

Learning Together: An Innovative Parent Education Project to Facilitate Children's Learning, Wellbeing and Resilience

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Abstract

The complexities associated with living and learning in a rapidly changing world impact on children's play, learning, wellbeing and resilience. Evidence suggests that parent education and parent-teacher partnerships in the early years can support positive outcomes for young children and their families. This paper provides an overview of a pilot project that used an interactive parent education project to support early learning, and young children's wellbeing and resilience. School personnel, parents and university academics came together to share their unique perspectives on children's play, learning and wellbeing. The project was implemented at two sites with some variations in delivery in response to local contextual factors. At each site the participants were provided with relevant findings from current research, and opportunities to share experiences, knowledge and perspectives. Participation in experiential learning tasks and reflective dialogue encouraged collaborative conversations and built common understandings between parents, teachers and academics. The outcomes of the project suggest that 'Learning Together' can contribute to new knowledge and perspectives that are likely to have positive outcomes for children and their families.

Key words

Early years, education, parents, parent-teacher partnerships, parent education, well being

Introduction

Early childhood care and education is undergoing significant change in many developed nations. These changes are associated with the increased recognition of the importance of early experience for future productivity (Harris, Lieberman, & Marans 2007; Karoly & Bigelow, 2005; Karoly et al., 1998; Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005; Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Marmot, 1999), and the significance of the early years for lifelong education, health and wellbeing (Mustard, 2008).

Australia has been one such country to recognise this and as a consequence a number of policy initiatives have been instigated. These policies, and the research that supports them, prompted the "Learning Together" parent education project that is the focus of this article. In what follows, a review of some of the relevant Australian initiatives allows readers an opportunity to consider international perspectives and the changing landscape that formed the breeding-ground for the "Learning Together" project.

Recently in Australia, both federal and state governments instigated policy directives such as the Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009), and the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education and School Aged Care (DEEWR, 2011). These government-led developments are

based on research (Edwards, Flear & Nuttall, 2008) and are designed to support positive health and education outcomes for young children by improving the quality of the educational experience for children, collaboration with families and employing university qualified teachers. These curriculum and professional development initiatives are supplemented by the introduction of the Australian Early Developmental Index [AEDI] (Centre for Community Child Health & Telethon Institute [CCCHTI], 2009.) The AEDI provides an internationally correlatable benchmark that can act as a measure of young children's learning and development at entry to formal school in communities across Australia. The results are designed to assist policy makers in identifying the types of services, resources and support necessary to give children their best start in life (CCCHTI, 2009). In addition, the Australian Research Council (ARC, 2012), the national funding body for research, has aimed to build on these initiatives by encouraging researchers to consider projects concerned with developing strategies to promote the healthy development of young Australians, and addressing the causes and reducing the impact of the genetic, social and environmental factors which diminish their life potential. Over the last five years a variety of sources have contributed to research about child well-being, and the impact can be recognized in practical ways through government initiatives. Although contributions from many sources formed the basis of Australian educational policy, it appears that collaborative efforts are less involved in the translation of research into practice.

The Australian government does recognise the rich advantages associated with engaging a variety of sources, education academics as well as health and epidemiological professionals, in the development and dissemination of policy regarding children's wellbeing. The authors of a recent government funded project to identify the research gaps in early childhood development state:

Ensuring the birth-right of Australian children has clear implications for policy makers, researchers and practitioners across diverse disciplines including amongst others, government, anthropology, sociology, psychology education, psychology and medicine. Despite a collective interest in the welfare of young children, the challenges, perspectives and worldviews across the vocations and disciplines will diverge and intersect at different points, contributing a wealth of mutually informative knowledge and adding many themes to the early childcare and education literature. (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth [ARACY], 2011, p. 4)

Although collective interest from a variety of professions does create a wealth of mutually informative knowledge, the World Health Organisation's (WHO, 2004) *World Report on Knowledge for Better Health* identified that there is a troubling divide between knowledge from research and the realities of practice, and this obstacle is commonly referred to as the 'know-do' gap. Specifically, Neuhauser (2010) notes that for almost all educational projects, this problem occurs and that connecting research from diverse disciplines with the various stakeholders is a significant challenge (2010 p. 91). She suggests that a way forward is "the active participation of researchers, practitioners and decision makers" (2010 p. 100). She also identifies the importance of interpersonal networks among stakeholders for the diffusion of knowledge. Lomas (2008, p. 130) also noted that "human interaction is the engine that drives research into practice."

