



WHO SUPPORTS FAMILIES BEFORE THE CRISES?

REACH

CONVERSATION STARTERS

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PROJECT WORKERS

Constance Jenkin

Pat Jewell

Marika Miles

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many families experience difficulty caring for children throughout their lives. Key family transitional stages, such as the birth of a child, entering early childhood services and beginning primary and secondary school can add to this difficulty. REACH Conversation Starters (FaHCSIA funded) took an action research approach to explore why families access some services and not others. Key services used by families at these stages include maternal and child health, childcare, kindergarten and primary and secondary schools. The project identified one key message i.e. 'Parents only attend and seek support from services where they have formed good relationships with professionals through informal, positive, welcoming interactions'. The project further uncovered factors that impacted on professionals' capacity to form these relationships.

These factors are:

1. There is an increase in the diversity of family groups that professionals are expected to work with, adding to the complexity of their role.
2. Many school staff and early childhood professionals acknowledge the need for a greater understanding of the impact of disadvantage on the learning outcomes and general wellbeing of children and young people, however they reported feeling afraid and lacking confidence when interacting with some families.
3. Demanding teaching curriculum in schools does not allow teachers the opportunity to consider their capacity to influence the development of 'the whole child'.
4. There are few supports and educational services available to assist professionals understand how to build relationships with parents and families and so benefit children.

This report will discuss the project undertaken and the outcome of attempting to assist professionals to work holistically with families and children.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Parenting Australia a program of Jesuit Social Services received funding for a project entitled “Conversation Starters” under REACH (Responding Early Assisting Children), a Federal Government initiative. Four geographical areas were nominated to receive the project: Mary borough, the city of Whittlesea, Morwell and the city of Brimbank in Victoria. These areas were identified as more disadvantaged areas by the Report “Mapping disadvantage” (Vincent, 2006) Furthermore, as transitional periods mean change and change creates stress the project focused on four key transition phases in a family’s life.

Transition Stage One

Stresses

The birth of a first child requires parents to renegotiate their roles in terms of moving from caring for themselves and their individual lifestyle to include another individual. Babies place great demands on adult relationships.

Transition Stage Two

Stresses

Babies and toddlers can place greater physical and financial burdens on parents. Major decision on childcare or ‘to work or not to work’ can be emotionally and financially demanding.

Transition Stage Three

Stresses

Starting primary school can be difficult for some parents who are beginning to see their children growing up and signaling a change in their parenting role.

Transition Stage Four

Stresses

Adolescences is a time of great change for both parents and children. Adolescents who are growing physically and emotionally demonstrate to their parents that they are becoming adults and will soon leave the security of home. Loss and grief can be experienced by family members during this period. This stage can be very frightening to both adults and children and is often the time of risk taking and conflict.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Why do some families not access professional support services?

During transition stages parents often need to access support and advice before problems become entrenched. For many parents seeking informal and formal support is not difficult and they have help from their family, friends and community agencies to problem solve and find solutions to difficulties.

There are, however, a number of parents who do not or cannot seek assistance when problems arise. Many of these parents do not have families or friends who could support them in times of difficulties.

Conversation Starters aimed to find out if families, in general, sought help for difficulties and in particular if parents found this support a positive, useful experience. In particular the project aimed to explore if the support services attracted more disadvantaged families to their agencies.

What evidence do we have that families are not accessing professional services?

In order to assess if families were offered and used support services, discussions were planned with Maternal and Child health nurses, early childhood professionals, teachers, principals, community leaders, sporting coaches, parents and others. These discussions aimed to elicit information about parent involvement in a range of settings available to families at the four key transitional stages and the positive or negative outcomes.

The results of a previous project funded by the Commonwealth Government (Early Intervention Parenting Project, 2004) showed that more poor or disadvantaged families were difficult to engage in support services that would enhance their lives.

What are the implications for families having difficulties and not seeking help from professional services or a supports within the community?

The implication for families who do not feel supported is well known. Individuals who feel alone and unsupported often become depressed,

Depression and isolation are dangerous especially for children who are developing a sense of who they are and who they can trust. If children are to grow to be confident, health, happy, engaged adults they need to know that they are loved and supported by their family and the community in which they live. Experiencing optimistic attitudes and behaviours and having hope for the future is essential for the wellbeing of all people.

Why Work with Parents?

The family is the most important influence on every individual. Whether as adults we reject or accept the influence of our early experience it is the crucible in which we learn about ourselves, develop our values and morals, learn to love and be loved and come to grow as a coping adult. It is important to acknowledge the power of the family and for professionals to understand the importance of this system when working with individuals. For professionals to believe that they can work with the individual alone is a mistake.

It is important to respect parents and work in partnership with them to overcome difficulties and enhance the lives of everyone involved.

For professionals to work effectively with children there is a need to understand the context in which they live before acting on or responding to their behavior. It is essential to understand the needs of the individual child and helping them grow to their full potential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will look at the research undertaken in communities, schools and early childhood settings that shows the importance of professionals building relationships with parents and the positive outcomes for children.

Research has shown that many factors impact upon the wellbeing of families including the following.

Social and community support

- A lack of social support leads to depression (Scott, 2001).
- Social support is linked with positive and negative health issues (Moore, 2005).
- The larger and more diverse an individual's social networks are, the more access to functional social relationships, and the more potential benefits there are likely to be for health (Moore, 2005).
- Social support has direct benefits for family functioning but mostly influences child functioning indirectly (Moore, 2005).
- 'Urie Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model of development states that children's development was influenced not only by the more proximal and stronger influences of the family and friends but also by the more distant features of broader social environment such as community formal services and governmental policies' (Moore, 2005; 9).
- Social support can have both direct and indirect influences on child development and behaviour. The direct influence is the range and variety of people the child interacts with. The indirect is supporting the family and enabling them to meet the child's needs (Moore, 2005).

What is a supportive community?

A supportive community will focus on:

- Shared actions, for example, a football club generated social cohesion by including families, the whole school community and the broader community in its establishment, support base, and functioning (Scott, 2001).
- All initiatives existing in a natural, non-threatening, social setting (Scott, 2001).

- Professionals caring and encouraging as much social cohesion and interaction between participants and not simply focussing on performing specific tasks. Community building was the latent goal, while the immediate goal was something more concrete, to provide an enjoyable activity that was appealing to the community members (Scott, 2001).
- Initiatives that included a viability strategy for the program to be sustainable (Scott, 2001).
- Considering the needs of individuals and exploring the expertise in the community to develop appropriate programs (Scott, 2001).

It is also noted that home based programs have better retention rates than centre based programs (R3) and face to face outreach and engagement with parents is more successful. (R3)

Research shows that:

- 'Sustained change only occurs when service systems coordinate their efforts and address multiple risks at different levels simultaneously' (Moore, 2005; 17).
- Better integrated services will meet multiple needs in a seamless way (Moore, 2005).
- There is a need for improved forms of dialogue between communities and services (Moore, 2005).
- 'Family centred practice and needs assessment tools that value parent input are important. Systemically it means developing skills and talking to communities of families, this is community centred practice' (Moore, 2005; 19).
- There is a need to adopt a family centred approach to community work (Moore, 2005).

Family Support

Research on families says that the parents who professionals are most likely to get on with are the parents that are most like them and who share similar backgrounds and values. This research has implications for professionals who work with parents who do not share similar backgrounds and values. It is, however, important that professionals acknowledge this difference and work towards overcoming any difficulties because building good relationships with parents has benefits for everyone.

Working with parents benefits everyone

- It has a good outcome for early childhood settings, schools, professionals and students.

