

Evaluation of the Supporting Parents - Developing Children Project

Final Report

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This report was prepared by Dr Liza Hopkins and colleagues on behalf of The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

- Mother Child English Language Program
- Bilingual Storytime
- Playgroup Enhancement
- Early Years Hubs.

In addition, the four programs were supported by a multi-disciplinary team comprised of an Occupational Therapist and a Speech Pathologist, who worked with families and groups across the four program areas.

THE EVALUATION

The evaluation focused on measuring the achievements and processes by which the Supporting Parents - Developing Children project was effective in meeting the following three of its four aims:

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

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach, utilising quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure depth and breadth of responses. This report contains a summary of the findings of each year of evaluation of the project (2012-2014) along with a full discussion of the overall evaluation project findings. Further reports of the first two years of the evaluation may be found in the two project interim reports.

Ethics approval for this evaluation was sought and granted through The Royal Children's Hospital Human Research Ethics Committee, in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

KEY FINDINGS

PARTICIPATION

Parents, carers, project workers and project coordinators all reported that SP-DC was successful in increasing the participation of culturally and linguistically diverse mothers of young children in southern Hume in early years services. This was especially so in the context of newly arrived and socially isolated groups. Parents reported that they made use of SP-DC programs, as well as accessing a range of other services for children and families both within the early years hubs and beyond them. The premise which underpins the focus on increasing participation is that it leads to improved outcomes for parents and children and this is borne out by the evaluation findings. Program staff reported that parent's participation in SP-DC was effective at increasing parents social contacts, peer learning, confidence and knowledge of child development. Results from the parent surveys showed that over the course of a year, child development/readiness for school scores increased for both children in the pre-school age cohort (4-5 year olds) and in the babies and toddlers cohort (0-3 year olds).

SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion is a difficult concept to define, and even more difficult to measure effectively. In line with Scanlon Foundation research into social cohesion, we designed our evaluation to investigate participants' sense of trust, belonging and connectedness as ways of measuring social cohesion at the individual level. Quantitative data and qualitative data were gathered. The participant survey included a series of questions covering the social cohesion domains. A key finding was a statistically significant increase in the way parents felt about the neighbourhood as a place to bring up children. This suggests that the programs of SP-DC have a positive impact on both parents sense of connectedness to their local neighbourhood and their confidence in raising their children. Other measures on the scale showed smaller, but consistently upwards trajectories with one exception.

TRAINING PATHWAYS

More than sixty women completed the playgroup facilitator/ bilingual storytellers training run by SP-DC itself, while many more were supported to go on to training beyond SP-DC, including in courses which were auspiced by the SP-DC early years hubs, certificate IIIs and diplomas in children's services, as well as continuing such studies at other local training providers, including TAFEs and Universities.

Program workers recognised a broader range of outcomes from training and learning pathways including a recognition of the importance of developing the concepts of volunteering and mentoring for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, as well as a focus on parents developing the 'soft skills' required to be job ready beyond simply achieving a program certificate.

SATISFACTION

Parents were asked about their level of satisfaction with the SP-DC program they attended. The survey contained a series of questions that were used to form two satisfaction scales: parents' satisfaction with the program activities, and the help they received from the program. Overall satisfaction on both scales was very high with mean scores of 4.4 and 4.3 respectively on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being completely satisfied.

In the final year of the evaluation information emerged from SP-DC parents, staff and coordinators as to what enabled the program's success. While investigating the enablers was not a focus of the evaluation, it nonetheless represents an important finding and goes some way to answering the question why did the program work. Overwhelmingly SP-DC parents, staff and coordinators commented about the value of the programs integrated or nested nature within the early year's hubs, providing supported entry points to a range of services, supports and resources.

INTRODUCTION

This is the final report of the Supporting Parents - Developing Children (SP-DC) project evaluation undertaken by The Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) Education Institute. The research project findings from 2012 and 2013 have been reported in full in the first two project interim reports. This report contains a summary discussion of the findings from these two reports, as well as a summary of the 2014 data collection, and an overview and discussion of the full three year evaluation project findings. The report also includes some administrative data provided by the City of Hume, which has been included to indicate the complete range of programs which make up the SP-DC project and to demonstrate the involvement of parents in SP-DC training pathways. A relevant review of the literature relating to the key concepts of the study was also completed in the first year and is included here.

The evaluation team was made up of a number of researchers from The RCH Education Institute, with assistance from the team at Researching Futures who assisted with data collection in the first year of the evaluation. The team collected evaluation data from key program services users (parents and carers) as well as from program facilitators, coordinators and other project stakeholders using both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

SUPPORTING PARENTS – DEVELOPING CHILDREN PROJECT

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

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

As objective 3 was being assessed in a separate evaluation, our evaluation focused on measuring the achievements and processes by which the project has been effective in:

- Increasing participation of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families in early years development and engagement programs.
- Fostering social cohesion through the engagement of CALD families in early years service programs.
- Creating training and learning pathways for CALD families.

The SP-DC project was coordinated by Hume City Council and funded by:

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

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

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

All four programs in the Supporting Parents-Developing Children project take place in southern Hume.

Southern Hume is an area within the Hume City Council region of northern metropolitan Victoria, Australia and includes the suburbs of Broadmeadows, Campbellfield, Coolaroo, Dallas, Jacana, and Meadow Heights.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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

Compared to the average community in Victoria, Hume is characterised by compounding layers of disadvantage, including low socio-economic status. In southern Hume where the SP-DC Project is based, this is demonstrated by the 2011 SEIFA index of disadvantage. The Hume City statistical area level 2(SA2s) of Broadmeadows, Campbellfield- Coolaroo and Meadow Heights are the top three most disadvantaged SA2s in metropolitan Melbourne (out of 269) and Victoria (out of 424) and are in the 1st decile (top 10%) of most disadvantaged SA2s across the nation. Additionally, Hume City has the second highest rate of unemployment in all Melbourne Local Government Areas (LGA) and high levels of crime against both a person and property (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Department of Health, 2012). Hume also has a large proportion of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with a mix of approximately 140 different nationalities and over 120 languages other than English spoken in the home (Hume City Council, 2012). Nearly a third of all residents living in the Hume LGA were born overseas and a quarter are from non-English speaking backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Many families residing within Hume have only recently settled in Australia and may be adjusting to an unfamiliar culture and learning a new language (Warr, 2007).