In addition to the integrated input needed from professionals, research over the last 12 years has highlighted the importance of parenting support in the early years for the long term health and wellbeing of young children (Case, Fertig & Paxson, 2005; Heckman, 2000; McCain & Mustard, 2002). In response, the Australian government commissioned research to isolate knowledge gaps in this area. One area of need identified was the need for greater understanding of what parents

do and don't know about child development and learning, their expectations about the education of their children and how professionals could use this information effectively. The government introduced the Family School Partnerships Framework (DEEWR, 2008), a framework designed to support parent and school connections via collaborative relationships and activities involving school staff, parents and other family members of students at the school. The Framework states that "effective partnerships are based on mutual trust and respect and shared responsibility for the education of the children and young people at the school" (DEEWR 2008, p. 2). The Framework identifies principles and strategies for effective family partnerships and several case studies. The Learning Together project provides a further example of how such strategies and principles can be implemented.

The challenge to bring together various parties from various vocations and disciplines, as well as parents formed the basis of the parent education project 'Learning Together' that is the focus of this article. The project brought together academics in the fields of early childhood education and health, school personnel and parents to share their diverse perspectives to help to bridge the research-practice divide.

Project Significance

The project 'Learning Together' was undertaken with the aim to share current, research-based information with parents, carers, educators and other community-based professionals working with young children. In doing so, it was hypothesized that it might facilitate a platform for key stakeholders to learn from, and with each other, and in doing so enable adults to gain knowledge that might help them to support positive learning and developmental outcomes for young children as well as assist in bridging the gap between research and practice.

There are a number of programs offering parenting education and support that have been evaluated and found to produce positive outcomes, including Triple P [Positive Parenting Program] (Sanders & Markie-Dadds, 1996), Systematic Training for Effective Parenting [STEP] (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976), and Parent Effectiveness Training [PET] (Gordon, 1976). While there is some content in these programs that addresses early development, the bulk of the content is directed at developmental concerns that emerge in school aged children. Also, these programs tend to address issues that are linked to illness and pathology such as behaviours related to attention deficit disorders, autism spectrum disorders or conduct disorders. The focus therefore tends to be on remediation and prevention of problems rather than on the promotion of healthy development.

While many studies have explored the detrimental effects of deprivation in early childhood, there is a growing body of evidence documenting protective experiences in the early years. For instance, The Australian Temperament Project, a longitudinal study following the development of a large cohort of Victorian children for more than 20 years, provides evidence of pathways that promote healthy adjustment, including particular aspects of parenting style and positive relationships with teachers and carers that foster a sense of belonging within educational or care settings (Sanson & Smart, 2004). Also, the development of effective strategies to cope with stress in the early years has been linked to positive cognitive and social/emotional outcomes in the immediate and longer term (Compas, Connor-Smith, & Jaser, 2004).

Although, as noted above some research does exist, few researched programs available in Australia are aimed at promoting wellbeing and resilience in early childhood despite evidence that early childhood experiences can have lifelong social, economic and health-related consequences. The relationship between early life experiences and cognitive, physical, social and emotional outcomes

throughout life is evident in research across the fields of neuroscience (Greenough & Black, 1992), developmental psychology (O'Connor, Deater-Deckard, Fulker, Rutter, & Plomin, 1998), population science and epidemiology (Marmot, 2004), as well as in the field of economics (World Health Organisation, 2004). The promotion of healthy development in childhood has benefits for all of society in terms of providing a solid foundation for responsible citizenship, economic productivity, and sustainable democracy (Shonkoff, 2003). The ARC (2012) recognises that enabling individuals and families to make choices that lead to healthy, productive and fulfilling lives will yield economic and social benefits and add materially to national wellbeing.