- It means that parents trust and feel safe and can be directed to a support service before any family difficulty becomes a crisis and threatens the child's capacity to function.
- A good relationship between a parent and professional can result in parents following up with any homework task or parenting suggested strategy at home.
- Sharing information between parent and professional will lead to greater understanding of the family and child's needs.
- Informal support is important and has a greater influence on the personal functioning of parents than formal professional assistance (Moore, 2005).
- Whether support provided by professionals has the same beneficial effects depends on the nature of the relationship between parents and professionals. There is a need to establish a comfortable working relationship between the parent and the professional. For the professional it is staying around long enough and being available often enough and having the personal qualities and skills to relate well to people with diverse backgrounds that makes the difference (Moore, 2005; 10).

Baby and early childhood support

Research indicates that the birth of the first child is a time of stress in most marriages; longitudinal studies show a decrease in marital satisfaction. Poser and Parke (1984) offer a social support model to describe the relative importance of factors that contribute to this decline. This model shows that the ease of transition into parenthood is determined by the nature and availability of the number of social supports both inside and outside the family unit.

Four social network supports are important and are listed in order of psychological importance:

1. **Relational:** close, emotional relationships serve diverse functions such as emotional support and recreation – sharing excitement about the baby – providing comfort in times of stress and showing mutual enjoyment in leisure.
2. **Ideological:** the degree to which the mother's social network provides support on ideological grounds of role decisions making.
3. **Physical support:** Providing goods and services ranging from housekeeping and childcare assistance to financial gifts.
4. **Informational support:** the degree to which social networks provide the mother with information on the transition to parenthood, for example diet during pregnancy, childrearing and day care (Poser and Parke, 1984).

One disadvantage is that institutions mostly provide general informational support and only a limited amount of the total information relates to the transition stage of parenthood (Poser and Parke, 1984).

There is a need for social network support changes throughout the transition stage and this should be linked to predictable changes in the women's physical and psychological symptomatology (Poser and Parke, 1984).

- The physical setting provides a focus for many early childhood activities in the neighbourhood (Scott, 2001).

The implications for family services and early interventions services are that they can:

- Create conditions under which communities can determine their own needs and supports.
- Provide urban environments that allow opportunities for unstructured, casual encounters.
- Provide young families with easy access to Maternal and Child Health support services.

New developments in Early Childhood Services:

- Maternal and child health are now broadening their focus to include family psycho – social wellbeing (Scott, 2001)
- Maternal and child health are providing first time parent groups (Scott, 2001).
- Organisations are thinking beyond the silos of health and welfare and working together (Scott, 2001).
- Self- sustaining parenting groups are operating within existing programs that do not rely on new funding (Scott, 2001).
- Parenting groups are using professionals as resources (Scott, 2001).

These initiatives build connections with others and provide opportunities for establishing supportive personal networks. (Moore, 2005).

- To build positive relationships with parents caregivers need to gain a better understanding of the needs, concerns and feelings of all parents including working, employed parents.
- Employed parents need many options to choose from if they are to become active participants in the childcare centre.

- Child- care centres can support the relationship between parent and child through flexibly scheduling parent visits, parent education courses, forums, informal communication and informal gatherings.
- Flexible schedules are important.
- Parents should have open access to the facility where they can:
 - demonstrate their special talents.
 - take their children out for lunch.
 - do activities with their children.
- Parent education meetings need to offer relevant information and be held at convenient times.
- Parent bulletin boards can make information readily available and communication can take place at arrival and departure times.
- Informal communication is important and held on a daily basis.
- Formal communication is organised and may include home visits or parent teacher conferences.
- Informal gatherings are planned with opportunities for parents, staff and children to interact informally. (King, 1985)

School Support

‘The framework for student support services in Victorian government schools’ highlights the role that schools play in building resilience in children and young people not only through providing flexible programs that enhance protective factors but also through supporting parents and families in providing positive and nurturing environments for their children.

Many schools support parents in a preventative sense by providing parent education or information on various parenting related topics such as communication effectively in families.

The framework document highlights the importance of building respectful and meaningful relationships with parents as a means of bringing together the child’s home and school experience.

In 2003 the Victorian Government Department of Education (now known as Department of Education and Early Childhood Development) took this further by announcing a program that would employ Welfare officers in many primary schools across the state by the end of 2006.

Many primary welfare officers take on a key role in supporting families in the school community and enhancing protective factors in children to this build resilience.

The definition and role of the welfare officer varies from school to school but the key aim is to build the schools capacity to support students and families. Some welfare officers provide intensive casework to families working on a multitude of issues while others provide opportunities for parents to become involved in the social/support groups within the school. Some officers only provide assistance to the student while structured educative groups are offered to others, for example, schools will organise speakers and community programs to be run in the school.

The role of Primary Schools

- Both practitioners and researchers describe ideal transition arrangement as a collaboration between families and teachers but little is known about this in terms of practice (Tiperty et al, 2003)
- Whether transition is successful or not can have immediate impacts on children's stress and anxiety levels (Briggs and Potter, 1995) and long term effects on grades and retention (Tiperty et al, 2003).
- It has been found that poverty, ethnicity and/ or single parenthood are factors associated with difficulties for children beginning school. (Bennett, 1992; Dauber, Alexander and Entwisle, 1993; Willer and Bredelcamp, 1990 in Ledger et al 1998).
- A greater mismatch between the home setting and the school setting can make the transition more difficult with poor links between the child's Microsystems. (Ledger et al 1998).
- Parents, educators and children all should have input into transition programs. (Dockett & Perry, 2001).
- Families know their children well; however parents need to trust schools before sharing information for fear of being judged negatively. (Dockett & Perry, 2001).
- Most principals conduct enrolment interviews – these should be used as two way information sharing opportunities (Dockett & Perry, 2001).
- "School communities that welcome and accept parents, where teachers and parents are accorded mutual respect, and where children feel that parents and teachers are working

together for them, promote a sense of belonging and acceptance that is conducive to learning. “ (Greenber, 1989 in Dockett & Perry, 2001; 33).

“There are many ways in which parents can be involved in transition programs. Parents of children already at school can meet with parents whose children are about to start school. School staff can make time to visit parents, in whatever forum is most comfortable and they could even meet prior to school starting. Parents can have a role in transition programs, such as helping with some activities asking questions, making suggestions, organising sessions, or identifying areas they would like to have discussed.” (Dockett & Perry, 2001; 33)

“Many parents have had a great deal of involvement in prior – to – school settings. A number of parents are concerned that when their children start school they will be unable to have such a ‘hands – on’ approach in their child’s education. Some even feel that they are actively discouraged from being involved in the education program.” (Dockett & Perry, 2001; 33)

“Transition programs that tap into families enthusiasm about supporting the child will be more successful than those that offer a blanket approach.” (Dockett & Perry, 2001; 34)

Early Adolescence

During the adolescent stage it is important that schools and parents work together.

Early to middle adolescence marks a point of increased depressed mood, syndromes and disorders (Rutter,1986). A quarter of our young people experience depression before the age of 18 and those most at risk are 15-17- years –olds (National Health and Medical Research Council,1996). One in twenty 15-16- year olds engage in self –harm on a regular basis (Hibbert et al,1996).

Adolescents who have adults in their life in whom they can confide show dramatically reduced rates of suicidal thinking. In a national study in the USA in 1997, the rate of 17% of adolescents with suicidal thinking dropped to 8% for young people with one confidant and to 0% if they had three adult confidants.

The culture of a school is an important determinant of the mental health of its inhabitants. School culture has been identified as critical in determining the levels of behavioral and emotional disturbance, psychiatric disorder and violence (Olweus, 1993; Rutter, et al 1979).

