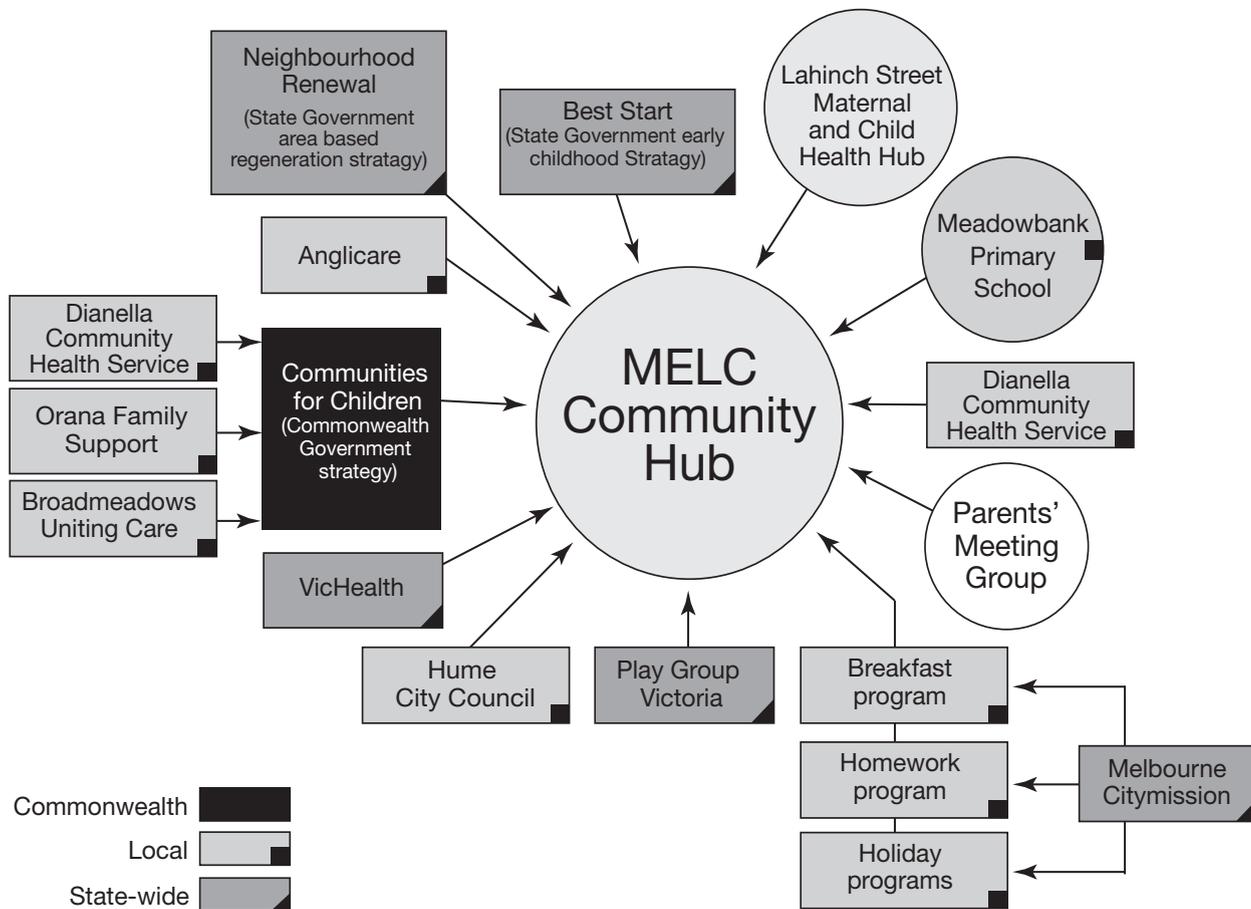


Figure 1: Partnerships and projects linked into the MELC Community Hub

Building networks in the community

Through the links represented in Figure 2 below, the MELC hosts a range of ongoing projects and one-off events that involve activities and events that take place both inside and outside of the school gates.