To this end, the parent education project 'Learning Together' that is the focus of this article sought to develop a protocol aimed at promoting wellbeing and resilience in early childhood. In recognition of the need to address the 'know-do gap', the program content was driven by both the researchers as well as the parents and teachers at the pilot study sites. In order to oversee this dynamic approach, a considerable amount of research literature was reviewed and numerous steps were undertaken to develop the program. The theoretical rationale and the development of the project are reviewed below.

Theoretical Rationale

The project was informed by a number of theoretical perspectives that are evident in the fields of education and health. A cross-disciplinary approach enabled the synthesis of a number of these perspectives both in the justification of the research and in informing the methods utilised throughout the design and implementation phases of the project.

Early education has been traditionally founded on child development theory which focuses on the biologically determined and predictable progression of children through ages and stages in various domains (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Erikson, 1950; Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1936, 1970). Within current approaches in early learning however there is increased recognition of the influence of socio-cultural theory (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2004; Rogoff, 1998, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978) which highlights the significance of gender, and ethnic diversity on children's play, development and learning. Socio-cultural theory requires greater recognition of geographical, social and cultural diversity of early childhood experience and suggests that early childhood curriculum should be responsive to the particular socio-cultural context of the child and family. It has prompted a move beyond the conception of the universal child, moving through developmental stages at the same rate and in the same way, to the conception of the child as an individual, with a greater consideration of diversity of development, learning style and socio-cultural context of families and communities. It also reflects the complex and multi-faceted worlds that children inhabit in contemporary society (Barr et al, 2012).

Proponents of the Reggio Emilia early childhood education perspective (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and other early childhood sources (Cannella, 1997; James & Prout, 1990) have challenged previously held views of the child as simple and immature and progressing through age and stage maturation that is biologically determined. Approaches to early childhood education and care have increasingly shifted from the deficit view of young children to an image of the child with strength, curiosity, and knowledge (DEEWR, 2009). Socio-constructivist perspectives, including the recognition that young children bring to the educational context the knowledge and skills valued by their own particular family and community are evident in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009). The increasing focus on socio-constructivist perspectives (Fleer et al., 2006; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) also recognizes the importance of the co-construction of knowledge, peer scaffolding and learning in relationship with others.

This theoretical shift influenced the development of the 'Learning Together' program in a number of ways. It encouraged an approach that recognised the strength of learning together and co-constructing knowledge. Specifically, sessions were run as communities of practice where all participants were seen to bring important knowledge and experiences and encouraged to contribute throughout all sessions (Lave & Wenger, 1990). This theoretical perspective also influenced the project through the ways in which the education and health experts shared information about current research and practice. Questions and prompts for reflection were used to support the participants to be encouraged to consider the research and practice in terms of their own contexts, specifically their own families and communities.

Another important way in which socio-cultural theory influenced the program development concerned the approaches to learning. A conscious decision was made to model quality early childhood pedagogical approaches, which are strongly influenced by socio-cultural theory with the adult learners. In this way, it was hoped that the adult participants would form a strong understanding of such approaches and a willingness to adopt similar approaches with the children in their care. For example, early childhood pedagogy recognises the need to allow learning through hands-on and experiential tasks. Therefore adult participants were provided with an opportunity to participate in a critical craft activity. Socio-cultural pedagogical approaches aim to allow the child to have influence over their learning; they can choose the topic areas they might want to learn about or the resources they might want to use. Similarly, adult participants were encouraged to identify topics of interest before the course as well as during the course.

The theoretical perspectives associated with situated learning and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1990) were also relevant to the project. These perspectives draw attention to the relational quality of learning and the ways in which meaning is negotiated by people who are actively engaged in solving dilemmas in contexts which are relevant to them. Lave and Wenger (1990) argued that learning occurs most effectively in communities of practice. As Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke and Harrison (2008) argued in relation to communities of practice,

These communities bind their members together in a functional social group. The interactions which occur within a community of practice such as problem solving, cooperation, the building of trust and goodwill have the potential to build networks and relationships of a community that enhances the wellbeing of the individuals within it. (p. 99)

'Learning Together' - The Essential Elements

Based on the theoretical perspectives outlined above, four key components were deemed essential for inclusion in the 'Learning Together' project.