In the 2007 Community Indicators Victoria Survey, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with feeling part of their community on a scale from 0-100 (Community Indicators Victoria, n.d.). For the Hume LGA specifically, respondents reported a slightly lower average sense of community connection compared with the Victorian response average (67.1 and 70.7 respectively) (Community Indicators Victoria, n.d.).

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

In light of this profile, the SP-DC was developed by the City of Hume in partnership with a number of key local agencies, supported by funding from the Scanlon Foundation, to increase participation, social cohesion and

transition into education and employment for culturally and linguistically diverse parents and carers of young children in the Southern Hume region.

OVERVIEW OF KEY CONCEPTS

NEWLY ARRIVED AND CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES

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

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

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

EARLY YEARS LEARNING

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

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

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

(Moore et al., 2011). A child's long-term success in school therefore derives from their learning experiences before school and the ongoing learning environment in the early school years (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2007).

TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

Commencing school is an important developmental and social transition point for children. Starting school requires children and their families to negotiate a multitude of changes across learning, physical, and social environments, and in their relationships and identity (Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2007; Fabian, 2007). These changes present children and their families with both opportunities and challenges, and while the transition to school may be a positive experience, the more dramatic these changes are, the more difficult it can be for children and their families to transition to school successfully (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008).

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

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

While it is generally the case that involvement in schooling by families is low in new and emerging culturally and linguistically diverse communities (The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2007), successful school transition is partially dependent upon how well the school culture is understood by the parents and family, and how trusting and respectful families are of the school (Clancy, Simpson & Howard, 2001, as cited in Centre for Community Child Health, 2008). Parents and carers whose own experiences of school were negative may have little understanding of or support for the school, making it important for schools to establish positive

relationships with families even before school starts, and to maintain these during and after the transition to school (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008). Thus the relationship between the child, their family and the school community (including the teaching staff, other parents and other children who attend the school) is vitally important in assisting the children of newly arrived and CALD families to transition successfully into primary school. The way these relationships are cultivated must help newly arrived and CALD families to feel accepted as valued members of the school, and the broader, community.

SOCIAL COHESION

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

According to The Scanlon Foundation (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2007, p.25), there are three common elements in the various definitions of social cohesion. These include:

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

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

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

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

An Australian analysis of social inclusion and social exclusion within the context of culturally and linguistically diverse communities - such as is apparent for the SP-DC project, concluded that culture, language, migration history, English proficiency, and religious differences may contribute to outcomes indicating social exclusion and therefore a lack of social cohesion (Hayter, 2009). The very nature of the programs developed for the SP-DC project is therefore vitally important in addressing these factors and providing the appropriate circumstances for social cohesion to be developed and fostered.

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

PROGRAMS OF THE SP-DC

The Supporting Parents - Developing Children project was comprised of four separate but intrinsically linked programs. The individual programs have evolved over a number of years and underpin the delivery of SP-DC services to culturally and linguistically diverse families with young children in the Hume community. In addition, the multidisciplinary team worked with each program to support and enhance services available to participants.

MOTHER AND CHILD ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM (MCELP)

The MCELP program has been developed over the past six years as a program in which mothers and children from CALD families can learn English together in a community setting. The program combines the English as a Second Language (ESL) course for parents and carers as well as providing childcare and a joint mother and child playgroup. In 2012 the MCELP model was adopted by SP-DC and MCELP classes were established either in early years hubs or other community settings as part of the SP-DC. MCELP in SP-DC is delivered in partnership with the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT) and VICSEG New Futures, a not for profit, community organisation incorporating the Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG Programs for Families, Children & Young People) and New Futures Training.

The ESL curriculum is structured around topics that support child development, is delivered within the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) curriculum, and enables participants to achieve learning outcomes at appropriate levels of the CSWE. This curriculum framework is flexible and allowed for further customisation to strengthen the child development and mother /child engagement focus of the program.

The playgroup component includes a period where children attend playgroup while their parent or carers, typically their mother, attends the ESL program. At the completion of the ESL session, carers join their child for the remainder of the playgroup session. Children and parents engage in a shared learning program, where a focus is on early childhood development and the further development language and literacy skills through play and social interaction.

From 2012-2014 there were five MCELP programs running as part of SP-DC. Three of these programs were conducted in SP-DC funded Early Years Hubs while others were conducted at the Broadmeadows Leisure Centre and Banksia Gardens Community Services. One hundred and nineteen adults enrolled in a MCELP program between 2012 and 2014, and they brought 159 children with them to attend playgroup.

ENHANCED PLAYGROUP PROGRAM

Enhanced playgroups provide additional services and support to parents, carers, children and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. The playgroup programs are facilitated by bilingual staff and aim to make it easier for mothers and children to come together in a safe setting where children and carers can come together to play and learn. Within SP-DC, the enhanced playgroup program is delivered in partnership with Banksia Gardens Community Services and VICSEG New Futures.

In addition to normal playgroup activities, the facilitated playgroups aim to provide opportunities for social connectedness by providing links for parents and carers to local services and to the wider community. The CALD facilitated playgroups typically run in the early years hubs and currently include playgroups facilitated in a range of community languages including Arabic, Assyrian/Chaldean, Turkish and Nepali, reflecting some of the common community languages of the southern Hume area.

Playgroups contribute a vital role in strengthening positive family relationships, promoting and facilitating engagement of families with others in their community and creating linkages with community service providers. They are well-recognised as a way of linking newly arrived, socially isolated or marginalised families to the community, peers and early years services. An important component of this program is the engagement of community members in training to become bilingual workers and to support the delivery of playgroup programs across southern Hume.

At June 2014, there were 18 facilitated playgroups in the Early Years Hubs and 20 playgroups in the SP-DC project overall conducted on a weekly basis. Eight of these playgroups were multicultural and open access, while 10 were language or culture specific. The language groups supported in these playgroups were Arabic, Assyrian/Chaldean, Turkish and Nepali (Bhutanese). Two playgroups had a focus on English conversation.

EARLY YEARS HUBS

Early years hubs are usually placed at the local primary school and provide programs and services for toddlers and pre-school aged children and their parents and carers, as well as for members of the school community. The hubs are linked to the wider school, neighbourhood kindergartens and other local service agencies. The hub model is viewed as an innovative and effective way to increase social cohesion in neighbourhoods.