Figure 2: Ongoing projects with Community partners based at the MELC include:

- **Bilingual storytelling.** Arabic and Turkish storytellers from the Hume Global Learning Centre come to the MELC for regular storytelling sessions with the children.
- **'Sing and Grow'**. Weekly sessions with music and storytelling provided through funding from Playgroup Victoria.
- Supporting a local **Samoan youth group** who visit to teach the children their cultural stories, music and dancing.
- Participation in annual **'Harmony Day'** events along with Meadowbank Primary School. This usually involves a concert at the Broadmeadows Town Hall and showcases local talent and the diversity of cultural traditions in the local community.
- **'Sounds Like Fun'**, **'Readiness for School'** and **'Feelings'** projects undertaken in partnership with Anglicare.
- **'Smiles for Miles'** in partnership with Dianella Health Services to promote children's dental health.
- **'Walking School Bus'** supported by VicHealth.
- **The Broadmeadows Tapestry Project.** This project is funded by VicHealth's 'Building Bridges' initiative. The funds are administered by the MELC and the project is a partnership of nine services/residents groups that is supporting residents and local organisations to develop personal, cross-cultural and extra-neighbourhood social networks.

Examples of stand-alone projects with community partners:

- **'Community Safety Day'**. This was jointly hosted by the MELC, the local Safety House Committee, Hume City Council and Neighbourhood Renewal. It involved taking the children on a walk around the neighbourhood to identify dangers and safety options. During the walk they identified local Safety Houses, met the 'Crossing Lady' who demonstrated how to cross the road safely and had visit from a fire safety truck. Leading up to the walk, the children were involved in a six week safety education program.
- **The Broadmeadows 50th Anniversary History Project.** The project aims to promote inter-generational understanding and social connections between younger and older generations in the neighbourhood. Young people will undertake video interviews with older residents in which life-stories are exchanged and shared.
- **Meadowbank Primary School 50th Anniversary celebrations.** This project is funded by VicHealth. This project culminates in a concert that showcases local cultures and local achievements. The process aims to build community and promote social equity through encouraging pride in the local community and foster cultural and community networks.
- **A visit to the new Child and Maternal Health outreach service.** A walking trip with parents and children and parents to introduce families to the new service being established at the local shopping centre.
- **A visit to Dianella Health Services.** Parents and children were taken by bus (driven by parent volunteers) where they were shown around the facilities at Dianella Health Services in Broadmeadows.

As a community hub, the MELC operates as a critical node for families to access available services, resource and opportunities. This has been largely achieved through the vigour with which the Co-ordinator works to build networks between the MELC and a range of services, informal community groups and organisations. The place manager for the local Neighbourhood Renewal strategy noted that the



Co-ordinator 'identifies a host of issues and actively pursues opportunities and develops links', while the Family Services Practitioner from a local social support service noted that the Co-ordinator 'accepts anyone who comes through the door—parents and professionals—and what they can offer, it's her ability to network'. This social support service has a long-standing association with the MELC and over this time has tried various approaches to supporting families. The Family Support Practitioner now attends one of the sessions every week and this allows for informal interaction with parents and children:

I visit the MELC weekly and spend time getting to know the families. I have tried different approaches in developing this role in these weekly visits, for example, presentations on different topics such as parenting issues. But these didn't work out—low turn-out. People are not interested in attending 'parenting issues' discussions so I decided that the best approach might be to simply be 'a presence' at the MELC and see what happens... through having a presence, getting to know the families, familiarising the service.

The willingness of the Co-ordinator to work co-operatively with local services and to allow workers to revise their plans reflexively according to how things are working out in practise gives more scope for programs to respond to the needs of families.

Parents also mentioned the value of these links and partnerships and were particularly appreciative when problems with hearing, speech and vision had been detected and referred for treatment services:

She [the Co-ordinator] was the first one to pick up that he had a lisp, that he needed speech therapy. When she picked it up she actually told me to get his tonsils checked so I took him to the doctor and

then he got me sent to the 'Eye and Ear' Hospital. They said that his tonsils are as large as marbles and that this had affected his speech and that was the whole problem. So she was the first one to pick that up and, not only that, they had the health nurse come here and they picked up on my children's eyesight, too. Because my daughter—she's longsighted—and they picked that up in here as well (P4).