1. Evidenced based information determined by stakeholders to ensure relevance to participants and context.
2. Interactive learning experiences such as hands on activities scaffolded by academics to support participants to deconstruct their own leaning processes.
3. Communities of practice that support social interaction, peer scaffolding and collaborative learning.
4. Positive emotional tone recognising the importance of affect in learning and building relationships of trust and mutual respect.

A critical aspect of the design of 'Learning Together' was ensuring that participants were given time to make connections with each other, to debrief, to reflect on the information given and their

own responses to the opportunities for experiential learning and time to recollect and reconnect with their own childhood experiences.

The Project

The 'Learning Together' project was designed to improve parent, teacher and community knowledge about, and experience with, strategies to promote, play, learning, wellbeing and resilience in young children. The researchers aimed to find out whether the program designed in consultation with local stakeholders, was relevant to their parents, teachers, carers and community members. The researchers also aimed to determine whether the parent and teacher participants found the program helpful for supporting the learning and development of young children.

Data was gathered from two sites located in metropolitan Sydney, Australia both of which are rated high on the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas [SEIFA] (ABS, 2013). SEIFA provides summary measures derived from the Census to measure different aspects of socio-economic conditions by geographic area. The educational leaders at these two sites agreed to participate in the pilot project so that ideas and concepts could be trialed and the results used to inform the development of a parent education program that could subsequently be implemented in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Participants on both sites included parents, teachers and community members. Site 1 included 14 participants with the majority being Anglo-Australian. Site 2 involved approximately 110 participants and reflected a greater diversity of cultural backgrounds. The discrepancy in numbers of participants reflected the differences in presentation format developed in response to the needs of each site. The format for site one consisted of a one day intensive experience for a small group of participants whereas in site two three sessions were conducted over a number of months to a much larger audience. Data gathering strategies also varied across the two sites in-line with these differences. Although from a research perspective such differences may suggest inconsistency they are evidence of the commitment to design the program in response to local needs rather than to fit an academic the research agenda.

A range of different types of qualitative data was collected during the project. This included researcher field notes and observations recorded by the researchers during the design, implementation and evaluation phases of the project. A survey for participants was also developed and disseminated to participants at Site 1 where closer relationships had been established with the participants. Questions in the survey focused on what participants learnt and whether it could be applied to parenting roles and relationships. The survey also asked respondents to indicate other aspects of early childhood learning and development that they would be interested in learning more about. Eight of the fourteen participants completed and returned the surveys. These responses are summarized in the following section. Follow up interviews with a small number of participants were also conducted and transcribed. This data provided additional detail on the perceived value of their experience of the Learning Together project. The data from the various sources was analysed in relation to common themes, levels of perceived effectiveness and examples of subsequent application of the parenting strategies in everyday life. The project involved three phases: the development of the project, piloting the project and evaluating the project.

Development of the project

The design phase of the project involved a series of collaborative and consultative meetings between university academics and school personnel at two school sites. The sites were chosen because the school communities had prioritised professional learning for staff and parents about

early childhood education and development. This was due to the fact that each school had early learning centres on their grounds and this had caused growing interest in approaches to learning in the early years. At these meetings school personnel and academics shared their intentions for the project. School personnel shared information from their communities about areas of particular interest, with one school sharing data that they had previously gathered regarding relevant issues, questions and concerns from the parents and teachers.

Information regarding the demographic characteristics of school populations and details of parents' desires and intentions for their children was used to inform the content of the 'Learning Together' project. For example parents noted in both locations that they sought knowledge regarding how young children learn and that they wanted to share in their young children's educational experiences. They were also interested in information about how to support children's mental health and resilience, possibly reflecting fairly significant media coverage of these areas, for instance newspaper articles about the detrimental effects of 'helicopter parenting' (Patty, 2010). Parents at both sites also noted that they wanted research based information that was not simplified on the assumption that this was necessary for a parent audience or in the words of one parent not "dumbed down".