School change is a stressful event around puberty (Felner et al, 1982) and transition programs to ensure adequate integration into secondary schools are vital. Studies have shown that successful integration programs will prevent later substance abuse and delinquency (Felner & Adan,1988). Involvement of the parents in the school is a positive way to assist integration and is also protective for young people. A school culture that supports and protects new entrants and involves their parents is likely to result in fewer problems later. As young people become more peer focused around this time, it is important that schools do not join adolescents in rejecting parents (Fuller, 1998).

Secondary Schools Role

- Services that are open to listening to families and value and use this information, when caring for children, are the most successful in building equitable relationships with families.
- Professionals who values and respects parents are likely to have a more positive direct impact on the parent child relationship.
- Using inclusive and respectful language will foster better partnerships between professionals and families.

AIMS AND REVIEWED AIMS

The projects original aims

The original aim of this project was to identify families who did not access professional services (e.g. schools, family support services, parenting support, early childhood services etc) and explore why. The project also aimed to work with community-based services (i.e. shopping centres, sporting groups and libraries) that the families used. It was believed that these informal settings were less intimidating and more easily accessed by families. Conversation Starters hoped to work with these community services to support and encourage them so that they could be a source of support to families not accessing professional services.

A change in direction

The stories from families and community services led the project in a different direction. Families shared the strong message that it was the professional's behaviour and attitude that made them feel comfortable or uncomfortable attending and not the service itself. Survey results indicate that (11/40) % of parents interviewed attended a particular service because of the staff's attitude. Further, (21/44) % stated that it was the behaviour of the staff that made them feel welcome or unwelcome. One parent explained why she chose a particular kindergarten for her child "Friendly staff is a high priority for me. We expect the teachers to relate well to children and now some kindergartens realise that it is a family thing and they need to relate to parent also."

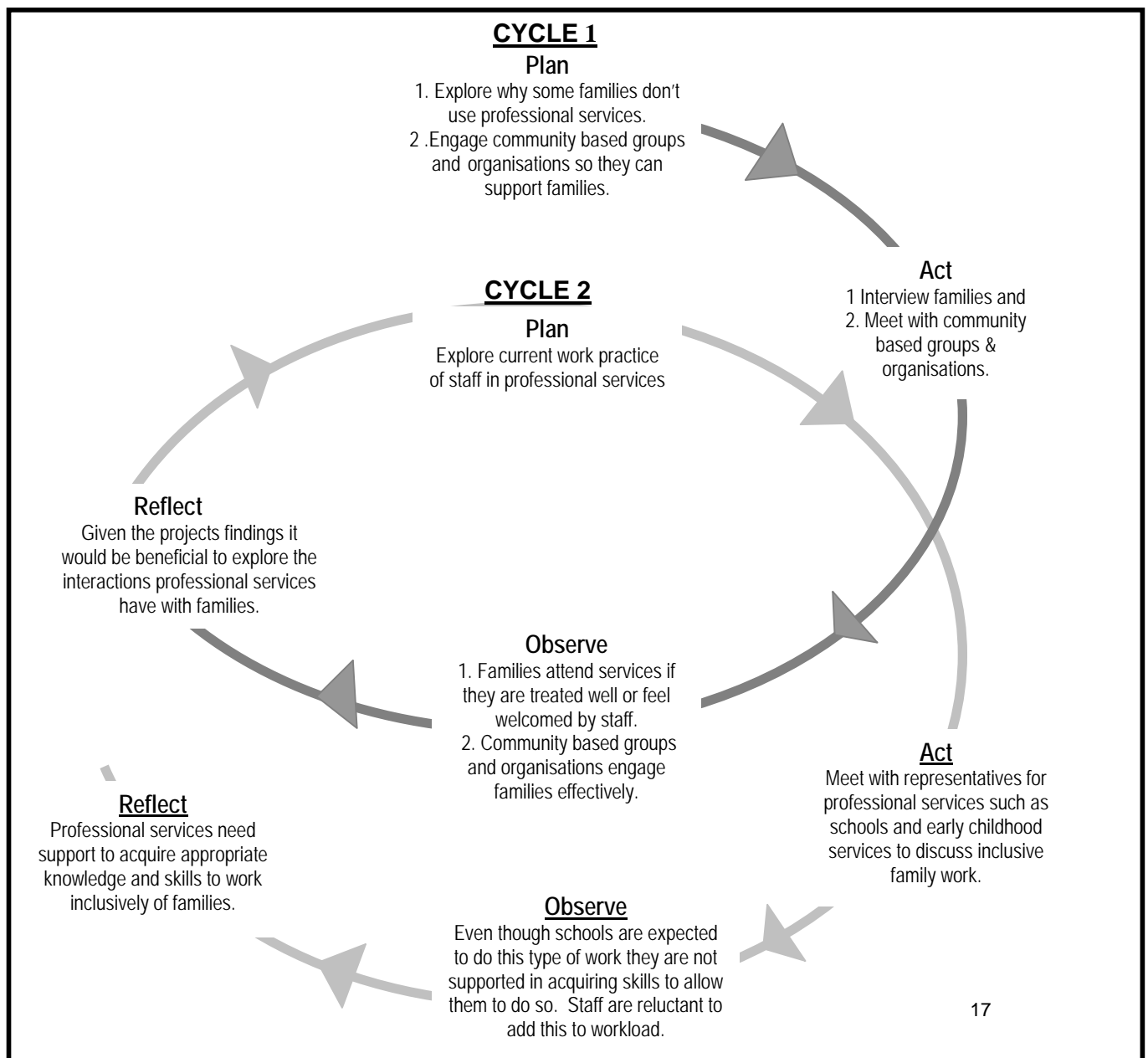
Meetings held with a variety of community service providers such as swim centre staff, police, library staff and shopping centre management were able to cite programs and initiatives at their organisation that were supportive of families. One centre manager explained, "All retailers know the importance of building rapport with customers and providing good customer service to encouraging the return of these customers to their shop".

Professionals involved with schools and early childhood settings were interviewed about their current *practice and level of comfort when interacting with families?* Many professionals expressed a high level of discomfort when working with families. Some professionals avoided families if they could; others believed it was not their job to engage families. Many others discussed the difficulty of adding yet another role to already stretched timeframe and lack of

resources. Many professionals did not understand the particular needs of traumatised, vulnerable, poor or migrant children and their families.

Based on this information the direction of the project chose to work more closely with professionals who it was previously believed understood the importance of including, supporting and communicating well with parents to benefit the well being and positive learning outcomes for children. Training and information sessions were offered to encourage and build the confidence of professional to focus on interacting and working with families in a positive manner (See Diagram 1).

Diagram 1: Action research cycles demonstrating the direction of project activities



METHODOLOGY

Cycle 1

Plan

1. To explore why some families do not use professional services. Discussions were held with families already engaged with a variety of community services and project workers listened to their ideas on why other families were not engaged and sought suggestions on how this could be improved.

2. To engage community based groups and organisations to support families that do not access professional services.

Preliminary meetings with community based groups and organisations were held to gain a greater understanding of the type of interactions they currently have with families.

Act 1

One hundred and twenty parents were engaged in focus groups with project workers. These parents were found to be accessing some services such as playgroups, schools, childcare services and various parent groups (See Table 1 below). Focus groups were conducted onsite. The purpose of these focus groups was to elicit three key pieces of information:

1. Why did parents initially join the group or service?
2. What factors contributed to parents feeling welcome at the group/ service?
3. What barriers prevented parents from attending, or made them feel unwelcome, at groups/ services?

