

Working on the ground to redress disadvantage: Lessons from a community-based preschool program

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There is a socioeconomic gradient evident in rates of children's participation in preschool programs, with participation highest among children from the most advantaged households and lowest among children from the most disadvantaged households. The combined circumstances of household disadvantage and living in a neighbourhood of concentrated disadvantage exacerbate these disparities. While early childhood education can compensate for the intersecting and compounding disadvantages that families experience, children living in disadvantaged households are least likely to access such programs. This paper considers how an Early Learning Centre [ELC] in the socio-economically disadvantaged suburb of Broadmeadows, Victoria, is operating to redress barriers to participation in early learning education. Using a participant observation method and drawing on interviews conducted with parents, staff and local service providers, the paper describes how the ELC represents a 'promising approach' in efforts to address family circumstances and service-level factors that combine to discourage vulnerable families from attending community-based programs. The processes and practices that are outlined represent innovative efforts to attenuate household and place-based disadvantages that are experienced by children and their families.

Barriers to Participation in Early Childhood Education

Disparities in educational opportunities manifest early in the life-course and are generated within the interplay of familial, neighbourhood, class and macro-structural social and economic processes. There is a socioeconomic gradient in participation rates in preschool programs in Australia, with children from the most disadvantaged households least likely to access early childhood education (Vinson, 2006; Australian Bureau Statistics, 2004). Providing opportunities to develop independence, build social skills, promote familiarity with routines and generally ease the transition into primary school, early childhood education programs increasingly represent important preparation for formal schooling. They also present critical opportunities to assess children's developmental progress and provide timely referral for specialist and other services where necessary. Lower rates of participation in early learning settings among children living in socio-economically disadvantaged households may contribute to, or compound developmental and health-related issues. For instance, there is evidence that children living in circumstances

of household disadvantage have poorer health and developmental outcomes when compared to children growing up in non-poor households (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov & Sealand, 1993; Graham & Power, 2004, Australia's Health, 2004).

More troubling is evidence that concentrated household disadvantage at the neighbourhood level appears to generate particularly potent, interdependent and complex sets of circumstances that exacerbate the implications of household deprivation and disadvantage (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). The co-occurrence of household- and neighbourhood-level disadvantage confronts growing numbers of families in places such as Australia, and other post-industrial nations, where intensifying processes of socio-spatial polarisation are constellating households with similar socioeconomic circumstances together in neighbourhoods (Baum et al., 2005; Massey, 1996; Dorling & Rens, 2003). Concentrated household-level disadvantage in neighbourhoods produces generalised conditions of deprivation that influence health- and well-being-related processes, access to services and local social relations (Fitzpatrick, 2004). There is mounting evidence that

neighbourhood-level disadvantage contributes sources of stress and amplifies the strains and distress experienced by families (Matheson, Moineddin, Dunn, Creatore, Gozdyra & Glazier, 2006; McCulloch, 2003; Ross & Mirowsky, 2001; Steptoe & Feldman, 2001). In poor neighbourhoods there are likely to be fewer private services and high demand for available public services (Forrest and Kearns, 1999, Speak and Graham, 1999). Residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods tend to have higher involvement in local social networks and fewer extra-local networks than people living in other neighbourhoods (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004; MacDonald et al. 2005; Warr, 2005, 2006). These complex and interrelated issues provide an important backdrop for understanding the ways in which household and neighbourhood disadvantage impact on the life chances and opportunities that are available to children and their families living in suburbs such as Broadmeadows.

While non-participation in early childhood learning is associated with family impoverishment, participation in early childhood education programs can compensate for the intersecting and compounding effects of household and neighbourhood disadvantage (Zwi & Henry, 2005). It is therefore of great concern that the children who stand to gain the most from early childhood education are least likely to access such programs. Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth, & Nelms (2004) identified two sets of factors as inhibiting access to early childhood services: family circumstances, and aspects of services. Family circumstances that may prevent access, or contribute to irregular attendance in early learning opportunities include low household income; lack of social support; lack of private transport; insecure housing; low literacy levels of parents or care-givers; attitudes towards the need for, of value of, services; distrust of services; poor physical or mental health of parents or care-givers; everyday stress and recurrent crises (Carbone et al., 2004). Service-level factors identified include lack of knowledge of available services; the prohibitive of cost of services; poor public transport; poor coordination between early childhood services; unwelcoming environments and judgmental

and disparaging attitudes from staff or other families (Carbone et al., 2004). Addressing these familial, service- and neighbourhood-level contexts requires sensitive understanding of the circumstances of people's lives, and the personal and social consequences of protracted and widespread impoverishment in families and local neighbourhood environments.

