

Barriers to participation: The experiences of disadvantaged young children, their families and professionals in engaging with early childhood services.

July 2011

Introduction

This Research to Practice Note presents the findings of a study which explored the early childhood participation of families who live in disadvantaged communities across NSW. The project, undertaken by researchers from Macquarie University (Grace & Bowes, 2010), was designed to contribute to an evidence base that would directly inform policy and service delivery within the Department of Family & Services, Community Services.

Background and research questions

The study was guided by the following aims: (1) to understand experiences of participation in early childhood settings from the perspectives of parents and children who live in disadvantaged communities within NSW; (2) to understand the barriers and facilitators to family engagement with early childhood services from the perspectives of parents and early childhood workers; and (3) to respond to the call to hear the perspectives of children on matters that directly affect them, and include them in research.

Commitment to equity of access has driven a Federal Government initiative to invest in early childhood services, with the goal of achieving universal access for Australian four year-old children to quality and affordable early childhood programs by the year 2013 (Gillard & McKew, 2008). This initiative responds to research demonstrating the potential benefits of participation in quality early childhood settings, both in terms of child development outcomes and beyond to families and whole communities.

It is well understood that the early years are crucial to the developmental trajectories of children (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), and that it is in the prior to school years that children are most sensitive to establishing learning patterns that influence their social skills and cognitive development (Eliot, 1999). There is a body of research evidence supporting the role of quality early childhood settings in facilitating cognitive development, pre-academic skills, behavioural and social development (e.g. Burchinal et al., 2000; Harrison & Ungerer, 2000; NICHD ECCRN, 2002; Wake et al, 2008; Lee, 2005).

Social inclusion through child and family engagement with early childhood services is an important part of building strong communities for children. Engagement in high quality settings has the potential to negate the effects of neighbourhood disadvantage and enhance a sense of social connectedness and belonging (McDonald et al., 2007; Vinson, 2007). Within this context, it is concerning that the children and families who could perhaps benefit from early childhood services most, those from disadvantaged families and communities, are reported to be the least likely to engage with them (Census of Child Care Services, 2008; Mance, 2005).

This research investigated the barriers and facilitators to participation in early childhood services from the perspectives of parents, children and early childhood service workers in disadvantaged communities throughout New South Wales.

Methods

A mixed-method research design was utilised to address the questions of this study. Ethics approval for the research was secured from the Macquarie University Human Ethics Committee.

The participating families

There were 101 families who participated in this research. For 91% it was the mother who identified as the primary carer of the target child and completed the questionnaire and participated in the interview. These families were spread across seven research target areas representing suburban (Mt Druitt and Wollongong), rural (Bathurst, Tweed heads, Taree and Nowra) and remote (Broken Hill) communities within NSW. Families were recruited to the study with the assistance of local early childhood centres and community services.

The sample was representative of different cultural groups (Indigenous = 16.8%; NESB = 18.8%). Different family compositions were also represented (Two-parent families = 69.3%; Single-parent families = 22.8%; Extended families = 7.9%). On average the number of children in each family was 2.84 (range: 1 child – 10 children).

Six of the participating parents reported having a disability, three reported speech or language disorders, two reported a mental illness and two reported having a chronic medical condition.

Children

Within the 101 families there were 109 children in the 3 – 5 year age bracket (male = 50.5%; female = 49.5%). The average age of the children was 4 years and 2 months (range: 3 years – 5 years 11 months). Parents indicated that 20 of the children (18%) had a diagnosed disability (such as ADHD, or language/communication disorder). Parental concern was expressed about the development of a further 17% of children.

Twenty one children (19.27%) did not attend any formal early childhood services at all. The remaining 88 children attended a range of early childhood services including preschool (n=43), long day care (n=37), family day care (n=7) and occasional care (n=1).

The participating early childhood workers

Forty early childhood workers participated in this research. All were female. The average length of experience working in early childhood settings was 9 years (range: 1 – 30 years). Nine participants were centre directors, 8 were early childhood trained teachers, and 23 were teacher's aides. Six of the participating workers were Indigenous.

Measures

This research was guided by Ecocultural theory (Gallimore et al., 1989). Ecocultural theory proposes that participation in early childhood services is an activity that will only happen in the life of a family if the routines that surround this participation are meaningful and sustainable for a family within the context of their own cultural and social circumstances.

Parent interview

Parents completed a 52-item questionnaire. This questionnaire provided the following information: demographic details; family social support networks; child care and formal service use; and family financial resources.

The completion of the questionnaire was followed by a semi-structured interview. The interview encouraged parents to talk about the daily activities of their families and explored the goals, values, and preferences behind their chosen routines. The interviews explored many aspects of family life and deliberately set out to capture the complexity of family's lives and understand the

mix of inter-related factors that influence family decision making around service engagement. In addition to discussion of family life and routines, all parents were asked directly about what they perceived to be the barriers and facilitators for families to participating in early childhood services.