An outing organised in association with Dianella Health Services in Broadmeadows proved to be particularly valuable for increasing parents' knowledge of available health services. Dianella is located in Broadmeadows but just outside of the neighbourhood where the MELC is located. Community surveys undertaken as part of the Neighbourhood Renewal project suggested that many residents did not access services at Dianella and many were not aware of what was available. A site visit for parents and children was therefore organised, and community buses driven by parent volunteers picked up people from the MELC and took them to Dianella. On arrival they were greeted by the Community Health Worker and shown around the facilities. This was a successful event that a number of parents mentioned to me. It also led to an uptake of services by parents:

I went on the Dianella trip to learn about health services available. There was a physiotherapist and a nutritionist, like, I didn't know about these services before the trip—only that there was a place called 'Dianella Hospital'. [Since then] I have used the dental service—I heard about that service from here [the MELC]—from the trip we had and now I know about the dentist and it's not far away from where I live, and I can also take the kids (P2).

A parent who speaks very little English explained that the MELC was very obliging in putting her in touch with social support services and services that could help out with providing some furniture for their home. The Family Support Practitioner noted the increasingly important role of the MELC in ensuring that common issues (such as needs for speech therapy or to see an optometrist) and relatively uncommon problems such as global developmental delays were identified. These issues were acquiring some urgency because socially isolated and highly transient families were not staying in contact with the Maternal and Child Health Centre and potential problems were not being picked up during infancy.

The MELC also supports children and families in the transition from home to school: 'The MELC is important because it provides a step between home and accessing school' (Family Support Practitioner). Family, social and cultural contexts can mean that children have limited experience of school and its disciplinary and educational expectations and processes. The MELC has also brokered opportunities for parents and residents to become involved in key State Government strategies including Neighbourhood Renewal. Neighbourhood Renewal is being undertaken in Victoria's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The initiative addresses key aspects of neighbourhood disadvantage through projects to improve housing and the environment, health and well-being, employment and learning opportunities, community safety, government responsiveness, and pride and participation among the community. Neighbourhood Renewal supports residents to become involved in decision-making processes related to renewal projects. The project worker responsible for implementing Neighbourhood Renewal noted that:

The MELC has been a critical contact point for putting residents in touch with Neighbourhood Renewal. It has hosted meetings and encouraged parents to come along to meetings and encouraging volunteer residents to become involved.

A number of parents from the MELC continue to be highly active members of projects and committees associated with Neighbourhood Renewal. Some of these parents were trained to become peer-interviewers working on the Community Survey, the Community Jobs Program and other local projects. In these ways, the MELC has been an important community-based site linking families to specific



support services, neighbourhood resources and other opportunities.

The MELC has also been working with the BestStart initiative, backing its aim of supporting children and families in the transition to primary schooling and collaborating in innovative projects developed by the MELC Co-ordinator. For example, the Co-ordinator has developed the concept of 'Children's Portfolios' to demonstrate and discuss children's developmental progress with parents and teachers. Best Start has worked with the Co-ordinator to extend and trial the concept in other settings and the method has since been adopted by other preschools and long day-care providers in Hume City. Feedback from parents and preparatory class teachers at Meadowbank Primary School confirm the value of the portfolio for explaining and understanding children's progress and promoting continuity for children through the critical transition period of moving from preschool into school.

Building informal social connections

Through a range of circumstances, many families in the neighbourhood are at risk of becoming socially isolated. The Co-ordinator perceives a heightening vulnerability among some families:

More generally, many people have no roots or connections to a community, especially through the dissolving influence of family and church that were able to provide families with social networks and support. Families are especially vulnerable when they are not in paid work. Many families are moving to the area because of the cheap housing (to rent and purchase) but this often means that they must leave behind other networks. They can be very isolated until they get on their feet and establish new social supports in the local neighbourhood.

In response to these local contexts, the Co-ordinator believes it is important to practise an 'open-door' policy and encourage parents to become involved in the program, because it gives them the opportunity to develop the informal social networks

that provide important everyday forms of support and companionship. Cultivating friendly sociability requires a welcoming atmosphere, time and a flexible approach because it may take a while for some parents to feel comfortable in unfamiliar situations and to acquire confidence to participate in conversations. The school hosts coffee sessions for parents every morning in the staffroom and some parents from the MELC regularly attend these sessions: 'It's a good socialising experience, you see, for me its actually hard to meet other people so the way I see it I should branch out' (P3). The Family Services Practitioner observed networks developing where 'parents are assisting each other and sharing information and really valuing the social contact'. Even if parents had lived in the neighbourhood for a long time the opportunity to meet different people, including those from other ethnic communities, was valued:

Yeah, I already know heaps of people around here (because I've lived here all my life) but not the right people so it's probably a different line of people, it's good ... There's quite a few people of a different race that I wouldn't normally mix with, a few are now friends (P3).