Table 1. Community based groups and services that held focus groups

Focus Groups	Number of Parents
Harvester Network of schools focus group	6
Whittlesea Playgroup	8
Salvation Army Playgroup	4
Lalor Day Stay	5
Lukes Place young mums group	10
Aboriginal Cooperative Parents groups	4
Maryborough kindergarten	36
Arabic playgroup	6
Maternal and Child Health New parents group	9
Whittlesea PND group	2
Commercial Road Primary School Focus group	18
Wandjana Lidj parents group	6
Lalor Child care	6
Total:	120

Observe 1

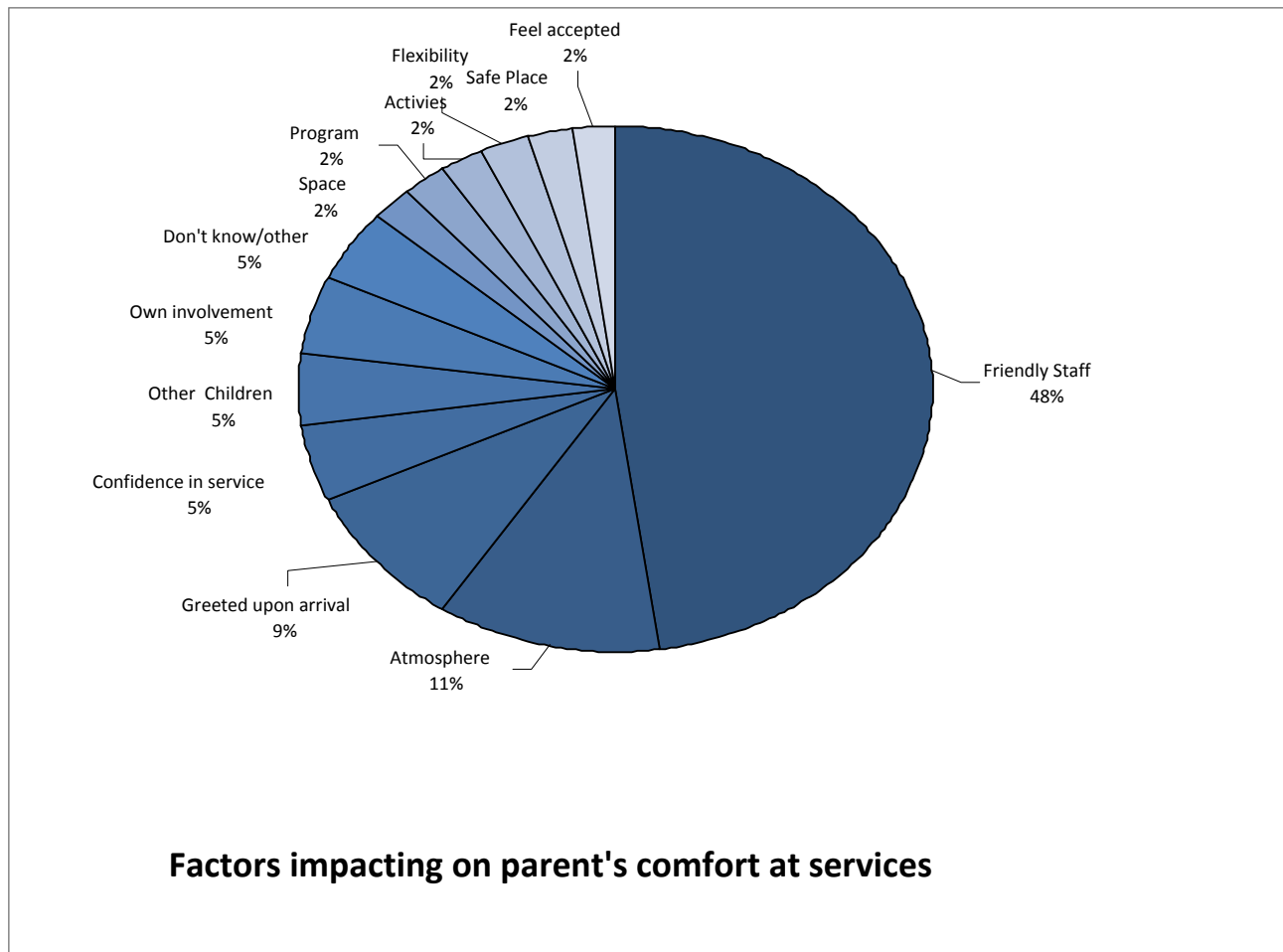
Attendance at services depends on the way families are treated by professionals

Many parents spoke about the reasons for initially joining a service, group or school, they included such things as knowing the group facilitator through another person, friendly facilitation, an engaging and relaxed setting, the teacher or nurse had a friendly personality, that there was support from other parents, that they had had a previous connection with the service, it was free of charge, there were no unrealistic expectations and that they could go at their own pace.

When asked to comment on what factors contributed to them feeling welcome to the professional service 77% of responses could be classified as being influenced by staff behaviour. These factors included, friendly staff and atmosphere, being greeted upon arrival, confidence in the service, being a safe place, feeling accepted and having a flexible program (see graph 1). One parent explained why she chose a particular kindergarten for her child; “Friendly staff is a high priority – teachers always relate to children well, some kindergartens now realise that it is a family thing so they must relate to parents as well.” Parents elaborated on other services that they had been unable to connect with. One parent told project workers about

a kindergarten that had been so inflexible that it demanded she mow lawns whilst very pregnant. Reasons given for parents not utilising services included: feeling judged about their parenting skills, not being listened to, not being respected and being spoken to inappropriately. One mother explained that the tone and language used at one organisation gave her a clear message that they did not want her or her children attending that service,

Graph 1: Factors influencing parents comfort at services



Act 2

As a means for better understanding of the most suitable and accessible community groups or organisations for parents in a specific Local Government Area, project workers developed a hypothetical problem and explored the capacity of support services in the area to respond. Project workers approached the area from the perspective of a parent seeking support for their young teenage child who had recently begun to refuse to get out of bed and go to school. The

'parent' believed that the situation would get worse and assistance was required to prevent the situation from escalating.

The project workers started looking at the local shopping centre for an advertised community information centre. The information centre was not there, however, a branch of the local library was found. The library provided programs for primary school aged children and adolescents but these were not relevant to the hypothetical issue.

The project workers then spoke to retail staff at the shopping centre that were unaware of a community information centre based within the mall but directed the project workers to a community house, a youth centre building and the local health centre. The community house was unable to help with the type of enquiry that the workers posed as they mainly dealt in adult education. The youth centre building was empty and a notice placed on an adjoining building stated that no person under 18 was allowed to enter without adult supervision. Finally, the health centre had closed its books and would no longer take on new patients. The receptionist was very unhelpful but did suggest an alternative centre in a distant neighbouring suburb.

This exploration involved the use of a car, the road map and travelling distances in an unfamiliar area. Public transport was difficult to negotiate. As the project workers we found the exercise disturbing and with a solution to accessing help unsuccessful we were left feeling helpless and willing to 'give up'. Any parent would have found this process difficult however parents with mental health issues, intellectual or physical difficulties would have found it impossible. In total five organisations within the local area were accessed including, the local shopping centre, library, community house, youth centre and community health – none of these were helpful. This process demonstrated the difficulty of accessing services from the perspective of a parent and led project workers to act in a manner that utilised community development skills and arrange meetings with eight of the local community groups and organisations. These were, Sunshine swim centre, George cross soccer club, Brimbank Shopping centre, Sunshine Library, Sunshine Police, Centrelink, Rotary and Vicsport.

Observe 2

Community groups and organisations work well to include families

When meeting with community groups and organisations the project was interested in four key areas:

1. Current activities that the service provides that may be supportive of parents and/or families, for example, child care, parenting courses.
2. Whether the organisation has a positive attitude to engaging parents and/or families as a way of supporting and building the community, for example, posters, activities.
3. Training undertaken about engaging or supporting parents and/or families, for example, organise speakers, discuss relevant articles.
4. Relevant referral or follow up procedures that would assist in supporting families experiencing difficulties, for example, partnerships with support agencies.