Child interview

Sixty of the children participated in a face-to-face interview that took the form of a conversation around the activities that they do during the day and how they feel about those activities. Teddy bear cards representing different emotions and a drawing activity were employed to support the children in the telling of their own stories.

Early childhood worker interviews

Early childhood workers participated in either individual interviews or focus groups according to their preference. These interviews explored what they perceive to be the barriers and facilitators to family participation in early childhood services, as well as their experiences as service providers and how they might be better supported to provide a quality service.

Results

Findings from the parent interviews

Family interview data was coded and analysed to explore the relationships between family variables and attendance, and family variables and engagement. For the purposes of this research, attendance and engagement were seen as the two elements of participation, where engagement implies ongoing involvement in a service beyond enrolment.

Decisions around **attendance** were found to have a significant relationship with the following four family variables:

- Extent of professional involvement in the life of the family: families who were involved with other service professionals were more likely to attend an early childhood setting.
- Perceptions of parental safety: family decision making around attendance was significantly influenced by parent perceptions on how safe the setting would be.
- Parental concern about informal support available to them: the findings suggest that families who had concerns about the quality of informal support (e.g. from friends and family) available to them were less likely to attend formal early childhood services.
- Congruence between parents: families who attended early childhood services were more likely to describe congruence between the parents in family decision making.

There was no significant relationship between rates of attendance and whether or not the family lived in the city or country. Family composition (i.e. single parent, two-parent or extended family), family income and maternal employment were also not found to have a statistically significant relationship with attendance. A significant difference was not found between the attendance rates of Indigenous, non-Indigenous and NESB children.

Level of family **engagement** with early childhood services was found to have a significant relationship with the following six family variables:

- Flexibility of working hours: Working parents were as likely to engage with centres as stay-at-home parents, however level of parent engagement for working parents was significantly influenced by flexibility of working hours.
- Involvement of the father: families where fathers were involved in the day-to-day life of the child and in the family decision making were more likely to engage with services.
- Reliance on formal sources of information: highly engaged families were more likely to gather the information they needed about services and parenting from formal sources, such as professionals within the community.

- Informal support available to family: Families with strong social networks were more likely to engage with services.
- Learning activities at home: highly engaged families were more likely to include learning activities for their children in their everyday routines.
- Perceived safety: highly engaged families were more likely to perceive the early childhood setting as a place that is safe for both their child and their family.

Families were asked to identify what they saw as the barriers and facilitators to the participation of families in early childhood services.

Ten **barriers** were identified: five were pragmatic issues (cost, transport, opening hours, availability, complex paperwork); three were service issues (quality, leaving children vulnerable to becoming sick, teacher/child ratios); and two were personal family issues (poor fit with family values, absence of trust).

Fifteen potential **facilitators** were identified by parents: seven related to service features (flexible hours, close to home, provision of parent education programs, co-located with primary school, long day care includes a preschool program, meals provided, integrated with other services); five were related to family features (good staff/child relationships, good parent/child relationships, family involvement with DHS, older sibling attended, cultural diversity within the centre); and three were staff features (highly trained, welcoming, culturally diverse).

Findings from the child interviews

Forty-seven of the 60 children interviewed were attending an early childhood service at the time of the interview (23 girls, 24 boys). The summary findings presented here focus on the findings from this group of 40 children, which included 12 Aboriginal and 5 NESB children. Thirteen of the children were three years old, and 34 were four or five years old.

The children spoke about the **rituals of arriving** at the early childhood setting. They gave emphasis in this discussion to the notion of ownership. They valued having belongings, such as a bag and lunch box that were unique to them and they liked having their own place in which to put their belongings. Children also valued individual acknowledgement and greeting from the workers on arrival because it helped them to feel a sense of belonging.

Children listed eight different **activities** that happened during the early childhood day. The most mentioned activity was outside play. The children valued opportunities to be outside and particularly the opportunity for adventure and to challenge themselves in their physical abilities.

The children were asked about their **feelings**. Thirty-four percent of children said that they were mostly happy at their early childhood service, 6% said they were mostly excited, 32% said they were mostly sad, 17% said they were mostly angry, and 11% said they were mostly scared sad. In total 60% of the children identified feeling primarily negative emotions in the early childhood setting, whilst 40% identified feeling primarily positive emotions.

Three additional themes emerged in the child interviews. The first was '**Connectedness**': it was very important to the children to have strong individual relationships with both adults and children in the settings. The second theme was '**A special object**': the children valued having attachments to particular objects within the setting and particularly valued being able to bring to the setting objects from home that were meaningful and comforting to them. The third theme was '**Incongruence**': the children spoke of disconnect between home and the early childhood setting, and enjoyed times when the setting felt more like home.