Another parent, who had moved to the neighbourhood two years earlier because of its affordable housing, commented that:

When I first came here I pretty much wasn't speaking to anyone, just, like now that I come to the kinder like I know I've met a few friends, like we've actually become friends, like we'll go sometimes to the shopping centre and that, it's quite good (P2).

These friendly contacts were assisting to build her confidence in social situations:

I reckon I've gained a lot, too. I feel confident now, whereas before I was quiet, you know, and I wouldn't talk to anyone but now like, if I see other

people I will talk to them and we have discussions and sometimes we go, you know, places together... I go on outings—I wouldn't have done that before but now when they have events for the kids and I always go with them (P2).

The Co-ordinator observes that, over the course of a year, parents will change the days on which they volunteer to work at the MELC because of friendships that have developed.

Processes for engaging families

The MELC's key role in providing opportunities for families and children to participate in interesting activities and projects, develop links with services and build informal networks rests on successful processes for engaging families. To an important extent, the strong and distinctive leadership practised by the Co-ordinator meant that the MELC and the Co-ordinator are often conflated as people sought to explain issues to me. The Family Support Practitioner summed up key aspects of the Co-ordinator's approach:

- There is a clear understanding that families' basic needs must be met before educational needs can be provided for.
- A strong ability to adapt and be flexible to the children's needs.
- Always welcoming and available to parents.
- Always offers good, non-judgmental and positive direction.
- Takes an interest in the children and their families, and gets to know them.
- Offers parents opportunities for social contact.
- Builds on children's individual strengths—anticipating what they need in the next phase of their life.

The Co-ordinator leads by example and is an important influence on those around her. Parents and workers alike commented on the positive modelling demonstrated by her, including the ways in which

she welcomes people to the MELC, interacts with the children, manages disagreements and conflict, and ‘effortlessly models the joy the children bring’ (Family Support Practitioner). The Teacher’s Aide commented:

The Co-ordinator is very thoughtful—over the years I have learnt heaps and heaps and heaps of things from her because she explains why she does things, she doesn’t impose on others’ culture, doesn’t impose her beliefs, and people feel comfortable with this. She explains procedures and processes and makes sure that parents are involved in things.

The Teacher’s Aide also provided insights from the perspectives of non-English speaking families who had reported to her that they have tried out ideas and strategies at home after watching the Co-ordinator: ‘Many parents have said what a good influence the Co-ordinator has been in their life—a “good influence” is a phrase that people often use’. Similarly for other parents:

I’ve learnt a lot as you watch, you see more, like some days I could pop in here [the MELC] and I’ll watch [the Co-ordinator] do something and it’s like “I might give that a go, I might give that a go and see how that works”. So yeah, I’m still learning as my kids grow (P4).

In addition to modelling individual strategies, one parent considered that the inclusive and participatory structure of the program offered social modelling: ‘I think that’s why I think [the Co-ordinator] has parents help here—just to show good examples that, you know, that parents need to work together just as much as the children’ (P4).

Emphasising the importance of instilling reasonable discipline, modelling appropriate behaviour and socialising children, one of the parents explained:

A lot of parents don’t know what to do with the



children—to get a child to do something you have to talk to the child in a certain way, you can’t yell at the child, if the child doesn’t want to do it—how do we deal with that? Most parents here don’t know how to deal with that, then the kid gets away with it, and then they can get away with it anytime. That little bit of education would help to encourage the child... they haven’t learnt yet [how to behave] and you have to show them—be a good role model with children. There still vulnerable, they don’t know, so if we can help them with other people, not be aggressive, to do what they’re told (P3).