The consultative meetings with school staff enabled the identification of key discussion topics that would be included in the course sessions. These topics were chosen to reflect issues or concerns raised by parents and school staff, as well as areas in which staff from the university and the school had expertise. They included current research and approaches concerning early childhood education and child mental health and resilience (DEEWR, 2009; Flear et al, 2006; Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke & Harrison, 2008).

Consultation with teaching and executive staff at the schools also focused on the delivery and evaluation processes associated with the implementation of the project. The theoretical rationale and pedagogical processes as well as content were important to both parties. The two sites provided access to curriculum, syllabus and programming documents as well as information about the school context (including numbers of students enrolled; resources available; religious affiliations). They also provided outlines and resources from previously delivered parenting courses to facilitate responsiveness to the local contextual features at each site. Researchers and practitioners with expertise in the fields of early childhood development and education, and child mental health and wellbeing then developed the course in conjunction with the local school personnel at each site.

The emphasis on the collaborative processes of course development is a departure from a more traditional and technical view of research based projects where a product is developed by experts, delivered and then implemented at the local level by practitioners. Walshe and Rundall (2001) suggested a more effective model is one in which stakeholders come together using multiple interaction processes to build consensus around a course of action. Concepts such as 'knowledge sharing' (Tsiu, 2006) and 'knowledge brokering' (Neuhauser, 2010) reflect the processes of exchange rather than delivery. These terms highlight the dynamic nature of the development and implementation of the project and the mutuality of the learning processes. The title of the project 'Learning Together' highlights the multilayered nature of information exchange, knowledge integration, teaching and learning.

Theory and practice shows that good program design can maximise the chances that a new project is effective in bringing about prescribed outcomes, is acceptable to the target audience and will be taken up and used widely (Dusenbury & Hansen, 2004). The Project Mapping approach has been shown to be an effective framework for guiding the development of programs (van Bokhoven, Kok & van der Weijden, 2003). This approach stresses the importance of ensuring that program development reflects evidence-based effective practice. Thus, the 'Learning Together' project utilised a strengths-based approach, focussing on identifying and promoting strengths in young children in line with research linking such an approach to positive educational outcomes and wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009; Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998).

Research concerning stress and coping was used to inform content regarding ways to support children to develop and use strategies to cope effectively with challenge and change (van Vliet & Andrews, 2009). Theory and research concerning learning and resilience provided information about the importance of allowing children to experience challenges and to apply strategies to meet challenges (Reeve, 2002). Such experiences can promote autonomy, agency and self-efficacy; enable positive feelings; and, act to motivate children to continue to discover and learn (Dweck, 1999; Fredrickson, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Diversity and difference was discussed in terms of recognising and respecting difference and responding in appropriate ways to enable children to develop and apply strengths effectively within social and educational settings (Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke & Harrison, 2008).

It was determined that the 'Learning Together' project should consist of several parts in order to maximise opportunities for information sharing and participation by both experts and school personnel. The design team wanted to ensure that the project catered for different learning styles (such as visual and auditory learners) and the diverse experience and expertise of the participants. The planning team also wanted to reflect aspects of early learning pedagogy that were being promoted by the project such as playful and creative tasks, experiential learning, and opportunities for co-construction and collaboration. At each site it was agreed that presentations by academic experts and school personnel, interactive workshops for parents and teachers and opportunities for conversation and discussion supported by examples from children's experiences of play and learning would be included.

In Site 1 the seminars were introduced with an opportunity for initial conversations between presenters and participants. These conversations were prompted by the provocation of objects such as old fashioned toys and books such as handmade wooden toys and picture books from the 1970's and 1980's which were selected by the design team to reflect the past childhood experiences of the participants. In Site 2 school personnel introduced the Learning Together project by explaining the rationale for the program and how it fitted within the school's vision and mission.