In impoverished neighbourhoods, many families are likely to be experiencing stresses and social vulnerability linked to chronic unemployment, inadequate or insecure accommodation, physical or mental ill-health, and/or recent resettlement in Australia. Community-based programs providing educational, social and health services are important starting points in ameliorating and redressing the potentially negative impact of these of these situations. However, as Carbone et al. (2004) suggest, community services may also be part of the problem for some families. These concerns are confirmed in other research that found high levels of distrust towards social and other services among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable families (Canvin, Jones, Marttila, Burstrom & Whitehead, 2007). These families perceived more risks than benefits in accessing social support services. These included unfavorable scrutiny of parenting practices and welfare payments being cut, and a common strategy for managing these risks was to avoid seeking assistance through formal avenues (Canvin et al., 2007). Responding to the evidence that children living in disadvantaged families are least likely to access early childhood education requires attending to these barriers and developing realistic solutions that are sensitive to the concerns and experiences of families.

This paper describes key features of an Early Learning Centre (ELC) that is a community program in the suburb of Broadmeadows, Australia. The ELC has a prominent and positive profile in the neighbourhood, which is one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs in the State of Victoria (Vinson, 2007). Community programs have been defined as a community development strategy that targets geographical communities with aims of improving community functioning (Jack, 2005). The paper

draws from interviews undertaken with parents, staff, service providers and participation observation methods to describe the features of good practice in community programs such as the ELC. The discussion is informed by theoretical and empirical insights into contemporary conditions of socio-economic disadvantage and the implications at household- and neighbourhood-levels.

About the Meadowbank Early Learning Centre

The ELC offers an exemplary case study of a community program that is empathically grounded in the circumstances of local families and the ways in which these circumstances impact on children's educational opportunities. In addition to offering an early childhood education program for children, the ELC facilitates access to local support services, fosters links with other community-based programs, and promotes community development processes that are orientated towards achieving long-term and sustainable changes in the neighbourhood. The ELC offers a pre-school program for four-year-old children and supports parents to run a facilitated playgroup for toddlers, conducts 'Transition to School' programs, and incorporates numerous special programs within its preschool program (for example, 'Sing and Grow'; 'Feelings'; 'Sounds Like Fun'; 'Smiles for Miles' and regular bilingual storytelling sessions). The ELC is also a driver and key partner for regular community-wide events to promote social cohesion in the multicultural suburb of Broadmeadows.

In 2001, the unemployment rate in the Local Government Area [LGA] where the ELC is located was 8%, in the suburb of Broadmeadows it was 19%, while in the neighbourhood where the ELC is located it stood at 21% (Project Partnerships, 2003). The neighbourhood has a higher than average proportion of families accommodated in public housing authority properties compared with the state of Victoria as a whole (24.4% compared with 3.7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics). In Australia, public housing is increasingly reserved for individuals and families with complex and concurrent problems or experiencing acute crisis situations (Arthurson,

2004). The local population also reflects remarkable ethnic diversity with relatively high proportions of people who were born in Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. Overall, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that while some ethnic communities predominate in the area, there are over 35 different non-English speaking countries nominated as the place of birth by residents in the ELC's neighbourhood (Project Partnerships, 2003).

The ELC's local renown in engaging families that were otherwise unlikely to access mainstream programs recommended it as a critical and informative case study to improve understanding of 'good practice' when working with the most disadvantaged and socially isolated families. Case studies are particularly useful for generating detailed and context-dependent understanding of real-world phenomena because they offer 'strategic importance in relation to the general problem' (Flyvbjerg, 2001:78). In this case, the ELC offers insight into how one community-based organisation is working on the ground to reduce the socio-economic gradient in participation rates in early childhood learning. The case study did not aim to evaluate the ELC; these kinds of community-based programs are notoriously difficult to evaluate because they target and influence a complex array of factors and contexts. Rather, the aim of the case-study was to identify key aspects of what Jack (2005) usefully conceptualises as 'promising approaches' in efforts that target complex social phenomena. Explanations of 'promising approaches' should be informed by theoretical and empirical understanding of key issues (Jack, 2005).