This parent had also completed a parenting course to improve their skills which, like many sole parents, they take very seriously, especially if they cannot rely on the non-custodial parent sharing child-raising responsibilities. Another sole parent explained how understanding children’s developmental milestones had better prepared them for the tasks of parenting:



That’s another thing I’ve learnt from [the Co-ordinator], you know, you’ve to like, kids only take like three or two words in at a time but if you give them a whole sentence they’re gong to think “Hey, hang on” because their mind is not like ours yet, you know, and that’s another thing I’ve learnt as well. That when you speak to a little one you can only speak in small amounts—not a large amount... And I’ve learnt, too, that like you’ve got to encourage them. You’ve got to give them compliments, you’ve got to say “Hey, well done!” You know, and if they’ve done something wrong you get them to apologise to you and you tell them also “Hey, well done”. She [the Co-ordinator] has taught me a lot in the years that I’ve been on my own, you know, how to handle the kids on my own, as well as that, you know, there’s ways around everything (P4).

A parent with a large family who had all attended the MELC explained:

I like the way [Co-ordinator] is with the children—she treats them all fairly. In the teaching and behaviour they get taught. ... They've gained from being well-behaved at school. They're learning, they don't sort of muck around in class. I've had no problems—mine are doing very well. The [MELC] has done a good job with them... and I think I have. We've got a friend in [the Co-ordinator] and the teachers and [the Teacher's Aide]. We've got a good relationship being over here for so many years.



The Teacher's Aide, who is an important contact point for Turkish- and Arabic-speaking families, observed that MELC has also been effective in engaging culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families: 'It gives parents a chance to have input into their child's learning. The Co-ordinator, in particular, consults, considers, and is understanding of cultural issues'.

Notions of 'respect' and 'empathy' were frequently used to convey the qualities of the Co-ordinator's engagement with families: '[the Co-ordinator] gives everyone an opportunity to flourish and learn, she respects everyone' (Teacher's Aide). A Turkish parent explained that the MELC treated her as a person and this was in contrast to some of her others encounters with schools and services where she felt that 'I was treated as second class because I don't speak any English' (P5).



Other staff commented that it is important to 'praise parents when appropriate, important to acknowledge the things that mothers do. This is more effective than telling them what they've doing wrong'. This is a useful insight because families are likely to be getting lots of messages about what they are lacking and not doing 'right'. The volunteer worker also reflected that:

What's missing from the academic side [other educational approaches] is that they often fail to appreciate the deeper emotional aspects of individual cases—and this is the kind of understanding that helps parents to move on. Empathy is often missing—they understand the issues but there is no deep understanding of how a family got to such a position. The Co-ordinator is able to empathise very strongly with the families.

This points to another way in which the MELC acknowledges issues outside the school gates. The Co-ordinator's capacity to empathise has grown through her long-standing involvement with the neighbourhood and compassionate understanding of the issues facing families. The next section considers the ways in which local circumstances of impoverishment, resettlement and social isolation among families informs programs and processes at the MELC.



Understanding the circumstances of local families

Over the thirty years that the Co-ordinator has been involved with the MELC she has witnessed many changes in the neighbourhood. Broadmeadows was largely built by the Victorian Housing Commission in the mid 1950s and public housing was allocated to working families. Many of the children who attended the school in its early days lived in housing provided by the army (the nearby army barracks was located on Camp Road). By the early 1990s, public housing has been increasingly reserved for those in greatest need and changes in the circumstances of local families have presented new challenges for the MELC:

Key emphases in the MELC program are to work with children and their families, and to assist families to be involved with, and to support, their children's learning. This can be difficult for some parents who are experiencing their own personal crises, family difficulties, challenges of settling in a new country, and families with limited grasp of English. Some families are highly transient and are frequently moving house or changing schools for a variety of reasons. Parents might change school following conflict with staff or other parents, move to support family members in other suburbs or states, to find work, or through unstable accommodation. This creates difficulties in providing continuity of learning, meeting learning objectives and ensuring access to relevant support services when needed.

In addition to a need for sensitive understanding of the limited material resources of many families in the neighbourhood, the MELC aims to bridge the social isolation that limits parents' and children's exposure to a range of social experiences, and is concerned to meet the specific needs of families from non-English speaking backgrounds. The material circumstances of the families in the neighbourhood are critical contexts for understanding families' everyday lives. In addition to the ongoing stress of managing on limited household budgets:

There are families in the neighbourhood who have never had a holiday—their poverty is unrelenting and it is difficult to understand how this feels if you've never experienced it, and families themselves may fail to understand the physical and mental strain that this places on them' (Volunteer staff member).