The presentations by the university academics which followed provided evidenced based information from current research in the areas of play and learning in the early years and child wellbeing and resilience. These sessions were interactive and involved a number of opportunities for shared discussion about the research findings and how the research might be relevant in the contexts of families and schools. At both sites these presentations were followed by a talk by a school representative about the ways the school was addressing the areas under discussion in terms of curriculum offerings as well as other programs and approaches. The subsequent sessions involved interactive workshops. These workshops were presented by school personnel (teachers, coordinators and counseling staff) as well as university staff. The workshops provided

opportunities for shared learning as well as time for networking and building collaborative connections between and within groups of parents, educators, carers and others. A number of workshop sessions were presented including sessions that addressed current research and practice concerning children’s learning; creativity; resources and environments; recognising, respecting and responding to individual differences; and adult-child and child-child communication in shared activities to develop language and literacy skills and concepts, reasoning ability, and social skills. In Site 1 elective sessions enabled the participants to choose content that best addressed their particular knowledge needs, experiences, questions and concerns. These sessions addressed content such as: literature for young children; identifying and supporting gifted young children; young children and language learning; young children, disability and learning (including Autism Spectrum Disorder [ASD] and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD]); strategies for building resilience and positive emotion; stress and relaxation for children and their parents, teachers and carers; and social development and behaviour.

Table 1: Overview of Learning Together Implementation

Site	Structure	Content of academic presentations	Format for project	Participants	Evaluation
1	Full day	1. Children’s Play and Learning 2. Health, Wellbeing and Resilience	Provocation Experiential Learning ‘Make a Hat’ Academic presentations Discussion Workshops Elective session	Parents Teachers Community members	Parent Survey Observation Discussion
2	Three 2 hour sessions	1. Children’s Play and Learning 2. Health and Wellbeing Presentation 3. Literacy Learning in the Early years	Academic presentation Conversation and Discussion Teacher Presentation Conversation	Parents Teachers Community members	Observation Discussion

Piloting the project

The piloting of the ‘Learning Together’ project was aimed at finding out if such a program was relevant and acceptable to parents, teachers, carers and community members and if they found it

helped them to support the learning and development of young children. Bartholomew, Parcel & Kok (1998) and Bernard (2004) suggest that seeking advice from the participants and/or target audience in the stages of the design process is important if the program is to be acceptable to those who will ultimately be using it. Adjustments can then be made to the program in light of feedback from the target population (Bartholomew, Parcel, Kok & Gottlieb, 2006).

The project was piloted with the help of the partner schools. An invitation to parents and community members was placed in the newsletters and posted on the websites of the two sites. An invitation was also extended to staff. The views and needs of parent, teacher and community participants were sought to inform adjustments to the program content and design during the development process. For example the structure of the project in each site was determined by responses to participants regarding availability and accessibility for parents and teachers in terms of timing and location. It was also determined that at Site 1 a parent survey would be provided for evaluation purposes as well as the observation and evaluative discussion.

In order to proceed with the implementation of the project both Sites 1 and 2 provided space in the school newsletter and on the school website to publish an invitation to participants. At Site 1 invitations were also sent to a local bookshop, the local community library and to a small number of early childhood services in the local area.

Each site also offered administrative support in the form of meeting time, word processing, desktop publishing and the production of text based resources for the seminars and workshops. Space for delivery of the seminar and interactive workshops was also provided at each site.

Evaluating the project

The research was designed to be participatory with school personnel involved as co-researchers investigating the relevant issues for parents and teachers at their own particular site as well as undertaking observations to support the evaluation process. The approach was informed by methodology used to evaluate the PET program (Wood & Davidson, 2003). Participant feedback was sought through a survey and/or semi structured discussion at the conclusion of the seminar series. At Site 1, surveys for completion were provided to participants. However limited time meant that the surveys could not be completed immediately after the delivery of the workshops as planned and participants had to return their completed surveys by post. This impacted significantly on the return rate and the validity of the quantitative survey data.

Results and Discussion

At Sites 1 and 2 school executives, teachers and other school personnel were invited to share their observations and perspectives through a semi-structured debrief session and discussion. During these sessions observational data gathered during the implementation of the seminars was shared. This practice was consistent with the theoretical rationale which recognized the importance of socio-constructivist theory, communities of practice and the use of evidence to inform change. The outcomes of the project suggest that the key elements of 'Learning Together' worked effectively. The design of the project, in particular involving the stakeholders from the outset, enabled relationships of trust to develop and more honest participation resulted. Participants were able to be honest and authentic while participating in and evaluating the project. This was particularly important for parents who were sharing their own personal perspectives quite openly in the context of a school-based experience.