Data for the Case Study

I first became aware of the ELC while preparing to undertake a series of research projects in Broadmeadows that explored associations between place, social connection and health-related processes. I was conducting extensive community consultations with local service providers to discuss my plans and obtain their perspectives on issues of concern. As time went by, I began visiting the ELC regularly where I was able to meet a range of people who lived and worked in the neighbourhood. I observed first-hand the ways in which the ELC

was striving to encourage and support families to be involved in the preschool program. I obtained ethics approval to undertake a modest, unfunded study to document the efforts of staff at the ELC to support families living in profoundly difficult situations. The aims of the study were to facilitate knowledge transfer of the insights and practice wisdom of staff at the ELC to other early childhood programs and to promote the ongoing sustainability of the ELC as the coordinator was approaching her retirement. I visited the ELC weekly over a school year and during this period I was a participant-observer in the program sessions, had many informal conversations with people and conducted some formal interviews with parents and staff. The ongoing contact I had with the ELC enhanced understanding of the ways the everyday circumstances of families impacted on the ELC and how issues unfolded over time.

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and these discussions explored how they had become involved with the ELC, the perceived benefits for children and parents, and the most positive and negative aspects of the program. These interviews were tape-recorded (except one that was conducted with the assistance of a translator). Four mothers and one father were interviewed and the parents were of Anglo-Australian, Turkish and Arabic backgrounds. I also interviewed ELC staff, a volunteer worker (who had formerly worked in the neighbourhood) and two local service providers who were working closely with the ELC. Notes were taken of these discussions (a total of five interviews). These interviews focused on describing the neighbourhood context for the program, processes for working with families, perceived benefits and problems of the program, and examples of working collaboratively with other services and community-based organisations. The findings from these interviews were written up in a plain-language report for the community (see Warr, 2007).

Recalling Flyvbjerg's (2001) explanation of the value of case studies, the following discussion brings together my understanding of the 'general problems' that characterise contemporary conditions and personal

implications of socio-economic disadvantage and the 'strategic importance' of efforts and initiatives at the ELC to understand and respond to the circumstances of local families. These circumstances involve material impoverishment, the challenges of resettlement in a new country, limited opportunities for social connection, and the social stigmatisation of poor people and poor neighbourhoods. The next section discusses key insights into family circumstances and the implications for the ELC. The final section of the paper explains approaches and practices that are used at the ELC to redress these disadvantages to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for children.

Insights into Household and Neighbourhood Circumstances

Family and neighbourhood circumstances include practical problems associated with material impoverishment and how these circumstances influence local social relations. These issues emerged as important contexts for understanding some of the barriers to participation in early childhood education among families. Family circumstances have been identified as key factors in limiting participation in early learning opportunities (Carbone et al., 2004; Vinson, 2006), and the generalised socio-economic circumstances and cultural characteristics of the neighbourhood where the ELC is located highlight the special needs of local families. Impoverishment through unemployment and disability, sole parents struggling to do the work of two people in raising children, and families who have recently settled in Australia, are common situations framing parents' engagement with community programs. The coordinator noted that '*there are difficulties for some parents who are experiencing their own personal crises, family difficulties, challenges of settling in a new country, and families with limited grasp of English*'. Material constraints and limited access to private and public transport ensured that many families relied heavily on local services and facilities. Service providers, such as the family services practitioner, noted that '*Many people rarely leave the area- they rarely visit the city, for instance*' (which is only 15 kilometres away).

Problems of social exclusion

The risks of social exclusion were multi-layered and relevant for the ELC in different ways. The most immediate issues were household circumstances that risked families became isolated in their homes. This concerned staff at the ELC because isolated families are less likely to enroll their children in preschool or to gain as many benefits through their involvement. The coordinator was clearly aware that overlapping circumstances within households heightened vulnerability for families to become social isolated and excluded:

Families are especially vulnerable when they are not in paid work. Many families are moving to the area to rent or buy cheap housing but this often means that they must leave behind other [social] networks. They can be very isolated until they get on their feet and establish new social supports in the local neighbourhood.

Some families become socially isolated because of uncertainty in housing, employment or family situations and this can also disrupt children's involvement in education programs:

Some families are highly transient and are frequently moving house or changing schools for a variety of reasons. Parents might change school following conflict with staff or other parents, move to support family members in other suburbs or states, to find work, or through unstable accommodation. This creates difficulties in providing continuity of learning, meeting learning objectives and ensuring access to relevant support services when needed.