Living among others in similar situations means that families are also likely to 'See others in trouble and help out—they understand what it's like in that situation' (Volunteer staff member) and this places further demands and strains on families in the neighbourhood.

The Co-ordinator explains how the aim to deliver a preschool involves juggling a complex array of objectives and challenges:

The aims and processes of the MELC are to facilitate children's learning, to model styles of facilitation for parents, and to provide parents with some understanding of developmental models they should expect in their child. An understanding of developmental milestones assists parents to encourage and support age-appropriate learning and to recognise when their child may have development delays that require further attention... A substantial number of children attending the MELC have been found to have developmental delays. These are evident in their speech, they may occur because of other illnesses, and some [children] display global developmental delays. I experience many difficulties in communicating unfamiliar concepts to families, especially those concerning developmental pathways and expectations, and therefore how to recognise and respond when development delays are evident.



Issues for 'Culturally and Linguistically Diverse' families

Almost half of the families attending the MELC are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Turkish and Arabic languages are predominantly spoken among these families. In 2005, one-third of the families attending the program had limited proficiency in English, with some not literate in their first language. Families attending the MELC in 2006 are from Arabic, Assyrian, Iraqi, Turkish, Samoan, Maltese, East Timorese, Portuguese, Vietnamese and Anglo–Australian cultural backgrounds. The Teacher's Aide, whose long association with the MELC spans seventeen years, has been a key contact person for many non-English-speaking families coming to the MELC. She explains that key issues for CALD families include:

Insecurities about what others are thinking of them and their cultural differences. Lacking the confidence to deal with issues and stand up for themselves. They are afraid of doing the 'wrong thing'. Often they just say "Yes, yes, yes" and then turn around and say "What did they mean?" They are pretending to understand in order to save face. It is important to make sure that people are able to understand what is said to them. Preserving their culture is also very important. Often people are afraid of mixing with people not like them because of their upbringing—traditional and strict. They want to teach their children about their religion and culture but they don't want to confuse the children. They don't want the children envying what others have. This is very difficult if you don't try to take 'the best of both cultures'. There are many practical difficulties with language. It is hard to find paid work because of language and education. Culturally for women, they are often discouraged from working.

Children in CALD families can experience a range of barriers to learning. They might be speaking English as a second language, and family circumstances

associated with recent settlement in Australia can have a disrupting effect on family and community social networks:

Some of the problems encountered by the CALD families in the neighbourhood are associated with losing strong ethnic community networks. Families find themselves outside of their homeland social structures and the networks they recreate in Australia tend to be 'flat' rather than hierarchical, and link them to people in similar circumstances. Many families are isolated because their extended families are scattered around the globe. Many CALD families have family histories that are marked with stories of dislocation and trauma. Parents are often concerned to keep these stories hidden in efforts to put the past behind them and to protect their children (Co-ordinator).

Racism can also discourage families from becoming involved in the community: 'People feel less safe and reluctant to go out, there is victimisation because of women wearing *hijab*—they are easy targets for flippant comments' (Family Services Practitioner).

Social relations and social identity

Circumstances of socio-economic disadvantage are widely viewed as putting individuals, families and communities at risk of becoming socially isolated because people lack the economic means to participate in a range of activities that are otherwise available to many families. Impoverishment means that households are left to rely largely on public services, usually confined to essential services, resulting in a severely reduced capacity to participate in leisure and other activities. Further, circumstances of concentrated socio-economic disadvantage in neighbourhoods can serve to contract the social experiences of families because they tend to have limited opportunities for social contact with people living in other neighbourhoods and life-worlds. This is the case for some families in the neighbourhood where the MELC is located where circumstances of chronic unemployment and impoverishment

shrink social networks, with powerful geographical consequences. For example, the Family Support Practitioner notes that ‘Many people rarely leave the area—they rarely visit the city, for instance [which is only 15 kilometres away]’. The causes and consequences of these experiences of collective social isolation are important for understanding social relations in the neighbourhood and how they impact on the MELC:

Some families have had limited exposure to a diversity of social experiences and tend to be involved in dense local networks. These networks are vulnerable to generating conflict because local networks are central social networks and people are less likely to be distracted by work and other involvements outside the neighbourhood and there can be high informal surveillance of others. Disagreements can escalate into serious conflicts and this creates challenges for the school and the MELC because these are sites where parents are likely to run into each other. This has been a problem this year and was very disruptive for the children’ (Co-ordinator).