From these meetings it was concluded that the community groups and organisations interviewed were generally working inclusively with families, in a way that is relevant to their role in the community. It was observed that these groups were engaging parents in a variety of activities with the aim of building supportive worker relationships with parents/families.

Table 2: Summary of responses to interviews held with community services

Organisation	Measure of working supportively/ Inclusively with Families			
	Current activities	Positive attitude	Training undertaken	Follow up procedures
Library	✓	✓	✓	✓
Centrelink	✓	✓	✓	✓
Swim Centre	✓	✓	✓	✗
Vic Sport	✓	✓	✓	✗
Soccer Club	✓	✓	✓	✗
Shopping Centre	✓	✓	✗	✓
Police	✓	✓	✗	✓
Rotary	✓	✗	✗	✗

Table 2 indicates that the majority of services expressed the importance of engaging families as crucial to providing their service and building the community. The dedication to this cause was perhaps most surprising at the local shopping centre as the project workers did not expect a retail enterprise to work so diligently towards this goal. However, as the centre manager stated “The centre acts in a similar way to old town squares, a meeting place for the community... All

retailers know the importance of building rapport with customers and providing good customer service in reference to encouraging the return of these customers to their shop". Furthermore, when speaking of the importance of engaging families a youth liaison officer from the local police stated, "Parents are still the most influential person in a young persons life, by the time a young person reaches 15 years old they have had 15 years of training to be who they are at home"

Five of the eight services interviewed underwent training on engaging families. For example the local library service was committed to updating staff skills on interacting with the public and had provided staff with training on making referrals to relevant support services, dealing with difficult behaviours, responding to mentally ill customers and "First Impressions" training.

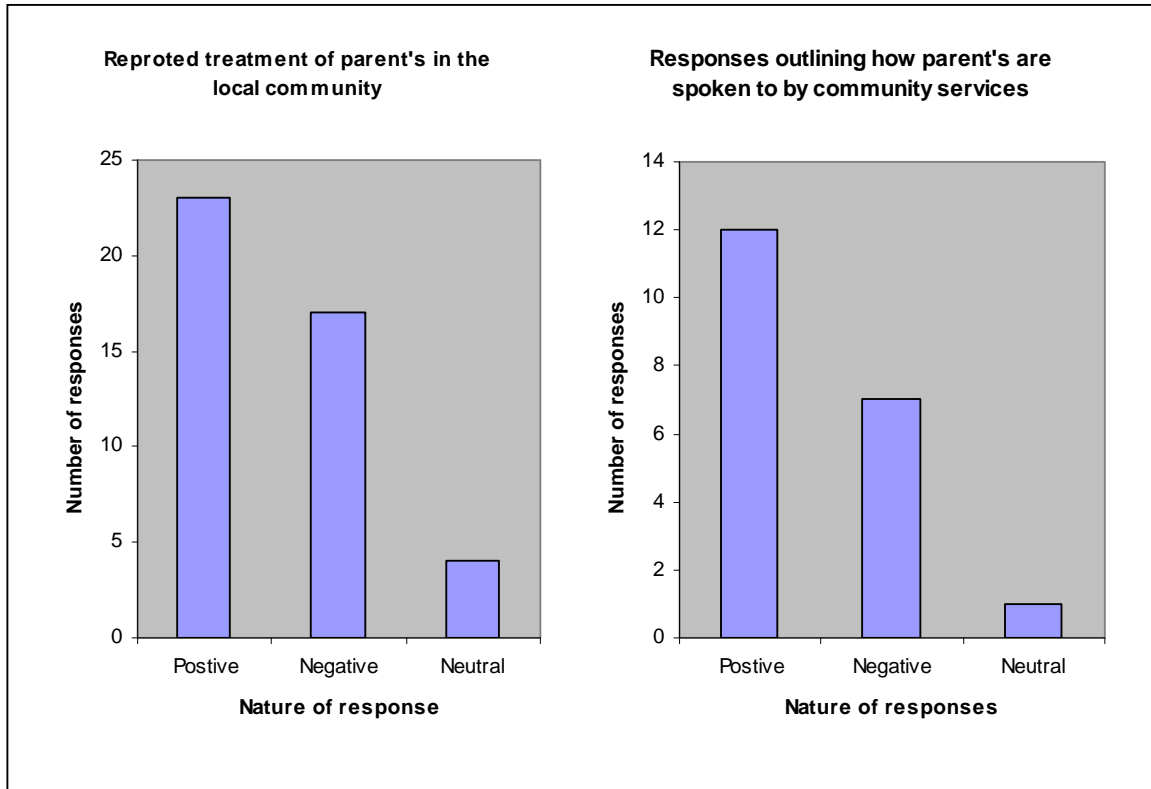
Four of the services engaged in follow up procedures which included the use of council websites, referral to family services, notifications to child protection and use of social workers within one organisation. One community service had a procedure in which all staff follow a deferred inquiry process which outlined that if an inquiry could not be met straight away it must be met within the next three working days.

Sporting clubs were initially seen as a possible area in which to access and work with coaches to reach parents that did not access professional services. Project workers engaged in visits to children's sporting events. It was encouraging to see so many parents present and interacting with coaching staff as well as each other. However, as attempts were made to speak to parents it became apparent that they were occupied with the sporting event that brought them to the venue. Project workers attempted to speak informally with the parents but most were fully occupied watching their children compete. Workers concluded that accessing sporting coaches and parents at such times was not appropriate. A meeting was arranged with Vicsport and confirmed that they provided sporting coaches with comprehensive training about engaging young people and their families as well as a website on relevant topics.

Parents also indicated that community groups and organisation respond well to parents. Parents spoke positively about the interactions that they had with members of the local community, such as shopkeepers. Graph 1 and 2 compares the number of positive, negative and neutral responses to questions pertaining to how parents perceive that they are **a)** treated in general and **b)** spoken to as parents. As the graphs indicate in both instances more parents

spoke about their experiences with community services as positive rather than negative or neutral (see below).

Graph 2: Parent responses about how they are treated in their local community



Reflect

As an outcome of the stories from families and observations made in meetings with community groups and organisations, project workers decided that community based groups and organisations were not the best forum to direct the efforts of the project. So much of the information collected by project workers focused on the behaviour of professionals and the nature of support and service organizations that this led project workers to become increasingly interested in the types of interactions that professionals and support services were having with parents and families. A new plan was developed.

Cycle 2

Plan

To explore current work practices of staff in professional services and gain a better understanding of where there are gaps in service delivery, why they are occurring and how professionals can be supported to engage parents more effectively. Interviews were held with school staff, maternal and child health nurses, childcare staff and kindergarten teachers as it was acknowledged that these services are universal to families moving through the family transitional stages.