The hubs often have bilingual staff and CALD support staff on hand to provide assistance. They provide a range of services including playgroup programs, courses and information sessions targeted to their local communities. There are many established hubs in the Hume community and new hubs are regularly being established. Six new hubs have been established in local primary schools as part of the SP-DC program. This includes hubs at: Meadow Heights, Campbellfield Heights, Bethal, Broadmeadows Valley, Holy Child and St

Dominic's Primary Schools. SP-DC also supports three existing early years hubs, located at Coolaroo South, Meadows and Dallas Brooks Community Primary Schools.

Services which hubs provide vary quite considerably between different hubs, and include services run by the hubs, such as the SP-DC facilitated playgroups, as well as being a venue for external agencies to deliver services such as dental care or settlement. The services delivered by different hubs range from early years programs, computer clubs, breakfast clubs, speech pathology, English language classes, financial literacy courses, family support groups, community kitchens and visits by the Maternal and Child Health Nurse. Hub workers are also active in providing information to families to improve their knowledge of services and opportunities and in making referrals to outside services such as employment agencies, where appropriate. The SP-DC hubs are hosted by primary schools with the support of school principals and other staff.

BILINGUAL STORYTIME

The bilingual storytime program was first established in 2005 and offers sessions at Hume libraries and a number of community settings including childcare centres, pre-schools, playgroups and schools. The program is provided in several languages including Arabic, Turkish, Vietnamese, Assyrian and Sinhalese and encourages interaction between parents and children through literacy and learning activities. The bilingual storytime program within SP-DC is delivered in partnership with Hume Libraries.

Songs and stories are told in both English and the first language of the group. Storytime sessions are aimed at assisting children from linguistically diverse backgrounds to develop good language and to help facilitate the transition to kinder and school. Sessions are run by trained storytellers who use a range of bilingual resources including LOTE books, songs and craft activities.

Bilingual storytellers are central to Hume's literacy program and play an important role in providing community information and building relationships with CALD families. In addition the program also provides learning and training pathways for parents and carers. The pathways provide a series of stepping stones into greater confidence, social connectedness, participation and opportunity.

From 2012-2014, eighteen bilingual storytimes were offered on a weekly or fortnightly basis, across the following language groups:

- Assyrian/ Chaldean,
- Arabic,
- Turkish,
- Vietnamese, and
- Urdu.

In the context of SP-DC, bilingual storytime sessions were introduced to SP-DC playgroups, to enhance the

language, literacy and learning components of the playgroup experience, as well as to encourage playgroup participants to attend storytime sessions held elsewhere, such as in libraries. There was a total of 531 bilingual storytime sessions held over the three years of SP-DC with an average attendance of 11 adults and 13 children at sessions.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM

In addition to the four programs, a multidisciplinary team consisting of a Speech Pathologist and Occupational Therapist was employed to work across all four programs, while a Hubs Project Worker provided support to the Early Years Hub development component of the program. Members of the multidisciplinary team gave on-site support, mentoring and information on child development and behaviour to parents attending SP-DC programs, liaised with SP-DC program workers over referrals and services for families, conducted professional learning sessions for ESL teachers in the MCELP program, playgroup facilitators, bilingual storytellers and hub coordinators as well as holding group sessions for children with language delay.

TRAINING AND LEARNING PATHWAYS

SP-DC offered training and learning pathways for parent participants, as well as ongoing PD for project workers at the bilingual storyteller, playgroup facilitator and hub coordinator level. Four Bilingual Storytime/ Playgroup Leader Training courses were offered to parents over the course of the project, with sixty-one women completing the course. The women came from eleven different language/ ethnic backgrounds. Eight of the course graduates went on to employment as playgroup facilitators, ten were given on the job mentoring by the bilingual storytelling team and seven were offered casual employment as bilingual storytellers. Others went on to undertake further training beyond the SP-DC project, including Certificate III and Diploma of Children's Services.

The data collected over the three years of SP-DC highlights the importance of training, learning and employment pathways for women participating in the project.

- 482 women participated in training courses including childrens services, hospitality, food handling, early literacy development
- 582 participated in learning activities including parenting, leadership and child development courses
- 89 women gained employment as playgroup facilitators, child care workers, bilingual storytellers and other employment
- 209 women volunteered in playgroups and hub programs

METHODOLOGY

The following section outlines the evaluation questions which guided the evaluation methodology and the data collection approach.

EVALUATION DESIGN AND METHODS

A number of quantitative and qualitative research methods (detailed below) were used to collect evaluation data from program participants and program stakeholders during the evaluation period. An overview of the SP-DC evaluation methods and respondents is provided in Table 1 below.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Interviews provide a useful mechanism by which to explore and access people's understanding of a situation and their construction of reality (Punch 1998). Interviewing is a means of obtaining rich and detailed information about the lives, experiences and situations of participants as expressed in their own words (Minichiello et al. 1995; Britten 1997; Fontana & Frey 2000; Mason 2002). The value of a semi-structured approach rests in the degree of flexibility within the interview process allowing for discussion that is focussed on issues that are central to the evaluation questions. In this evaluation stakeholder interviews were conducted with project and program coordinators, program facilitators and parent participants.

FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group is a method that allows for involvement of several people at a time, that reveals a richness of data at a reasonable cost (Morgan & Krueger 1993). This method provides an opportunity for group members to interact, elaborate on issues and commonly simulate memory. Focus groups in this evaluation were conducted with program coordinators, program workers and parents who participated in SP-DC programs.

SURVEYS/QUESTIONNAIRES

Surveys are a common descriptive research method where respondents are asked a series of questions in a standard manner so that response can be easily quantified and analysed statistically (Liamputtong, 2010). Responses are derived primarily from self-completed surveys or through interviews. In this evaluation, two surveys were conducted which included a mix of closed and open response questions. Surveys were administered face-to-face with parents, including with the help of an interpreter if required.

WORKSHOPS

Research workshops are designed to a) provide information about the evaluation to various stakeholders; and/or b) to obtain input into the evaluation process; and/or c) to provide feedback on the progress of the evaluation and to discuss recommendations. Participatory workshops were held with project stakeholders in 2012, 2013 and 2014, to feed back evaluation findings and garner further reflections from participants on the progress and findings of the evaluation. All workshops were facilitated by experienced personnel from the RCH Education Institute and Researching Futures.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Existing project documents were used as a source of input for the evaluation. The stability of documents as a source of information and their capacity to be repeatedly reviewed are core strengths in the consideration to use documents as data sources (Kellehear 1993). The documents in this instance included key project and program documents and completed reporting templates which provided background and program context information for the evaluation team. Administrative data provided by program and project coordinators was also included to support research findings in some areas.