In addition to influencing local social relations, the economic, social and geographical dimensions of disadvantage generate unhelpful social identities for people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods that, in turn, can have debilitating psychological effects. People living in the neighbourhood are aware of ‘wider community pressure and stigma and they lack self-confidence, no confidence in themselves’ (Family Services Practitioner). Over the years, the Co-ordinator has also noted that many parents lack self-esteem:

This arises through a lack of understanding of their place in society, and how they can contribute, have influence to change their life or their children’s lives—it impinges on them: “I don’t

know what I don’t know” and not knowing what to aspire to. There are also feelings that “I’m not worthwhile—it doesn’t matter what happens—I’m worthless”. People can have little sense of their rights—what they can ask for in their community. It also puts people in a no-win situation if they are dependent on the help of others—it’s lose/lose—“I can’t respect what you give me because you gave it to me”. This can also mean having less empathy for others in similar situations and this inhibits social solidarity and results in a lack of social connectedness with others, in family units and neighbourhoods and with school and local institutions... Some things are changing in the neighbourhood, for example, through Neighbourhood Renewal people are managing conflict and developing more positive sense of self-identity and sense of worth around these opportunities. However, this can be a two-edged sword—“they must be given to me because I can’t develop them for myself”. Broadmeadows used to have a ‘Poverty Action Group’ and this group had a strong sense of being able to change and communicate circumstance and it gave people a sense of control. What has changed since then? No structure to feel that they have any say in their destiny.

These insights point to the powerful psychological consequences of chronic impoverishment. It is critical for services and organisations to have a sensitive understanding of the ambivalent and complex ways in which people respond to, and cope with, difficult life circumstances. Otherwise, vulnerable families risk being further alienated from potential sources of support and assistance.



Challenges for the MELC

The MELC continues to be presented with challenges that include:

- Many children in the neighbourhood are attending preschool irregularly or not at all and this threatens their future learning.
- The limited resources at the MELC for identifying, diagnosing and responding to problems or development delays children may be experiencing.
- Difficulties in accessing appropriate resources and services that can assist families. These issues are particularly acute in neighbourhoods with high levels of household disadvantage because parents are highly dependent on local public services and this creates high demand for available services in the area.
- The MELC is effective in engaging families with children who have special needs but is ineligible for funds to support this. This has presented difficulties over recent years because the MELC is reluctant to refuse children participation in its programs and children with special needs have participated in the program. This had placed additional demands on resources that are already stretched to the limit.
- Further efforts are required to promote healthy diets and improve the children's dental health. Some children have already had decayed teeth removed and treating children with food is an option for parents when other kinds of rewards are impossible to afford.
- Attending to the needs of socially vulnerable families can alienate families who are concerned with the educational achievements of preschool programs.



This latter point presents a significant dilemma to the MELC. Providing for the intense social support needs of some families *and* a challenging learning program for preschoolers more generally can be difficult to reconcile, especially with limited resources. Like parents everywhere, the parents in Broadmeadows are concerned that their children to have educational experiences that best prepare them for primary school and beyond. In contexts of disadvantage, parents' commitment to their children's education comes from an acute understanding that they have no other advantages to draw from—doing well at school is the best chance for their children to get ahead. This leads some parents to question the extent to which staff at the MELC are able to focus on educational issues, or they may doubt the value of aspects of the program that leave less time for developing key skills. Some parents perceive the value of developmental play: 'You have some negative parents that find that, you know, all they do is play games... but you've got to give them free time as well—they're not like adults' (P5). However, another parent expressed concerns that educational aims are being neglected:

The Co-ordinator does try to cover everything, tries to get to talk to everybody. She's very busy, and that's sort of a down side of this situation—there're not enough educators in the room. There are lots of parents, and some of us do a pretty good job, but





on some days you have some parents that sit on the side and do nothing... Our [children's] education is more important than worrying about other stuff—like reading, writing and speaking properly is more important than speaking in a different language or whatever (P3).