More broadly, families in the neighbourhood are vulnerable to collective

experiences of social exclusion. A range of research has identified that generalised neighbourhood-level socioeconomic disadvantage is associated with residents having fewer extra-local social networks and high dependence on local networks (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004; Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001; MacDonald et al., 2005; Warr, 2005, 2006). This network structure increasingly reflects the socio-spatial consequences of contemporary forms of socio-economic disadvantage in which the poor and non-poor live increasingly further apart from each other (Bauman, 2000; Massey, 1996). The consequences of these network structures are also implicated in processes that serve to reproduce educational and other disadvantages. The circumstances of high involvement in local networks and limited involvement in a diversity of social networks were evident among families in Broadmeadows and the implications of this were observed to have repercussions at the ELC.

Many families tended to be involved in dense local social networks and have limited social ties with people outside of the neighbourhood. On one hand, this fostered a strong sense of community connection and belonging. On the other, it limited the settings in which people feel comfortable and generated tendencies towards volatility in networks that had a number of negative effects. The coordinator explained:

Some families have had limited exposure to a diversity of social experiences and tend to be involved in dense local networks. These networks are vulnerable to generating conflict because local networks are central social networks and people are less likely to be distracted by work and other involvements outside the neighbourhood and there can be high informal surveillance of others. Disagreements can escalate into serious conflicts and this creates challenges for the school and the ELC and because these [schools and other community-based settings] are sites where

parents are likely to run into each other. This has been a problem this year and was very disruptive for the children.

The density of local networks can escalate conflicts that arise because it is more difficult to avoid contact with local people and disagreements with one family can isolate people from other families in the networks. High dependence on these local friendship networks also renders families vulnerable to social isolation if they decide to withdraw from these networks as a way of avoiding or managing conflict. Parents may decide to avoid local venues, such as schools and kindergartens or even enroll children in other programs. Either of these responses is likely to be disruptive for children, and especially pre-school age children if parents feel that attending a pre-school program is enjoyable but not necessarily essential for their child's wellbeing.

The coordinator also perceived that generalised risks of social exclusion, linked to the disintegration of traditional social institutions, are intensified for local families who are already vulnerable through household situations and prevailing circumstances of disadvantage in the neighbourhood:

More generally, many people have no roots or connections to a community, especially through the dissolving influence of family and church that were able to provide families with social networks and support.

The families that are caught in intersecting circumstances of disadvantage have high and complex social support needs, but staff and service providers working at the ELC refrain from talking about 'problem families'. Instead, there is encouragement to consider how situations appear from the perspectives of families and the anxieties they may be experiencing. These insights into family circumstances and local network structures inform efforts adopted at the ELC and address barriers to participation.

Approaches include getting to know families, ensuring parents and children feel welcome when they come to the ERC, some awareness of relationships between families and modeling non-aggressive tactics for resolving disputes. One of the parents described how, through her contact with the ELC, she had learnt tactics for managing problems at home: "*I learnt how to handle things at home and I'm still learning and if I've got a problem, yes, I come back to [the coordinator] and she actually gives me advice on how to handle it*". More strategically, the ELC had taken a lead role in developing a number of 'upstream' community development projects that support families to build diverse social connections and networks and tackle the social determinants of disadvantage.

Problems related to social stigma.

In addition to the widespread hardship among families living in the neighbourhood, the processes of social stigmatization to which poor neighbourhoods are frequently subjected compounds problems with establishing diverse social networks (Warr, 2005). The social stigmatisation of impoverished neighbourhoods can also have debilitating psychological effects on residents. According to a Family Services Practitioner, people living in the neighbourhood are aware of '*wider community pressure and stigma and they lack self-confidence, [they have] no confidence in themselves*'. This is also observed by the coordinator who notes that, amidst these contexts, careless efforts to 'help' will only reinforce feelings of powerlessness and helplessness:

[A lack of self esteem] arises through a lack of understanding of their place in society, and how they can contribute, have influence to change their life or their children's lives – it impinges on them: 'I don't know what I don't know' and not knowing what to aspire to. There are feelings that 'I'm not worthwhile – it doesn't matter what happens – I'm worthless'. People can have little sense of their rights – what they can ask for in their community. It also puts

people in a no-win situation if they are dependent on the help of others – it's lose/lose – 'I can't respect what you give me because you gave it to me'.