DATA ANALYSIS

The survey data was entered into statistical software package STATA, with descriptive statistics and statistical tests completed as appropriate for the data. All participant focus group discussions and stakeholder interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was then analysed using open coding to determine concepts and categories. Qualitative data was independently scrutinised by two researchers, who coded the data thematically in line with the three guiding evaluation questions, as well as creating some new key themes from the emerging data. The two independently derived sets of themes were compared and discussed, and a complete set of key themes, or findings were agreed on by the team members.

ETHICS

Ethics approval for this evaluation was sought and granted through The Royal Children's Hospital Human Research Ethics Committee, in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

Table 1 Evaluation participants and data collection methods

Data collection method	Year	Participant group	Number of participants
Semi-structured interviews	2012	Project coordinator	1
	2012	Program coordinators (including multidisciplinary team)	8
	2012	Parents	1
	2013	Parents	3
Focus groups	2012	Program workers	22 (three focus groups)
	2012	Parents	13 (three focus groups)
	2013	Program workers	14 (two focus groups)
	2014	Program coordinators	6
	2014	Program workers	14 (two focus groups)
Survey 1	2012	Parents	First round: 61
			Second round: 27
Survey 2	2013	Parents	First round: 63 Second round: 39 (27 continuing participants; 12 non-continuing participants)
Workshops	2012	Program workers	29 (two workshops)
	2013	Project stakeholders	6 (one workshop)
	2013	Program workers	31 (one workshop)
	2014	Project stakeholders	4 (one workshop)

LIMITATIONS OF THE EVALUATION

While evaluation of large scale projects such as SP-DC is appropriate and essential in elucidating the success of the project in meeting its stated aims, caution must always be exercised in interpreting evaluation results.

While the evaluation indicates that SP-DC was successful in meeting its aims of increasing participation, improving social cohesion and creating training and learning pathways, some caveats are in order when interpreting the results. While the authors of this report have taken these issues into consideration, readers are also urged to bear the following comments in mind.

The evaluation was not able to measure every possible indicator of change throughout the life of the project. Restrictions on time, resources and logistics mean that the evaluation necessarily focussed on particular areas of the project which were anticipated to provide the most robust results. Other changes may well have resulted from the implementation of SP-DC which are not discussed in this report. In particular, the changing emphasis on programs within the SP-DC project means that at the conclusion of the project, the development and resourcing of the early years hubs has proven to be the aspect of the project most likely to succeed and be sustainable into the future. At the commencement of the project, however, focus on the development of facilitated playgroups as a stepping stone into participation, social cohesion and training and learning pathways mean that the focus of the evaluation has been on parents entering the project through the portal of facilitated playgroups and MCELP, rather than on the hubs themselves. This is also attributable in part to the work being done independently of SP-DC in evaluating the development of early years hubs in the City of Hume and elsewhere in Melbourne.

A difficulty with evaluation of any project in the community sector is population mobility, where people who are most likely to be targeted to participate in community development programs are by definition the most vulnerable across a range of indicators including insecure housing, job mobility, lack of transport options and limited resources. Such individuals and families commonly move house, have unexpected changes in circumstances and limited ability to commit to long term programs. High turnover of participants can make statistical analysis of evaluation data more difficult and potentially less accurate than qualitative data from individual participants. The messy complexity of individual's lives and of social and cultural groups also make it difficult to attribute causal relationships to observed change. While we did observe change in project participants across the three evaluation domains, it should also be borne in mind that many factors external to SP-DC are also affecting the project participants. The evidence of association between the project and the observed change is strong, however casual pathways cannot necessarily be assumed.

EVALUATION FINDINGS 2012-2014

This section reports the year by year findings of the evaluation. Indented text is used throughout to identify the voice of respondents.

KEY FINDINGS 2012

In 2012 one hundred and two parents/ carers (101 female and one male) took part in the evaluation project, either through completing a questionnaire, or by attending a focus group. A further sixty project stakeholders, including project and program coordinators, hubs workers, playgroup facilitators and members of the multidisciplinary team also participated in the evaluation (nine in interviews, twenty two in focus groups and twenty nine in workshops).

The responses to the evaluation questions and discussions were overwhelmingly positive, with parents/ carers, workers, coordinators and stakeholders all reporting high levels of confidence and satisfaction with the SP-DC project. Parents/ carers, in particular, tended to report that they enjoyed the programs, that the programs met their needs, that participating in the programs increased their sense of belonging and inclusion, and opened up new training and employment pathways for them. A potential limitation of these findings, however, is that the survey was conducted with parents who attend the SP-DC programs. It is probable that parents who don't find that the programs meet their needs choose not to attend and therefore are not included in these results. Some of these parents were surveyed in 2014 and the results are discussed below.

PARTICIPATION

Parents, carers, project workers and project coordinators all reported that engaging vulnerable and disadvantaged parents/ carers and their pre-school aged children in the supported programs of SP-DC were highly effective and a valued means of increasing participation. In particular, the emphasis on shared knowledge of child development and effective parenting in the Australian context were widely felt to be beneficial. This was especially so in the context of newly arrived and socially isolated groups. Communication was also a key issue which affected participation, with effective communication to parents being seen as a key enabler in program participation. A parent reported being able to find out about services through participation in SP-DC:

There are a lot of services in the area – health centre, kindergarten. We ask about what is happening and they (the playgroup leaders) tell us.

SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion is a difficult concept to define, and even more difficult to measure effectively. In line with Scanlon Foundation research into social cohesion, we designed our evaluation to uncover participants' sense of trust, belonging and connectedness as ways of measuring social cohesion for individuals. Our participants reported high levels of feelings of connectedness and belonging, as well as identifying the potential sense of exclusion and isolation which might be felt by mothers who did not attend similar programs. One parent reported:

I don't have any direct family here in Australia (sisters, brothers etc) so when I come here to this playgroup, I meet other mothers which I enjoy a lot. And my daughter plays with other kids like her age which she enjoys a lot too.

Program workers and coordinators also mentioned some tensions over the concept of social cohesion and what it looks like in practice. In particular, there was uncertainty over whether providing ethno-specific services such as playgroups and storytimes for particular language-speakers contributed to social cohesion or detracted from it. Nonetheless, workers and coordinators articulated ways around this tension, and identified specific strategies to ensure that a diversity of activities and events were available across a range of cultural and linguistic groups.