Findings from the worker interviews

The 40 participating early childhood workers raised issues related to the support of families, the support of staff, and supporting the service as a whole. In relation to **families**, five main themes emerged:

- **Social disengagement:** workers were concerned for families who did not have networks within the community. Workers felt challenged in knowing how to reach out to these families and ensure that they knew of the services available.
- **Building relationships:** workers emphasised the importance of a strengths-based approach in working with families, and the importance of communication to build trust.
- **Complex family challenges:** the workers described families with many complex problems. Staff members were working hard to support families but expressed the need for additional support because the needs of the families were so complex.
- **Accessibility:** the early childhood workers spoke about issues of accessibility such as the importance of assisting families with transport and the cost of attendance.
- **Supporting Indigenous families:** the Indigenous early childhood workers emphasised the importance of respect for families, cultural understanding, inclusion of Indigenous culture in settings and employment of Indigenous staff.

Two main themes emerged in relation to the support needs of **early childhood staff and services**:

- **Quality:** Workers spoke about the importance of maintaining worker morale because of the risk of burnout for staff working with disadvantaged and chaotic families with high support needs. Maintaining a quality service was also contingent upon ongoing professional development and the workers described many challenges to achieving this. Inadequate funding and their frustration with the administrative tasks involved in securing funding were also important issues.
- **Integrated services:** some staff felt that an integrated model of service delivery would benefit families.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this research contribute to our understanding of the barriers and facilitators to participation in early childhood services for families living in disadvantaged areas. This research looked beyond correlations between attendance and family characteristics to understand engagement and the processes of decision making for families. It approached these issues from the perspectives of families, early childhood workers and children. Together the voices of these stakeholders came together to deliver some clear messages.

A range of potential pragmatic barriers to participation, such as cost and transport, were raised as important issues by parents and workers. Early childhood workers gave focus to getting children to the service each day and ensuring that fees were paid to maintain the viability of the centres. It was interesting to find that pragmatic challenges like the cost and transport difficulties and the hours of centre opening were raised by families but only those families who were currently attending an early childhood service. The families who participated in this research who were not engaging with an early childhood did not give emphasis to these issues at all. When it came to decision making about whether or not to engage, the primary issues for non-attending families were around whether or not participation fitted with their beliefs and value systems. Families who believed that young children should remain in the full-time care of their mothers did not engage irrespective of any initiatives to subsidise centre fees. Families who did not see that early childhood services provided valuable education did not engage irrespective of initiatives to extend hours and provide buses. These kinds of initiatives are invaluable in maintaining the involvement and regular attendance of children who do attend, however the findings of this research suggest that these initiatives do not influence the decisions of families who would not otherwise attend.

This research supports the importance of early childhood settings being places where families feel safe. The building of relationships and the inclusion of families in the day-to-day activities of centres is important to strengthening families and building trust. This research points to the important role that fathers play in decision-making and in facilitating family engagement with services. The importance of congruence between the parents was highlighted in the family interviews. Involvement of the father in the day-to-day life of the child, along with the flexibility of his working hours, were significantly related to the degree of family engagement. It is clear that cohesive families with cohesive social networks are far more likely to engage with services than families who do not experience cohesion in their lives. Early childhood workers saw that the widespread embracing of an integrated service model to facilitate collaboration between education, health and social service professionals was potentially very important to help families build a stronger sense of life cohesion and to facilitate their engagement. The universal delivery of integrated services was advocated by the workers in this study.

Often overlooked in discussions of family decision-making is the role that children play. Families were concerned about the happiness of their children and there were families in this study who withdrew their children from services primarily because they felt that their children were not happy. The majority of children who participated in this research indicated that most of their emotions when they were at an early childhood centre were negative. This is a confronting finding. The participating children valued acknowledgement from centre staff. They wanted to know that they were welcome, that there was a place there for them, that the things that were important to them were also welcome in the centre, and that they had staff members and friends who genuinely cared about them. The interviews with the children offer a lot for us to think about, particularly in relation to how workers might better develop meaningful connections with children. Children must be viewed as important stakeholders within these settings, and not just the focus of adult-driven programs and interventions. Recommendations and possible strategies for implementing them are discussed within the full report.

Acknowledgments

The chief investigators of this report would like to acknowledge and thank the NSW Department of Family & Community Services, Community Services for their support of this research. Particular thanks go to Peter Walsh, Johanna Watson and Eileen Ross. Community Services was the major funding partner for this research. We would also like to thank Macquarie University for contributing additional funds to this research through the New Staff Grant scheme. The Bluesands Foundation, through their generous donation to the Children and Families Research Centre, made it possible for this research to be extended to a remote area of NSW.

In large part, the success of this research reflects the quality of the work invested by outstanding research assistants. Dr Michelle Trudgett, an Aboriginal woman descended from the Wiradjuri nation in central-west NSW, was pivotal to the engagement of Aboriginal families and workers in this research. She played a key role in the adaptation of materials for Aboriginal families, in the interviewing of Aboriginal families and workers and building relationships with communities, as well as in the analysis of this data. Andrea McFarlane and Toby Honig made significant contributions to the recruitment and interviewing of families and workers, and assisted in the analysis of data and writing of the report. Most of all, our thanks are extended to the participants in this research project. As in every research project, it is the participants who form the heart and soul of a project and we hope we have captured their collective voice in a way that does them justice.

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