These comments point to the powerful psychological consequences of individualising discourses of poverty and disadvantage where possibilities for making social or political sense of one's circumstances are increasingly limited. In addition to the ways in which such discourses erode self-confidence and self-belief, they threaten social solidarity in the neighbourhood. Discussing research undertaken in the western suburbs of Melbourne, McDonald (1999) argued that the economically and socially disenfranchised young adults in his study were unable interpret their struggles as outcomes of disempowering social-structural processes. Rather, contemporary experiences of disadvantage are increasingly experienced as problems of personality (McDonald, 1999). This influences how people interpret their own situations, as well as those of people living around them in similar situations. The coordinator was aware of the socially fraying effects of these individualising discourses:

[It] can mean having less empathy for others in similar situations and this inhibits social solidarity and results in a lack of social connectedness with others, in family units and neighbourhoods and with school and local institutions (...) [this neighbourhood] used to have a 'Poverty Action Group' and this group had a strong sense of being able to change and communicate circumstance and it gave people a sense of control. What has changed since then? No structure to feel that I have any say in my destiny.

These astute insights from the coordinator reflect on subjective experiences of being 'disadvantaged' and how this

translates into practical barriers and further involves powerful psychological and social consequences. These issues are clearly beyond the scope of the ELC to resolve but they are used to understand radiating implications of people's circumstances.

Issues for culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Typically, over half of the families attending the ELC are from non-English speaking backgrounds. Turkish and Arabic languages are predominantly spoken among these families and some of these families are not literate in their first language. These circumstances can present a range of barriers for accessing early childhood programs that on one level are linked to language difficulties and lack of knowledge of available services. The Teacher Aide noted that language barriers undermine parents' confidence when interacting with staff and other parents:

[There are] insecurities about what others are thinking of them and their cultural differences. People can lack the confidence to deal with issues and stand up for themselves - they are afraid of doing the 'wrong thing'. Often they just say 'Yes, yes, yes' and then turn around and say 'What did they mean?' They are pretending to understand in order to save face. It is important to make sure that people are able to understand what is said to them'.

A critical observation from this bi-lingual Teacher's Aide is that an important coping strategy adopted by parents is to convey an appearance of comprehension, even when they do not understand what is being said. The coordinator observed that families that have recently resettled in Australia are likely to experience many strains arising through impoverishment, the difficulties of acculturation to a new country, ongoing experiences of racism, family histories marked with stories of dislocation and trauma, and the loss of extended family networks.

To support non-English speaking families,

the ELC has implemented a number of service- and individual-level strategies including having multi-lingual Teacher's Aides present at all sessions. This is further linked to local capacity building because the Teacher's Aides are recruited as parents who are also encouraged and supported to gain post-secondary qualifications. The ELC program for children incorporates activities that cater for children (and families) with limited English or who are speaking English as a second language. Examples of these efforts are the bi-lingual storytelling projects that are undertaken in collaboration with the local library and events celebrating special days in religious calendars. More generally at the ELC, staff are encouraged to model warm and respectful interactions with parents and children in order to establish a culturally inclusive atmosphere. The Teacher's Aide, attributed the Coordinator's positive modeling as critical for establishing a welcoming, safe and empowering environment for all families:

The ELC gives parents a chance to have input into their child's learning. The Coordinator, in particular, consults, considers and is understanding of cultural issues (...) She is very thoughtful – over the years I have learnt heaps and heaps and heaps of things from her because she explains why she does things, she doesn't impose on others' culture, doesn't impose her beliefs, and people feel comfortable with this. She explains procedures and processes and makes sure that parents are involved in things.
[Teacher's Aide]

Community-based settings such as pre-schools may present many families with their first opportunities to engage in interpersonal cross-cultural interactions. Through mixtures of unfamiliarity, misunderstanding and anxiety over their children's future success at school, tensions have surfaced over the content of the program curriculum and some parents question

the value of special initiatives such as the bi-lingual story-telling sessions. For example, one parent expressed the view that *'their [the children's] education is more important than worrying about other stuff – like reading, writing and speaking properly is more important than speaking in a different language'*. There are no easy ways to reconcile these views but the staff at the ELC were focusing on promoting cross-cultural understanding through one-on-one discussions with parents, supporting parental involvement in the program and was a lead partner in community-wide projects such as *The Tapestry Project*, that was funded through VicHealth's 'Building Bridges' program and which created opportunities for positive cross-cultural interaction across a variety of neighbourhood settings.