Qualitative data from the parent surveys indicated that they valued the delivery of evidenced based information. Comments included:

- An eye opener.
- A wonderful opportunity to learn more about children.
- I really enjoyed the sessions regarding resilience and children's play.
- Thank you for excellent presentations supported by the credibility of research.
- I want to find out more about how to prevent mental disorders in my children.
- Now I will be more aware of how much time I spend with my daughter and of my patience when she is playing and learning.
- I found the workshop discussions really valuable as well as one to one conversations.
- I found the information on stress and its impact on a child's life helpful.

Discussions after the delivery of the project suggested that the 'Learning Together' project was positively evaluated from the perspectives of the different stakeholders, parents, teachers and other school personnel and the researchers. Parent and teacher responses to the project were positive. Parents valued the opportunity to gain evidenced based information and to participate in conversation and discussion with other participants including other parents, teachers and other school personnel and academic experts. As well as valuing the content, teachers commented positively about the overall benefits of information sharing and the impact on the relationships between parents and the school. For example one teacher commented, "What a great meeting. The evening presentation was wonderful. We had many positive comments from our parents. The shared experience generated many positive conversations between parents and teachers."

Comments from the school executive staff at both sites also acknowledged the impact of the project on the nature of the relationships between parents and teachers. In-depth feedback highlighted some of the key elements of the project - experiential learning, opportunities for reflection and the importance of relationships. Examples are provided below:

Experiential Learning

I liked the emphasis on creative thinking. When I experienced the hat making activity I was very surprised to see the results. We all had the same materials, the results were completely different. The hats seemed to be a reflection of each person's personality and ideas. If kids can do similar kinds of activities I think they would learn a lot from each other. Some people focus on function and others on appearance. They can learn the strength of another person's thinking approach. Kids learn from seeing and doing. I learnt that even from a simple activity a lot could be achieved. I can learn about my son from watching the way he does and creates things. When I see what he does it is like a form of communication and a window into his personality.

Reflection

The seminar affected me the most as a mother with the statement: 'a toddler is a tireless experimenter'. This was so liberating! There was no doubt in my mind that my boy was tireless, his energy seemed to stretch from sun up to sun down without ever letting up but this idea of being an experimenter has not occurred to me before. I found this idea made me more patient with what he was trying to do. When I watched him I noticed that the behaviour I had previously found tiring or frustrating was in fact his tireless efforts to try something out. I could now see his repetitious experimenting in a different light. When he plunged his foot into a puddle he was not

getting his clothes wet he was seeing what sound the puddle would make and repeating it to see if there was a change when there was less water than the first time. When he squashed his food on the table it was not making a mess – he was seeing what pattern the food would make when he mixed it together. I now find myself able to offer him insights into the outcomes of his experiment and offer suggestions and variations that he could try to find some different results.

Relationships

As a teacher I work closely with my students to help them meet their artistic potential and harness their artistic abilities. I aim for them to realise their own capabilities and to raise their expectations of themselves. However when I get home I hang my ‘teacher’ hat at the door and become ‘Mum’. In moments when cooking, cleaning, washing and keeping the house running smoothly, are at the forefront of my mind I seem too stretched to consider providing critical analysis, constructive feedback and personal reflections (all things which are valued and encouraged in the visual arts). I left the seminar wondering why it is that mum can make time for her students but struggles to spend time with her own child when she needs Mum’s undivided attention. Since then I have made more of an effort to leave the dishes and spend time discussing her achievements for the day (being able to put her pants on by herself, making new friends at day care, and learning how to slide down the slippery dip by herself). I’m learning to slow down a bit on the ‘Mum duties’ so that I can appreciate more of those little moments that seem to make parenthood so worthwhile (hearing the excitement in her voice when she arrives home happy to see mum, seeing her determination for independence as she forces herself to carry too much and too heavy Dorothy the Dinosaur back pack. ... Most importantly when she creates an art work I relish really looking at it with her, just like I do with my student’s works. My ‘teacher hat’ I have learned shouldn’t be left at school - my daughter is worth more than that.