The Co-ordinator is aware of tensions in expectations of the purpose and value of preschool education and that there is pressure from many sectors to teach children their 'A,B,Cs'. For the Co-ordinator, the educational aims of the learning program are to prepare children for formal schooling by providing a program that nurtures children's physical, social, emotional and linguistic development:

We need to recognise the importance of each level of child development in early childhood and raise awareness of the value in providing a rich oral language and age-appropriate, play-based curriculum.

These aims of preschool education were endorsed in Vinson's recent report when he emphasised that preschool programs should be concerned to prepare children for formal learning. Participation in preschool education supports children in developing social skills, adapting to routines, following directions and encourages appropriate degrees of self-sufficiency (Vinson 2006). It remains a challenge to communicate to parents and others the benefits of programs that

aim to build these foundational skills and capacities that will underpin children's ability to thrive in formal learning settings.

At the same time, preschools in neighbourhoods with high levels of disadvantage are confronted with circumstances in which many families have not been able to offer children a breadth of experiences, and preschool programs are rightly concerned to address these gaps. Discrepancies in children's life experiences put them at different developmental stages and this generates complexity for identifying and implementing educational aims and programs that meet the needs of all children. The risk for some schools is that the more effective they are in catering for the needs of disadvantaged families, the less attractive they become to families who have no need for such services and who perceive their programs as unchallenging and unfulfilling. This situation risks further widening, if not entrenching, socio-economic differences in educational outcomes and reinforces problems of concentrated disadvantage and horizontal social networks that tend to characterise the networks of families in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.



CONCLUSION

The way in which the MELC operates as a community hub enables integrated provision of local support services for families with young children. Early childhood is a critical phase of the life-course and participation in early learning programs offers valuable opportunities to assess physiological and social development and generally prepares children for school. More generally, early childhood educational programs are important community-based institutions for promoting the social inclusion of children and their families (Friendly & Lero 2002). Education offers important possibilities for alleviating disadvantage and early learning programs are particularly essential for children whose families are under stress, who are from newly settled families learning a new language and culture, and children with special needs.

However, even when early learning programs are available, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are least likely to access them and we need a better understanding of how to engage with vulnerable families. Without special efforts to understand and address the specific needs and circumstances of vulnerable families there are tendencies for educational experiences to widen, rather than close, the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged groups (Reay 2005). The MELC provides an exemplary case study of the contexts, issues and processes that need to be considered to ensure that children living in disadvantaged families are given good opportunities to succeed in and enjoy their education.

Notable aspects of the MELC include the way in which it operates as a community hub and centralised contact point for families to access a range of services and, among the staff, an empathetic understanding of issues confronting local families. The personal qualities of the Co-ordinator have been prominent in the accounts of people I spoke with, and there is much to learn from the practices and modes of

interaction that are used to engage families. The welcoming approach, genuine interest and ongoing support that families are offered serve to make not only parents and children feel valued, but also workers from other services, visitors and volunteers. This contributes to a sense of belonging that inspires reciprocity—many parents wanted to give back to the MELC by becoming further involved through volunteering, joining committees and organising extra-curricular events. Parents and staff talked about the positive modelling provided by the Co-ordinator and how the ‘open-door’ policy at the MELC, which actively encourages parents to stay and participate in the sessions or interact with other parents, presents opportunities for parents to get to know one another, and to observe activities and strategies that are used to engage and supervise the children.

The Co-ordinator’s capacity and willingness to network with local services ensures that, via the MELC, parents have access to a range of support structures and opportunities. This enables the MELC to provide critical outreach support services that promote access among socially isolated families as well as presenting avenues for parents to become involved in a variety of community-based projects and activities. However, a problem for the MELC and other preschool programs in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods is that despite their best endeavours in identifying problems and developmental delays, specialist services and resources are not always available where they are desperately needed (Vinson 2006).

The MELC is situated in a neighbourhood where problems arising through household disadvantage are compounded because of generalised neighbourhood disadvantage. This is important for understanding the stresses that are placed on families both inside and outside the home. It also explains the stress placed on local institutions where there is high demand and limited resources to provide the intense social support that some families require *and* a challenging learning program that generally prepares children for primary school. In these contexts, the MELC has played a critical role in engaging families to become actively involved in their children’s education, develop new friendships, nurture connections with community-based activities and, when necessary, facilitate access to social and health support services.

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