Act

Schools

To execute the plan project workers were linked with two schools and arranged to run workshops and surveyed staff. During these workshops project workers observed that teachers acknowledged the importance of engaging students and could speak to this topic confidently and enthusiastically. However, when discussions turned to working inclusively with parents to build partnerships between parents and teachers the professionals involved were less enthusiastic. Project workers discussed how building relationships with parents provides teachers with a greater understanding of the family background thus enabling them to work more effectively with the child. This concept was received poorly. After one session the project worker reflected

“The group said that they worked with parents but when I asked how they engaged and spoke with parents one teacher stated that it was unacceptable and intrusive to speak with parents casually and she would never say to a parent 'how are you?' because that would be rude”

after another session she said,

“In the training session a group of young male teachers sat at the back of the room and opened their computers. At least eight of these teachers did not engage in the session and spent the time working on their computers and comparing notes. Several teachers moved in and out of the room during the session. I had the feeling that the session was a waste of time for them”

At the end of each workshop participants completed surveys. When asked how they perceived themselves as teachers and how they could build resilience in a young person two out of twenty

six stated 'through working with parents', compared to eighteen claiming 'having good communication with a child', thirteen alluded to being a good role model and nine alluded to giving them strategies or running programs. Very few of the teachers believed working in partnership with parents would assist the child. Further, when asked to share thoughts and feelings about developing closer connections with parents and students at their school one teacher stated

"No (it's not my role). You have to be careful you don't impose yourself on people when they don't want it. Connections need to be made only in relation to teaching students"

Three out of the twenty six teachers did express positive feelings towards working with parents, however these were clearly the minority. One teacher stated:

"As a prep teacher I feel it is vital that I have a good connection with my children's families and seek out the parents and siblings to establish communication networks"

Project workers continued their exploration into schools by meeting with individuals responsible for welfare at seven schools in the City of Brimbank and four schools in Morwell. These meetings specifically explored the schools approach to welfare and the type and level of interaction all school staff have with students and families. Project workers met with staff members who held responsibility for student welfare at each school. These included: three assistant principals, four primary welfare officers, one community liaison officer, one student service coordinator, one student wellbeing coordinator and one team leader of welfare.

Early Childhood Services

During cycle one the project worker collected data from a variety of early childhood staff in the City of Whittlesea, including long day care staff and child care coordinators. The project worker met with this staff group again later to feedback results of the data collection, at this time she was linked with the 'Support Inclusion Facilitator' and the head of family services for the municipality. At this meeting it was determined that there was a need for early childhood professionals in the area to understand the importance of building partnerships with parents, gain skills that allow them to do so and become aware of challenges that face families they interact with. The City of Whittlesea offered to place Conversation Starters on the municipal training calendar for child care staff in long and family day care.

Observe

Schools

Information provided by school welfare staff was examined to consider three questions.

Is the school welfare system supporting families?

Two out of seven welfare focused school staff in the city of Brimbank stated that working with families is a major component of the role, citing home visits, advocacy and general support as ways in which they work with families. However project workers were unclear as to how this operated in practice. Others stated that they engaged the parents when issues arose with students.

In three of the four schools in Morwell parents were invited to attend the meeting, giving the immediate impression that parents were included in operations at the school. Each school had specific ways of engaging parents. This ranged from one school stating that no teachers engaged parents but instead left this task entirely to senior staff and welfare staff. In this instance the assistant principal/primary welfare officer endeavoured to make home visits to reach parents who did not present to the school. Other schools engaged parents at all levels stating that 90 – 95% of teachers spoke with parents regularly about their children and as a whole they worked hard to engage parents. As well these schools ran a number of different programs, some being intensive programs to assist children and families transition from pre-school to primary school, while others were as simple as having a procedure for at least one staff member to greet parents in the car park as they dropped their children off in the morning. One school looked for innovative ways to include parents in recreation activities.

Is the school welfare system reaching families that don't access support?

These meetings indicated that schools were an ideal place for reaching families that need support but not accessing community services. Need is often identified through the presentation of the student and from here the family is engaged and further family issues uncovered. Many families in crises need to make disclosures to the school for the wellbeing of their children. One welfare worker relayed the story of mother who had been physically assaulted by her husband but still brought her daughter to school the next day. This mother confided in the assistant principal so they could monitor the daughter's behaviour and emotional state. The school welfare coordinator was then able to take her to a GP and relevant support services.

Do the schools have a common approach to welfare?

It became apparent to the project workers that schools within a common geographical area did not have a shared approach to how they dealt with welfare issues within their schools. When interviewing welfare workers it was apparent that most had different titles and that this could prevent a common understanding of who parents could access in times of difficulty.

Even in some individual schools staff did not share a common approach to welfare. Many teachers did not see the relevance of engaging the school welfare officers when problems arose or even seeking their advice with difficult issues. Project workers decided that unless teachers, welfare officers and the whole school community worked together on a shared approach to welfare, engaging families to enhance the wellbeing of children was difficult to achieve.

Early Childhood Services

Several meetings were held with early childhood professionals to explore the relevance of training to their work.

Maternal and child health nurses agreed that they no longer have extra time to fully develop supportive relationships because of the way that their jobs are structured. The number of visits that they have with mothers has been reduced, the amount of time they are able to spend with each mother is limited and there is mandatory content to be covered during this time. Many maternal and child health nurses reported that they don't ask parents general questions about their wellbeing anymore as they don't have time to listen to their responses. They agreed that professional development, such as conversation starters, that assisted them to build rapport during everyday greetings and general conversations would be beneficial.

The project workers also met with a kindergarten teacher's network group. This group also expressed interest in participating in professional development in this area.

Reflect

Key decisions about the direction of the project were made based on the information received. It was determined that workshops would be offered as part of each organisations overall approach to the welfare of children and young people.

PROJECT OUTPUTS

At the beginning of the project workers undertook training that explored the type of material that would be most useful to professionals. Twenty six teachers, parents and welfare coordinators were included in these two workshops with two secondary schools and three primary schools represented. Participants were surveyed about their satisfaction with the information represented and how confident they felt working with families after the workshops. This led project workers to shape the information for the remaining workshops. Many of the schools represented in these two workshops used the information shared to facilitate parent groups within their schools. These trainings were based on PACE program training. (Jenkin, C. & Bretherton, D. (1994)).

Twenty subsequent workshops were held engaging 293 professionals from schools, childcare centers, kindergartens and maternal and child health nurses. These workshops aimed to assist professionals to:

1. See the importance of growing the whole child as part of their role.
2. Become aware and responsive to family situations.
3. Build confidence and feel comfortable to approach and talk with parents.
4. Offer strategies to build relationships and start conversations.

The content of these trainings has been included in a comprehensive training manual (available from Jesuit Social Services).

Workshop Evaluations

To evaluate the effectiveness of these workshops all participants were surveyed pre and post workshops. Some of the key findings of these surveys are as follows.

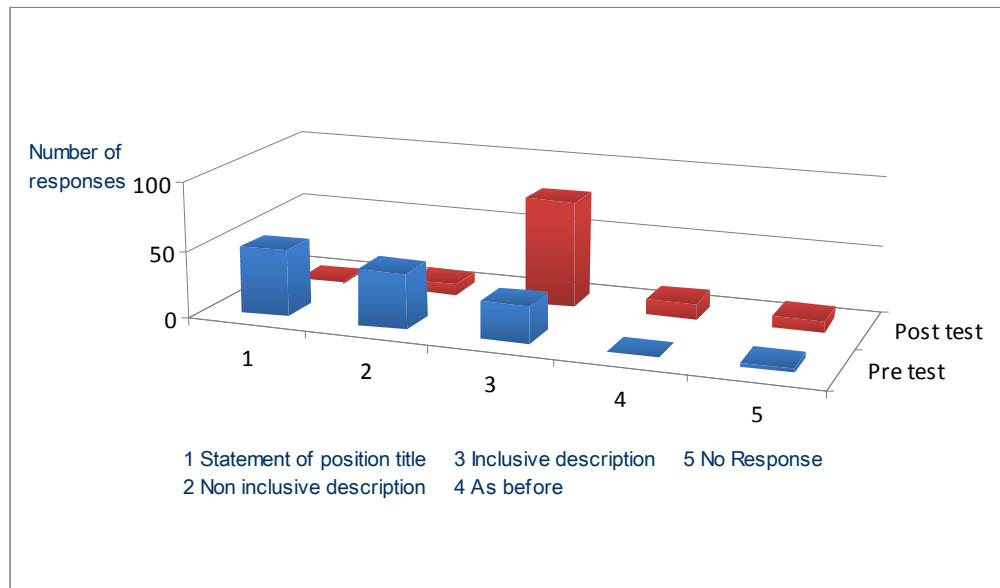
Workshop participants redefined their role as a result of the workshop

Question 1 asked participants to describe their role. Responses were classified into five groups:

1. **Statement of position title**, responses that were not at all descriptive and simply responded with *'librarian'*, *'math teacher'* or *'grade five/ six teacher'*, etc.
2. **Non inclusive description** which described responses that did not include any reflection on working with families e.g. *'to improve child's academic performance'* or *'teach children basic reading skills'*.