TRAINING PATHWAYS

The development of training pathways as part of the nested programs of SP-DC has clearly been a successful element of the project as it has been implemented so far. Case study data shows that parents find the safe, guided pathways through the programs to be accessible and effective, in a way which they perhaps would not have in a less structured and supported environment. Our case study interviewee described her journey through a supported training pathway with SP-DC:

First you feel like you're doing something for yourself, especially like after like leaving your country and coming here, nothing to do, not confident you know. Of course you have a role, you're a mum, you're doing like lot of things, but still you have to do something for yourself to feel like you're still alive.

Project workers and coordinators did raise the pertinent question of what comes after training, and mentioned the difficulties inherent in articulating training pathways into sustainable employment opportunities either within the project or beyond it.

KEY FINDINGS 2013

PARTICIPATION

The evaluation found that SP-DC was successful in increasing the participation of culturally and linguistically diverse mothers of young children in southern Hume in early years services. Parents reported that they made use of SP-DC programs, as well as accessing a range of other services for children and families both within the early years hubs and beyond them. The premise which underpins the focus on increasing participation is that it leads to improved outcomes for parents and children and this is borne out by the evaluation findings. Child development/readiness for school scores increased for both children in the pre-school age cohort (4-5 year olds) and in the babies and toddlers cohort (0-3 year olds). A bilingual storyteller with the project explained:

Yes, because like when the parents see there is a bi-lingual storytime there is someone with a story and everything in their language they feel more belonging or more welcoming and their participating will be I think more constant. They'll be participating more rather than [if] just its in English. ... Yes, also more attending I think.

In addition, focus group data indicated that the importance of participation is well understood by the project workers and that effort is made to ensure that the SP-DC programs welcome parents and encourage their participation. Case study data indicates the importance of participation in playgroup and the value of the support provided by the multidisciplinary team in enhancing the participation of parents of children with additional needs and the critical role of spreading awareness of normal child development, services available and the importance of early learning and early intervention.

SOCIAL COHESION

The evaluation used a composite scale to assess levels of social cohesion amongst parent respondents. The social cohesion scale assessed a number of measures of belonging, connectedness and sense of community, and indicated that parents' sense of social cohesion improved during the course of the year. A key finding was a statistically significant increase in the way parents felt about the neighbourhood as a place to bring up children. This suggests that the programs of SP-DC have a positive impact on both parents sense of connectedness to their local neighbourhood and their confidence in raising their children. Other measures on this scale showed smaller, but consistently upwards trajectories with one exception. This exception was parent's self-reported sense of confidence in using the English language to communicate, which showed a significant decline over the course of the year. However, qualitative data collected in case study interviews, focus groups and the survey indicated that parents felt their English language skills had improved due to their participation in SP-DC, suggesting that their decreasing confidence in using English may relate more to an increased understanding of the intricacies of the English language and a more accurate understanding of their own abilities. The evaluation did not objectively measure parents' English language skills. Project workers

clearly articulated the importance of using English to improve cohesion, and identified strategies to help parents in doing this:

I mentioned to all my playgroups mums I said, “Please. If they’re not here today you’re free to talk in whatever you want, but if we have another language please try to speak English. I know if you have something private you can see them after session when you get out wait for your kids, you can speak. But please inside we have different nationalities – respect everyone. Speak English to understand. Maybe get her idea or maybe help her to get from her to you”.

TRAINING PATHWAYS

Case study data give a very clear picture of one participant’s journey through SP-DC from newly arrived refugee to qualified and employed child care worker, over the course of three years. Focus group responses from project workers also highlight the importance of the articulation of training, volunteering and employment pathways within and beyond SP-DC. The survey data collected over the course of one year showed little change in parents’ training and employment status; however, it is likely that the short time frame covered by this evaluation is insufficient to effectively measure movement through training, education and employment. Additional administrative data has been included in this report to demonstrate the role of training pathways amongst parents who participated in SP-DC but were not included in the survey. Both parents and project workers identified the importance of scaffolding training pathways within the SP-DC project:

Because this facilitator already there, they know the families and they have some trust and connection with the mums so I think much easier than to bring someone from outside so maybe one of the mums has been trained.

SATISFACTION

Finally, parents were asked at the end of the year about their level of satisfaction with the SP-DC program they attended. Two scales were developed to measure parents’ satisfaction with both the program activities and the help they received from the program. Overall satisfaction on both scales was very high with mean scores of 4.4 and 4.3 respectively on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being completely satisfied.

FEEDBACK FROM PARENTS WHO WERE NO LONGER ATTENDING THE PROGRAM

As well as the follow up survey with parents who had attended playgroup/ MCELP over the whole year, a short survey was conducted at the second time point with parents who no longer attended one of the programs. Twelve responses were received in this survey, which asked parents very briefly to explain their involvement

with SP-DC and the reasons why they no longer attended. Eleven of the respondents in this survey had initially attended an SP-DC playgroup and one had initially attended a MCELP class. All of the playgroup attendees had joined their playgroup on the recommendation of a friend, while the MCELP participant had been referred through the Early Years Hub Worker. Two thirds of participants had attended between three and ten sessions before dropping out, while one third attended more than ten sessions.

The reasons given for no longer continuing with the program were diverse, however they included the following:

- Participant started working (n=3)
- The time was not convenient (n=2)
- Personal reasons (n=4)
- Child started school or kinder (n=1)
- Participant had a new baby (n=1), and
- Lack of transport/ venue too hard to get to (n=1).

Although three respondents stopped attending because they had moved into employment, no participants reported that they had moved into employment, education or training as a result of their participation in the program. Three respondents reported that they were attending a different playgroup than the SP-DC playgroup. Two of these cited a better program or better resources at the new playgroup and one was attending a playgroup closer to their child's school. No parent was attending a different English class.

KEY FINDINGS 2014

PARTICIPATION

Program staff

Program staff indicated that the programs are effective at meeting their aims of increasing the participation of parents in early years services in their local communities, both within and beyond the scope of SP-DC itself.

Typical comments from program workers include:

The playgroup is a very good place to lead parents to other services like they don't know about most of the services in Hume. At first they didn't know what services around them but through playgroup, through all the guest speakers to come to playgroups too, like they build that knowledge about what's around them and what's there for them

Also you help the mums to get socialise or get enough confidence and reach other services around them.