Addressing Service-level Barriers

Structural, practical and attitudinal aspects of service delivery are critical factors for promoting socially inclusive early childhood services. A number of practical problems for low-income families can be addressed through structural aspects of educational programs. Participation in preschool is lowest among children in families where parents are not involved in paid work, suggesting affordability is a critical factor (see Australian Bureau Statistics, 2004). Therefore, to keep costs down and encourage parental involvement in the program, the ELC has an 'open-door' policy with strong emphasis on, and support for, parent participation in the program. Costs are kept to a minimum and this is appreciated by parents, as one explained: *'It's important for people who can't afford the big high fees – it's helping the low-income people'*. The low cost of the program is offset through the expectations that parents will assist in running program sessions. Sustaining parental involvement does involve planning and effort and has positive aspects – it pushes staff to ensure that parents feel welcome, to avoid judgmental and paternalistic attitudes and provide meaningful roles for parents in the day-to-day operation of the ELC.

The time parents spend at the ELC offers opportunities for learning exchanges and for informal interactions between staff and other parents. During the time I was a regular visitor

to the ELC, I observed a number of friendships that tentatively developed between parents who crossed paths while assisting in the program. Parents also noted the value of observing the coordinator engaging with the children:

I've learnt a lot as I watch ... some days I pop in and I watch [the coordinator] do something and it's like "I might give that a go, I might give that a go and see how that works". So yeah, I'm still learning as my kids grow.

Poor coordination between early childhood services can result in limited knowledge of available services among parents, thus causing families difficulties attending services that are scattered over an outer suburban region that has few public transport options for local travel, and limited resources for services to respond to the needs of non-English speaking families. Distrust towards social services were also expressed by some parents and reinforce the importance of not alienating families, including children, from potential sources of support, assistance and other benefits. In explaining why they have little to do with other services in the area and felt quite isolated in their parenting role, one of the parents said "*nobody wants their child to be taken away so I've just done it myself*". This parent was a regular volunteer at the ELC.

The ELC is also concerned to offer parents opportunities for social contact with other parents to build informal links that are important for companionship and everyday sources of support. Cultivating friendly sociability among parents requires a welcoming atmosphere, time and a flexible approach. It may take a while for some parents to feel comfortable in unfamiliar situations and to acquire confidence participating in conversations with other parents. A Family Services Practitioner who regularly attends the ELC has observed networks developing and '*parents are assisting each other and sharing information and really valuing the social contact*'. A parent reflected:

I reckon I've gained a lot, too [from coming to the ELC] I feel confident now, whereas before I was quite, you know, and I wouldn't talk to anyone but now like, if I see other people I will talk to them and we have discussions and sometimes we go, you know places together (...) I go on outings – I wouldn't have done that before but now when they have events for the kids and I always go with them.

Ensuring that families have access to services the ELC has been working towards establishing itself as contact point or 'community hub'. This involves local early childhood, maternal and child health and social support services offering outreach services or opportunities for informal contact and information exchange on premises at the ELC. Figure 1 represents the network of links that that have been brokered between the ELC and local, non-government, State and Commonwealth early childhood services and initiatives. Over time, these links have been established in response to the difficulties that families with complex support needs were experiencing in accessing a suite of health and social services. These efforts to structure the ELC as a community hub in order to enhance locally centralised and integrated service delivery and community development efforts in the neighbourhood have influenced broader policy initiatives. In 2006 the Commonwealth government's *Communities for Children* initiative funded the 'Setting the Hubs Humming' project in which the ELC provided a 'best practice' model of how community-based sites could operate as community hubs to further improve access to resources and services for families with babies and young children (Hubs Strategy Group for Hume Communities for Children Initiative, 2007).

Involvement in community development.