3. **Inclusive descriptions** highlighting working with families or include strategies for doing so e.g. *'A partner with parents to influence children's lives'* or *'a shift from only giving information to listening more and learning from parents'*.
4. **As before.**
5. **No response.**

Graph 3: Participant descriptions of their work role – pre and post workshop responses



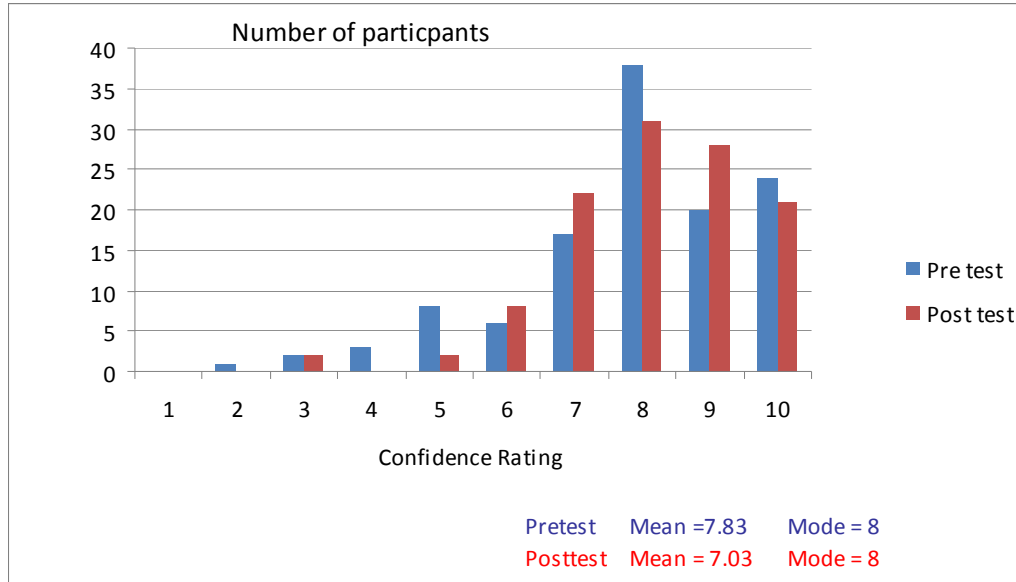
Graph 3 shows that overall the number of inclusive, descriptive responses increased at the post test stage. This was consistent for participants from primary school, secondary school and early childhood services. Pre and post test responses were also compared for workshops of varying length and the results were the same. The result seemed to suggest that workshops provided participants with time and opportunity to reflect on their role more fully and consider what is truly important in their work.

There was a decrease in confidence ratings post workshop

It is apparent that participant's confidence rating decreased slightly at the post workshop stage. However this difference is minor. Project workers anticipate that there was no increase in confidence ratings because many of the participants did not consider working with parents as key component of their role prior to the training. Providing this new information may have affected confidence in their overall approach to work and engagement of parents. Workshops

may have put forward ideas and concepts that participants may not have considered before and in the beginning this may seem overwhelming for some.

Graph 4: Participants confidence rating - pre and post workshop responses

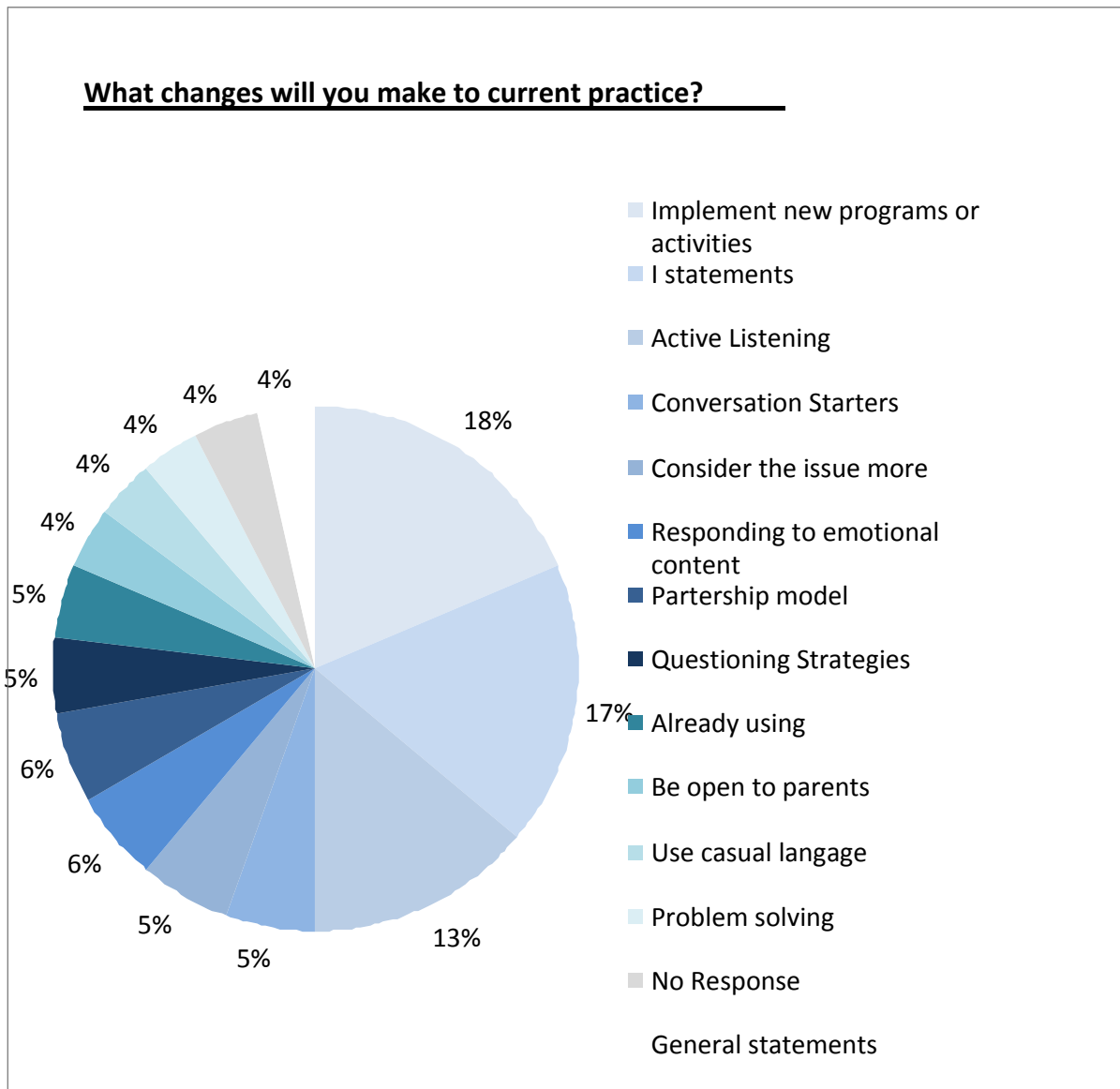


A large proportion of professionals stated that they would adopt parent engagement strategies in their practice

Many respondents (18%) stated that they would implement new parent engagement programs or activities at their workplace. These included some that were suggested during the training others included some that already existed in their workplace.