Program coordinators

Project staff at the coordinator level also reflected on the ability of the programs to engage participants in service use, across a range of domains. These included knowledge and awareness regarding the services available, participation and utilisation of services and a higher level role of encouraging and enhancing parental input into the services available, especially within the early years hubs.

I think accessing services was a benefit for most of the parents, like you know information was given to feel part of the community and then the parenting information and exchange of information with the parents that was very apparent amongst the parents. Like you know when you have a session they said oh we didn't know about this or I didn't know that this we could do or we didn't know how to read the label for example about obesity and reducing obesity and healthy eating or how to manage our children when they are stubborn.

It might be an opportunity to outreach to the community and have more parent participation in the program and learning more about child development and engagement and transitioning to school.

I think we've also seen like a confidence in parents to influence what is delivered in the hub, so initially we were saying we can do this, we can do this, they were coming what we thought they needed but now they will actually ask for things and say oh yeah we've done the English but we want to just talk so they'll make a playgroup like an English space where they're only talking English. So they're really influencing what is offered there which is really nice, it's very targeted and very specific to each family.

Program coordinators also reflected on their own role in enhancing the range of services available to parents and the coordination and interaction between these services.

I think it was to enhance.... the developmental quality of programs that were already in place so [it] was about not just parents but also the community and people who were already delivering the service. So to enhance, when I started using the word community I would include parent systems but also the facilitators of the existing systems, to enhance both of those.

SOCIAL COHESION

Program staff

Program staff articulated the ways in which they saw participants increasing their social contacts and reducing isolation through their participation in SP-DC:

Before the people shy, they won't talk with each other. Everyone alone, by themselves. Now they build good relationship. If anyone has a problem they can ask me. Then we have communication, what's your opinion and we have good communication.

This occurred particularly through playgroups, as a first point of contact with other women in similar situations:

I think the playgroups are really an entry point for a lot of women... it is the isolation, it helps to break that down initially but what would probably work in another community would take a lot longer to work in our community. It takes longer to build those relationships and you know giving as our families are, there is still that reluctance here, it goes back to the language and what if I say the wrong thing and what if I you know treat my child like I'm not supposed to be treating my child so there's always this fear and level of am I doing the right thing.

Peer learning between participants and the shared experience of parenting, particularly for those women without close family members nearby, was an important component of this process:

But it's a very supportive environment in that you know as you said it's non-judgemental and women talk to each other and say "Oh that happened to me too and this is what I do" and so there's a lot of exchanging of ideas and etcetera but really it takes a lot longer in our community to move women on than it may in a different community where it could be predominately Anglo-Saxon or women that do have a career or you know just taking time off work, it's very different here.

From attending playgroup, many women were then able to effect change in their own and their families' lives, increasing both participation and social inclusion:

It's like a butterfly effect, small change, getting big change and if they're, the change in their social life for example at my playgroup the mums, they come together and now they are going out maybe once a month and they give their kids at home to the dads and they have a day for themselves.

Also before like only just mums bring the children and now more grandmothers bring the grandchildren and now grandma can say oh I don't have to stay home. I make friends, like summer time they go to picnics all grandmothers and mums together. Yeah, that's a change too.

Program coordinators

Program coordinators too reflected on the role of the SP-DC programs in engaging parents in social activities and extending networks of trust and connection:

Obviously they [the program workers] are seeing that occur, they've come in, they've participated in the program, they've come in as fairly isolated individuals with their child you know not really connected to anything, their first connection has been with the teacher and then the women in the group and then they've connected to the services outside. So the program involved excursions occasionally to places of interest but also having speakers come in and talking about a range of things from dental care to the need to drink water which is quite a big issue in a particular community.

I mean even the social network, the networking, so all the parent's who've told me that they go shopping together, the children are playing together and continue on the weekends or on the, yeah so it's getting to network even they go and cooking they have like you know sharing in the recipe in one house and that becomes like a small playgroup for continuing that network and social connection. Yeah some have no families here and then found somebody who keeps ringing even though they're not meeting but they're still finding that person to give them that support.

TRAINING PATHWAYS

Program staff

Program staff commented on the success of the playgroups in enabling women to enter the workforce, particularly through the childcare industry:

we have seen women move on and particularly in the child care industry, there's a big growth towards doing the study around that, around doing work in, family day care work and now we've got quite a large number of women doing that which gives them a flexibility to still be able to look after their children and also do some work, paid work on the side.

This could be within SP-DC or moving beyond SP-DC:

Some mums now what they start doing, I heard one mum..... She used to come to my playgroup just bring her child and her sister too they come just for the story time and I refer her to do a child care, certificate three in children's services.... she did that, she did the diploma, sister too.... Both of them did that. She is working now. She is doing story teller, she is working story teller now. And the other one is doing child care, child care centre now.

Many program workers, who had themselves commenced work through the facilitated playgroup program commented on their own learnings from participating in SP-DC, both as playgroup participants and as volunteers and casual employees:

Actually my oldest son say to me like maybe two years before. He's observed me, ok one time he's come to me "mum do you know you've really changed?" I said "why?" "Because you never listened to me like all the time, like you screaming all the time, you not listening to me but you listening now."

Program coordinators

Program coordinators also observed strong positive growth in training and learning of the participants and the program employees. This could be through both formal and informal learning opportunities:

Yeah I mean, look really observing the playgroup leaders, from when they first start in the playgroup and setting up to become playgroup leaders, receiving the training and then the P.D sessions that [name] was talking about and all of that. It's really reached a stage where they're standing on their own.... this one shows a huge improvement and transition to where they are now.

That they knew they had to put out a certain kind of array of toys, they knew they had to have a certain way of engaging, they knew that it was important to engage families and parents and they knew the value of early years in preparation for school and prep. So they knew all that but I think that the gap that I saw was they didn't have the capacity to unpack what the play was and why that was important to the mum, so they didn't really have the capacity to unpack for the mothers, the importance of their play with their children. They knew it was important but didn't have the ability to unpack that and I think one of the biggest things I think I've done is to, hope I did anyway, was to unpack that, to help them understand that when you do this like this and this, fabulous, but when you do this and do that, and to do that then you've enhanced so much more in the developmental, from the developmental perspective. I think that has made a humongous difference and I see them now knowing that I'm doing this because we're doing this.