The effort put into community engagement processes at the ELC is a critical

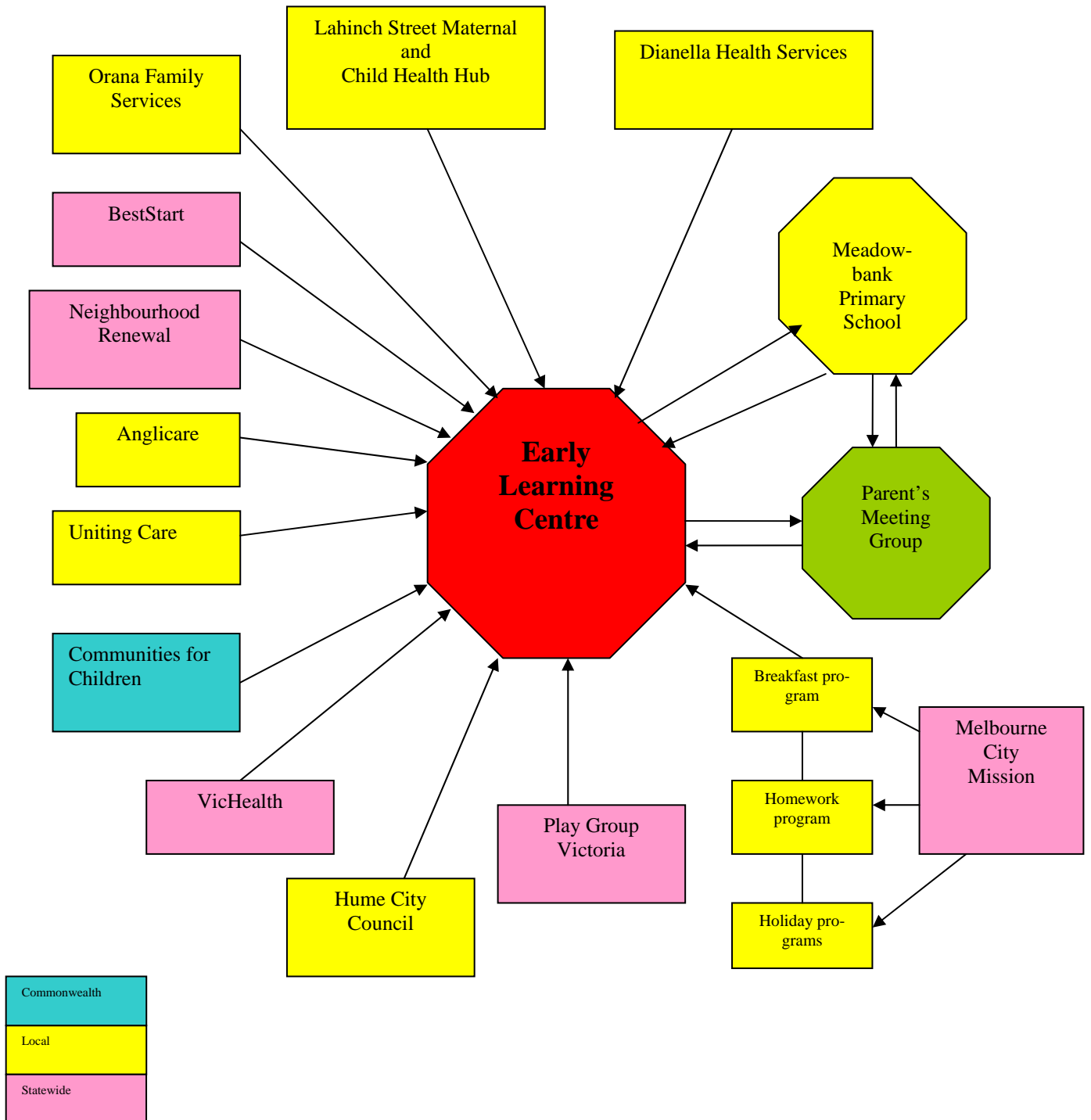


Figure 1: Current partnerships and Projects associated with ELC

factor in its success in engaging families to become involved in the school and community. Community engagement at the ELC has dual emphases on engaging families and local service providers. Engaging families focuses on encouraging and supporting families to leave their homes to become involved in

community-based and extra-local organisations, networks, programs and projects. Engaging service providers focuses on encouraging them to leave their offices and get out into the community. The latter is orientated towards improved integration of useful early childhood and other services by having service providers

more active 'on the ground' as well as developing improved understanding of the life-world circumstances of families.

Challenges

The ELC is presented with many challenges. Significantly, it operates with limited resources, and opportunities for supplementary fund-raising activities are severely curtailed by the circumstances of local families. Generalised socio-economic disadvantage in the neighbourhood impinges on the standard of local educational facilities, creates difficulties for parents in accessing early intervention services where necessary and, for the ELC in particular, and ongoing difficulties in harnessing local resources to operate as a community hub. Further, in neighbourhoods with high levels of disadvantage, early childhood programs are confronted with circumstances in which many families have not been able to offer children a breadth of experiences. Discrepancies in children's life experiences put them at different developmental stages and this generates complexity for identifying and implementing educational aims and programs that meet the diverse needs of children. Pre-school programs offer important opportunities to address these gaps in life experiences but they struggle to find the resources to do so. Staff at the ELC are also aware that they are not meeting the needs of all families. Many children continue to attend irregularly and the transient circumstances of many families ensure that some children are not benefiting from sustained involvement in the program.