‘I statements’ was the most frequently mentioned strategy that the participants stated they would use. This may reflect the professionals’ feelings of not being heard or acknowledged in interactions with parents. Active listening was the next most mentioned strategy. See Graph 5 below.

Graph 5: Participant’s reports of workshop strategies they would use in their work



As well as conducting these workshops the project produced resources to sustain knowledge gained during the life of the project. Firstly, to capture effective training approaches and exercises the project developed a training manual, available from Jesuit Social Services – Melbourne. Also, the project discovered some schools and early childhood services that developed innovative and effective ways to engage parents, this information was captured in the production of a training DVD, also available from Jesuit Social Services (www.jss.org.au). The Case study presented below gives some information on one of the good practice models included.

School and Family Partnerships

A Case study

Community setting

School A is situated in a rural setting. Some time ago the town's major employer of unskilled workers closed down, leaving the area an unemployment rate of 10% in adults and over 50% youth unemployment. The depressed economic state of the area added to stress in families and was visible as the children began to act out in school. Many of the middle class families left the area and the majority of students now come from families experiencing intergenerational poverty.

School Setting

School A is a '**Like School 7**'. This school noticed the escalation in violence in the schoolyard. A great deal of time was spent putting out 'scrub fires' and not enough time actually teaching. Students were not at the expected levels of learning when leaving primary school for secondary school. Lunchtime detentions for violence were extremely high. School interactions with parents were hostile. Most parents had not had a good experience of school themselves and approached the school defensively, viewing the school as the opposition rather than a support.

What was done?

The assistant principal decided that something needed to change and after trying some programs that did not succeed, surveyed the students to determine why. The students informed the assistant principal that they were bored during lunchtime. Based on the findings she set up a lunchtime links program that engaged community recreation facilities to provide activities for student during lunchtime. She started the lunchtime links program and involved community recreation facilities. Parents were also engaged to supervise programs, giving them the opportunity to participate in activities with their children that they would not have had previously.

In addition to this program a number of others groups were organized including a kinder to prep transition program, breakfast club and parents 'cuppa and craft' group.

Underlying each of these programs and the positive day-to-day interactions with families an inclusive and accepting attitude is well established in the school. Teachers are gently encouraged to reinforce this attitude and not speak negatively about families. Students and teachers have input into the decision making about new programs.

Outcomes

The lunchtime links program meant that teachers and parents were able to build relationships in a non-threatening way.

When the School introduced a new reading program that requires daily support from parents they had a large group of parents that felt comfortable to assist.

100% of students are now leaving the school able to read and write

Lunchtime detentions dropped from over 200 students to 4 students per term before being abolished altogether

A community of parents now look out for each other so that they can support each other and the school does not spend as much time responding to parent problems

Teachers no longer have to deal with high levels of conflict from parents

Teachers can spend more time teaching

The school environment is more welcoming, friendly and peaceful, a nicer place for staff, students and parents to be.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

From meetings, discussions and training sessions held at schools, in the community and with professional education groups the following claims are made;

Observation 1

There is an increase in the diversity of family groups that professionals are expected to work with, adding to the complexity of their role.

There is a great deal of diversity in the Australian community. School, early childhood centres and maternal and child health are amongst the few community organisations at which all families regularly attend or are mandated to attend. Therefore these organisations and staff are required to support the full extent of the countries diversity.

It is well known that Australia has one of the most diverse ethnic communities in the world. Many families who arrive from other countries do not speak English and are often refugees carrying with them diverse needs. Furthermore, teachers and early childhood professionals respond to diverse family structures and a greater existence of family breakdown and dysfunction due to lack of resources, mental health issues, drug and alcohol use etc.

Observation 2

Many school staff acknowledge a need for greater understanding of the impact of disadvantage on the learning outcomes and general wellbeing of children and young people. Staff reported feeling afraid and lacking confidence when interacting with some parents.

A significant number of classroom teachers, senior staff and early childhood workers are unaware of the impact of disadvantage on the learning outcomes and general wellbeing of children and young people.

Many teachers and early childhood staff are not provided with information about the particular needs of children and their families experiencing disadvantage. These disadvantages may, for example, be because of poverty, mental illness, use of alcohol and drugs, those who have experienced trauma and torture and others.

Furthermore many teachers and carers are not well supported to deal with the many issues that arise when these children are in their care.

Some schools in an attempt to address this problem engaged Primary School Welfare Officers through the Department of Education and Training (now known as Department of Education and Early Childhood Development).

Our findings show that in some cases the system works well when there is a whole school approach with the Principal and all the staff communicating effectively with the Welfare Officer. However in many situations this does not occur and the background training of the Welfare officer and the interest of the Principal determines how students and their families are assisted. This system can be very dysfunctional.

Teachers expressed fear in becoming aware of the difficulties they suspect many students face. Many spoke of their fear in speaking to parents. One teacher stated that she avoided even saying 'good morning' to parents in case she had to carry on a conversation. Many discussed the difficulty of adding yet another role to their already stretched timeframe and lack of resources.

If teachers become aware of families and treat them with respect a partnership is created that will enhance the wellbeing of the children.

School leadership can support and encourage teachers, administration staff and others to develop skills that will benefit the whole school community.

Observation 3

The demands of the teaching curriculum do not allow teachers the opportunity to consider their capacity to influence the development of 'the whole child'.

A Significant number of teachers and early childhood workers are unaware of their role in influencing the development of the 'whole child'. Many teachers believed that their only role was to pass on information about a particular subject. Many teachers did not see the family as having any impact on learning outcomes and failed to relate the child's behaviour to the family environment.

In one example, a student who had been misbehaving in class was sent to the principal's office to be punished. The principal discovered after listening to the student that he had witnessed and been personally involved in domestic violence in his home on the previous night. After consoling and counselling him she gave him a chocolate drink and he returned to the classroom. When the classroom teacher discovered that the student had not been punished he immediately confronted and reprimanded the principal for her lenient actions. A shared understanding of difficulties faced by some students and the impact on learning might have helped in this situation.

With a shared understanding of the how disadvantage impacts on children and their families and clear methods of how to address problems, teachers and care givers can be free to focus on teaching the curriculum.

Teachers who are more confident to handle challenging situations and are supported by other professionals within the school or early childhood setting have time to extend their programs, experience more peaceful environments and enjoy greater job satisfaction.

Observation 4

There are few supports and educational services available to assist professionals build relationships with parents and families.

From our discussions with staff in schools and early childhood settings, as well as knowledge of tertiary training, it became evident that there was not a systematic focus on the child as a member of a family and the impact of this family on the child's development and capacity to develop academically. The family is not considered. Therefore providing these professionals with information and skills on ways to value and engage family members as partners in the child's development is overlooked.

CONCLUSION

The project did discover some good models of work practice that other organisations could consider.

Teachers need to be better informed about the dynamics and needs of families including those from a disadvantaged background.

Teachers need to understand the strengths of families and how it enhances the learning for children.

Teachers need to develop skills and ways to engage families, furthermore they would benefit from support from tertiary institutions and relevant government departments in achieving this.

Engagement can involve day to day conversations, parent teacher nights, parent groups and discussion nights.

Based on what parents are saying, it is suggested that services need to be there for the family's needs rather than the professionals needs. This involves using the 'Partnership' model rather than the 'expert' model where professionals acknowledge that parents are equal and have important knowledge about their own child and skills in caring for them.

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