Relationships were important to the project on a number of levels. Positive relationships and interactions helped to ensure that participants moved beyond knowledge exchange to a transformative process by which new knowledge was created. The participants were able to transform knowledge so that the knowledge gained was invested with meaning and power. This helped to connect the participants to shared thinking and action at each site. The outcomes suggest that this approach could have worthwhile application to other contexts.

Conclusion

‘Learning Together’ was designed and implemented with the aim of improving parent knowledge about ways to protect and promote play and learning, and wellbeing and resilience in young children. Although small in scale, the outcomes of the research suggest that the model has the potential to benefit children, families and teachers and their communities on a broader level. Providing parents with knowledge, skills and social support may increase their self-efficacy or feelings of competence and decrease parenting stress and anxiety. Research shows that children benefit when parents are informed, and when they feel supported, efficacious and less stressed. Children experience benefits in the areas of behaviour, mood and learning. Providing education and support for community groups benefits communities by enabling informed planning and implementation of projects for young children within child-care, preschools, primary schools, and community centre activities. This can have flow on benefits to the wider community by facilitating positive interaction and shared understanding and thereby ensuring that early learning opportunities at home, at school and in the community are informed by input from a number of important stakeholders.

The results of current Australian research suggest that the Learning Together project may have greater significance for policy makers and providers in the areas of education and health than the researchers had originally anticipated. Recent research by Brinkman et al (2013) in relation to the AEDI (CCCHTI, 2009) has highlighted the importance of prior to school development and learning for subsequent academic success. The AEDI which assesses children at school entry on five domains of child development including: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; school-based communication skills and general knowledge was found to be a valid predictor for subsequent cognitive and behavioral outcomes. When comparing AEDI data at age five with results on the National Plan Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] Brinkman, et al (2013) established that the AEDI has predictive validity of a school readiness assessment. The authors note that ‘a child’s skills, development and attributes at school entry (as measured by the AEDI) predict their latter literacy and numeracy skills (as measured by NAPLAN) throughout primary school’ (Brinkman et al 2013, p.1). AEDI data helps to identify vulnerable populations and sites where increased support for parents is most needed. The results of this research highlight the significance of development and learning in the years prior to school for subsequent educational outcomes, the important role that parent’s play in children’s health and wellbeing and educational outcomes and the importance of effective parent education. Recent Australian research in relation to parent participation in school education shows that parent participation in school education and positive relationships between parents and teachers makes a difference to children’s academic success. The authors note in their executive summary that ‘given the clear benefits of positive parental engagement in student learning, by way of improved academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity, the report concludes that resourcing and effectively progressing parental engagement initiatives is warranted, if not essential to education reform and the future of Australia’ (Emerson et al, 2012, p.8).

Although a small scale project the results of Learning Together offer some insights to effective parent education for vulnerable and disadvantaged populations which are identified by the AEDI. Learning Together provided a forum for parents and teachers to learn together scaffolded by university academics. The results indicated that this facilitated communication within and between all participants. The attentiveness to local information and openness to parent expectations in Learning Together contributed to the success of the program and highlights the significance of targeted interventions which are relevant and responsive to parental concerns. The face to face and interactive delivery of information which occurred in Learning Together enabled the inclusion of a relational dimension which was important for parents and for the other education and health participants. The opportunity for initiating collaborative and respectful relationships has potential benefits for parents and professionals working with vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. In particular, this relational aspect provides parents with direct contact with relevant health and educational professionals who may be needed as sources of family support in subsequent years. The first connection made in the context of information sharing, active listening and co-construction provides a positive platform for future interaction and support. The interactive and relational nature of Learning Together also provides a framework for parent to parent connection and the potential for the development of supportive parent community networks which would enable parents to share their experiences of parenting in a complex and changing world.

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