An ongoing challenge for the ELC is conveying the benefits of a play-based program for early education. The aims and rationale of play-based programs, while widely accepted in professional circles as laying a sound foundation for subsequent learning experiences, can be difficult to translate across class and cultural contexts. Like parents everywhere, parents in Broadmeadows are concerned that their children have educational experiences that best prepare them for primary school and beyond. In contexts of disadvantage, parents' commitment to their children's education comes from acute understanding that they have no other

advantages to draw from – doing well at school is the best chance for their children to get ahead. It remains a challenge to communicate to parents and others the benefits of programs that aim to build foundational skills and capacities that will assist children to thrive in formal learning settings. If pre-school programs are viewed as merely opportunities for playing it risks being perceived as an expendable luxury within competing demands for scarce household resources.

Finally, an ongoing challenge for the ELC is that the more effective community-based programs are in catering for the needs of disadvantaged families, the less attractive these programs become to families who do not perceive a need for the extensive programs that are offered. This risks reinforcing problems of concentrated disadvantage and entrenching socio-economic differences in educational outcomes

Concluding Comments

A key characteristic of the ELC's approach to family engagement in the pre-school program is empathic insight into local circumstances. It has focused on providing a welcoming and socially and culturally inclusive environment, and integrating educational and support services through cooperative links with local agencies. Together these strategies address the barriers presented through family circumstances and service-level factors in accessing early childhood services (Carbone et al., 2004). As children from the most disadvantaged families are least likely to attend an early education program, understanding and addressing these barriers is critical for reducing the socio-economic gradient in children's participation in early learning opportunities (Vinson, 2006).

Overall, the ELC program is characterised by clear understanding that it needs to acknowledge the circumstances of families. This extends to neighbourhood settings that are forged through the consequences of high levels of unemployment, a high proportion of sole parent families who are working hard to raise

children alone, and the strains on local social networks because of family pressures, social isolation and social stigma. There is also limited capacity to access private services and high demand for available (usually public) services. The need to engage with wider community contexts underpins the ELC's efforts to operate as a community hub in order to facilitate access to other health and social support services. Ensuring timely access to appropriate support and interventions can have beneficial and enduring outcomes for children and families. The ELC is also an enthusiastic partner in a raft of local partnerships, projects and initiatives. This model of intersectoral cooperation has been identified as essential for addressing early childhood disadvantage, and is especially important when families have high support needs and are 'clients-in-common' of local service providers (Hetzl & Glover, 2003).

Early childhood education represents an important window for promoting social inclusion for families, and nurturing developmental and social capacities in children to sustain social inclusion over the life-course (Friendly & Lero, 2002). This potential of early learning education is particularly critical for families most at risk of social exclusion. Early learning programs are families' first encounters with formal learning institutions and processes, and are important in establishing the tenor of ongoing relations and cooperation between schools and parents. At this critical time, it is important not to alienate families that stand to gain the most from support and educational services and the ELC offers an encouraging example of how thoughtful practice and deep concern for local families becomes the basis for mutual understanding and connection.

This case study is limited in terms of offering a representative overview of the issues. Rather, its aim has been to provide detailed description of a 'promising approach' to tackling a range of complex and interrelated contexts and barriers to participation in early learning opportunities. The ELC represents a promising approach because of its understanding of key issues and the innovative responses it has developed to address the

issues with which it is confronted. The ELC exemplifies the capacity of community programs to work at different levels to tackle dimensions of disadvantage. Community programs can readily lend themselves to ecological approaches, address local effects that contribute to personal and community vulnerabilities, and build on community engagement practices (Jack, 2005). It is increasingly recognised that achieving positive education and well-being outcomes for all children requires these kinds of 'social ecological' approaches in which configurations of family, school, neighbourhood and community contexts are viewed as interdependent influences (Earls and Carlson, 2001). Community programs such as the ELC acknowledge the specific qualities of neighbourhoods in order to effectively build on community assets while being realistic about the limitations that are likely to be encountered (Caughy & O'Campo, 2006).

The ELC is situated in a neighbourhood where problems arising through household disadvantage are compounded because of generalised neighbourhood disadvantage. This is important for understanding the stresses that are placed on families both inside and outside the home, and inside and outside school settings. It also explains the stress placed on local institutions and organisations to provide the intense levels of social supports that some families require, and a challenging learning program that generally prepares children for primary school. In these contexts, the ELC is supporting families to become actively involved in their children's education, develop new friendships, nurture connections with community-based activities and, when necessary, facilitate access to social and health support services. In these myriad ways, the ELC is working to reduce educational and other inequalities.

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