That's measurable, we can actually measure the completion of the different modules, the completed learning tasks that they've gone on from one certificate to another so that's measurable. But there's [also] the information that they gained in learning the language that's being the critical thing because that's all been about services that are available for pre-school kids. It's been really rich, we've stuck with all seven of the topics so that's prescribed but that's, there's a lot of scope there. The mums are a lot more connected to their community. The teachers have commented on how their, they've used words like transformation actually which are really strong words.

I know that volunteering is being introduced as a concept and that's been accepted. That's an unusual concept for a lot of countries. But people certainly understand it, they're comfortable with it, with the

notion of volunteering and they do and they can see that it can be quite a thing in itself but it can also lead on to, in some cases, forming networks

Program coordinators were also realistic about the accessibility of training and employment pathways for some participants and noted that not all parents were ready for employment:

And I think we also need to manage the expectations of the women also, that when it comes to employment it is very different from being a volunteer. And that's something that we've noticed a little bit too for example you must be on time every time....A lot of people struggle with that and they think you know it's cultural and it's also being busy and its being a mum and stuff too but it's just that big step up from even casual work, from yeah being a volunteer or even a helper, not even a proper volunteer to being a paid employee some people may not get there because of that and it takes a lot of patience to be managing that. And I think that sometimes maybe that, or yeah people just having an understanding of what that's going to mean, it's a bit difficult.

In the MCELP program part of the informal learning was designed to address these types of issues:

We stress that it's a commitment, we want people to come every week and part of that is to train the women to make a phone call if they weren't going to be able to make it, to ring, and at first the teacher would ring, if they were away, but by the end of the term most of the mums were reliably ringing to say if they couldn't make it. It's a transfer of skills.

Clearly such processes go well above and beyond the acquisition of English language skills, but their informal benefits are possibly of as great a benefit as the more formal elements of the class learning.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Program staff

While not directly part of the evaluation aims, much information was collected regarding the transfer of knowledge and skills relating to child development through the SP-DC project. Many program staff members commented on the importance of increasing parents' knowledge of appropriate child development and of gently changing entrenched cultural beliefs about child development and the child learning:

Some people before has a problem with behaviour, maybe delayed the child. Before they shamed to talk, now they talking, more confident.

I think a lot of parents they focus on the learning as in education as in reading writing, but it's not, it's like socially you're learning, emotionally you're learning, you're mixing with other kids you're learning how, like everyone else said. But you're putting that language into it that it's not just learning as in formal learning it's like developing the whole child.

Most of them don't really like understand like we have to really explain to them how important it is to spend those certain crucial years with their children. So like mentoring them, sort of explaining to them make them realise how important it is to spend time with their children.

These comments shed light on the depth of knowledge acquired by the program workers through their employment and their attendance at SP-DC professional development opportunities.

Program coordinators

Program coordinators also reflected on the importance of capacity building for both program workers and parent participants around contemporary understandings of early child development, particularly early brain development and the importance of early literacy:

It seemed to empower parents with more knowledge around, well you know that they are the first teacher to their children and give them the confidence to believe in that.

I think it ... provided capacity building for the parents in terms of understanding child development and then participating in their child's development at an enhanced level so that they understood what their child's development was doing and where it was and what it was doing and ways in which they could improve that or assist that developmental process. And likewise the same notion taken to each of the program components about the playgroups that were in place, the bilingual story times that were in place, but they're could be things that you could do from a developmental perspective that would enhance the quality and the depth of both the understanding what people were doing and their capacity to do more with what they were doing.

This extended to parents being able to enhance family members' understandings of child development beyond the participants of the programs:

They even look at taking some activities, asking the playgroup leader, can I take extra copies home and can I also use those with my, the activities with other children for example or even to engage the father in the activity which was reported in a number of the playgroups that they go home and the child will say, one is at kinder for example or prep, here is my work to the father, this is what I've done and then the little one says and this is what we have done in the playgroup, this is my work and then taking another activity and sit down with the father to do the activity with the father. Makes you feel proud of it, like you know it's an achievement that you come a long way engaging parents or their families.

SATISFACTION

Program staff

In addition to the direct evaluation aims, program workers provided some very important personal insights into the value of the SP-DC project:

I got four children and I never took my three children to any playgroup or even to the library and ..., now I'm thinking at that time I was feeling isolated from everything and a bit low self-esteem and yeah I was just in a big, what do you call? Like a dungeon. Yeah but now when I started this job and now I'm interested in everything, open minded and my fourth daughter, my child I took her like playgroup, everywhere now she's, yeah she's more smarter [laughs].

Program coordinators

The program coordinators also provided comments on the value and overall satisfaction with SP-DC. These included issues such as improved communication and coordination of services:

I think it's reached sort of those objectives that we've already mentioned but it's also then done some other things that I probably didn't think that it would do. So it's a really good conduit between Council services and what it can offer, that's a good pathway too being the Council as a support agency here. And often some groups from here from Council will consult, will use the hub leaders as a consultancy group to inform plans which is nice as well given that different perspective with community informing Council plans and things like that.

It also included some reflection on the changing role of schools in the provision of early years services, despite rhetoric towards greater inclusion of early years learning:

And also what I'm starting to see now is that schools are now having more of a focus on wellbeing, they've got a hub they've really got to embrace that work, the hub work is core business for the school, which is still a struggle, still early stages but that conversation is happening a lot more particularly if they've got a hub. So just moving past the hub leader now and having the whole school on-board with that sort of hub work.

I know some of the schools when we approached them they already had a playgroup, they set up a playgroup however theirs were not active, they were not up and running. They needed that expertise to engage. Although their role was to engage with the families and do it but they were more as overseeing rather than hands on to get individual involvement so, and then SP-DC came on board and then the partnership happened with, it kicked it off.

Program coordinators also stressed the importance of taking time and building relationships when engaging very marginalised and socially excluded communities. There was a strong recognition that delivering early years services through externally developed learning packages was not effective with these communities:

I think all these other programs that get set up that are things like ten ways to speak nicer to your child and someone comes out and, you know, delivers a package. Package delivery, I think, to these types of communities that are not in the mainstream are a waste of time, I really think they're a waste of time because you don't have the credibility, you haven't got the approach and you're just delivering the package. Whereas the other way, the SP-DC way has been known to be extremely responsive and therefore it's part of the whole program.

And I think you've picked up on the point that was really strong with the playgroup facilitators' responses as well about relationship building and the importance of building those relationships and establishing trust for very isolated parents to actually do that work, I think it takes time.

You've got to be really gentle, very diplomatic and very skilled in the way that you shift somebody from, and respectful too of where they're coming from, and where they're coming to in a new culture and society.

Program coordinators reflected on their own learnings in recognising these processes and the ways in which community programs must be managed, particularly in terms of the time taken to achieve program goals:

this other way where you're actually being much more customised and you wait and you follow your own developmental principles of wait, wait your turn, wait and see what you need to do and then you start to offer and then see what the response is and then offer more and then you, so you build up that thing and that again one thing about the SP-DC, three years is a fantastic length of time for a project to be done but I think it needed six.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS 2012-2014

This section summarises the results described above, together with the findings of the previous two years of the evaluation, with particular reference to the research questions of:

- Increased participation in early years services
- Increased social cohesion, and
- Improved access to training and learning pathways.

PARTICIPATION

The findings of all the evaluation activities, across all three years of the SP-DC project, point to the project being successful in engaging parents (overwhelmingly mothers) of young children with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in a range of early years services. This includes engagement and participation in the programs of SP-DC itself, notably the facilitated playgroup program and MCELP English language program, which together have enrolled over 1000 parents across the three years. In addition, the role of the SP-DC resourced early years hubs in bringing a wide range of social, cultural, financial, health and support services together in an accessible way has encouraged many times as many parents in making use of such services. Quantitative data from the 2012 survey indicate that SP-DC has achieved its aims of improved child development through participation in playgroup/ MCELP. Data from the survey demonstrates that child development/readiness for school scores increased for both children in the pre-school age cohort (4-5 year olds) and in the babies and toddlers cohort (0-3 year olds). While the results for the pre-school aged cohort reached statistical significance, the smaller change (not statistically significant) for the babies and toddlers group also demonstrates an improving trajectory.

SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion is closely related to participation and again the measures of social cohesion used in the survey indicate that SC-DC has been successful in improving social cohesion. Qualitative data suggest that parents feel more connected to their friends and neighbours, that SP-DC program workers recognise and promote the value of social connectedness for newly arrived families and that program coordinators also work hard to promote this concept. Quantitative data from the 2012 survey indicate that social cohesion improved across a twelve month period of participating in either playgroup or MCELP for the majority of mothers who took part in the survey. Scaled scores to reflect the multi-faceted concept of social inclusion, including measures of trust, connectedness, social support and sense of belonging showed improvement across the two time points of the survey, while the improvement in scores on one measure in particular, the sense of the local area as a good place to bring up children, reached statistical significance. The only other score to reach statistical significance

was the combined measure of parents' confidence in speaking, reading and understanding English, which was significantly worse after twelve months of participation. However, the measure was based on parents' self-report of their confidence in English and was not an objective assessment of their actual level of skill. As such, we posit that this finding represents parents' increased knowledge of the intricacies of the English language and the complexities of its use rather than a decrease in their ability to use English. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups supported the premise that parents' English language skills improved over the course of their participation in SP-DC, particularly among those who participated in the MCELP program, for which rigorous assessment of participants' progress is available.

TRAINING PATHWAYS

Training pathways were a key component of the SP-DC program and the project was successful in engaging culturally and linguistically diverse mothers in a range of training programs in a safe and supportive environment. More than sixty women completed the playgroup facilitator/ bilingual storytellers training run by SP-DC itself, while many more were supported to go on to training beyond SP-DC, including in courses which were auspiced by the SP-DC early years hubs, such as computer training, English language classes, certificate IIIs and diplomas in children's services, as well as continuing such studies at other local training providers, including TAFEs and Universities.

In 2012 participants reported some concerns around the full articulation of training pathways, worrying that parents were being trained for areas in which they were unlikely to get jobs, however by 2014 this fear had largely evaporated, as parents had begun moving into paid employment successfully. Program workers also recognised a broader range of outcomes from training and learning pathways by 2014, including a recognition of the importance of developing the concepts of volunteering and mentoring for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, as well as a focus on parents developing the 'soft skills' required to be job ready beyond simply achieving a program certificate.

It is also clear from the data collected over each of the years of the evaluation that a considerable amount of informal learning had taken place through the SP-DC project, both for program employees and for parent participants, through peer learning, targeted educational sessions around particular topics of child health and development and through the auspicing of SP-DC programs such as the work of the early years hubs coordinators and the multidisciplinary team.

INTEGRATION OF SERVICES

Probably the strongest finding of the evaluation, however is not to be found within each area of investigation, but rather in the integration of the four program areas along with the development of training and learning pathways within SP-DC. The nested nature of the bilingual story times, sitting within the facilitated playgroups,

which themselves sit within the early years hubs, all supported by the multi-disciplinary team and providing entry points to recognised training and learning pathways was recognised by participants, program workers and program coordinators as the strongest element of the whole SP-DC project. This a key finding, and represents the achievement of one of the initial driving aims of the SP-DC project, to deliver services cohesively, systematically and simultaneously.

CONCLUSIONS

Evaluation is a not a perfect science, and evaluations of large, complex, multifaceted community development programs such as SP-DC can only hope to capture a portion of what was involved in the project across its three years of operation. This evaluation has focussed on the experiences of three groups of project stakeholders:

- Program participants (parents and carers, overwhelmingly mothers)
- Program workers (bilingual storytellers, playgroup facilitators and hub coordinators)
- Program coordinators (across bilingual storytime, playgroups, MCELP, early years hubs and the multidisciplinary team).

It has aimed to tease out the understandings and observations of each of these three groups in relation to the three project themes of:

- Increasing participation
- Improving social cohesion, and
- Creating training and learning pathways.

The evaluation employed a range of data collection techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, across three years of work, in order to elicit the strongest possible data to elucidate the success of the project in meeting these three aims.

The evaluation cannot hope to capture all the experiences and responses of stakeholders in the SP-DC experience. We did not conduct a process evaluation and are therefore unable to comment on the management and deployment of SP-DC resources across the years, however it is to be hoped that the findings of our work will be useful in demonstrating to others attempting similar community development projects the range of outcomes which might be expected and the key factors which have worked together to underpin the success of the SP-DC project. We hope that the participants in this evaluation will find the findings of interest and value, as well as those who funded, auspiced, governed, managed and oversaw the entire project.

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