



Promising Practice Profiles

Project title	Sunshine Learning Together
Project practice	Sunshine Learning Together is a dual generation learning program for parents who want to learn English and who have preschool age children. There are three components to the program: culturally appropriate early learning and activities for 0–5s; simultaneous English language tuition for the mothers; a follow-on parent–child program attended by both the mother and her children.
Project undertaken by	St Vincent de Paul Society In partnership with Victorian Cooperative on Children’s Services in Ethnic Groups, Uniting Care Sunshine Mission, and Adult Multicultural Education Services
Start date	December 2006
Focal areas	Supporting Families and Parents Early Learning and Care
Program	Communities for Children
Issue	<p>Women with young children seeking to participate in community training are prevented from doing so unless they are able to find childcare or unless childcare is provided. In the target area, there was a shortage of affordable and appropriate childcare for women on low income. The reference to “appropriate” incorporates both culturally appropriate childcare and childcare that is available for 2–3 hours, as opposed to a full day.</p> <p>In addition many of the target parents were not comfortable with using childcare for their children but did want to learn English. Previous attempts to provide the English classes with community volunteers providing childcare were not satisfactory.</p> <p>Finally, there was a desire to introduce information about the strong benefits of parent–child engagement to parents who were newly arrived in Australia.</p>
Program context	<p>Sunshine Learning Together is a project that comprises three linked components. One component provides early learning activities and experiences for children from birth to 5 years of age. Another provides English language tuition for mothers of the children; and another is a parenting program for mothers with their children. The project is delivered within a community setting. Sessions are held on Mondays and Tuesdays from about 12.30pm to 3.00pm. The early learning activities and experiences for children and their mothers to learn English occur simultaneously. These components run from about 1.00pm to 2.30pm. The parenting program commences around 2.30pm and concludes about 3.00pm. The parents and children are at the same site for all elements.</p> <p>The project partners are St Vincent de Paul Society (SVDP), Uniting Care Sunshine Mission, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Sunshine, the Victorian Cooperative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups</p>

(VICSEG) and the Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES).

St Vincent de Paul Society is the community partner, the Uniting Care Sunshine Mission provides the venue, VICSEG delivers the early learning activities and the parenting program, and AMES delivers the English language tuition. The Smith Family and ISIS Primary Care are facilitating partners.

The target group is parents who wish to learn English and who have preschool age children.

Practice description

This Promising Practice Profile will identify the key ingredients of the practice of the Sunshine Learning Together project. These include:

- engagement of key partners;
- provision of English lessons and children's program in the same venue;
- provision of childcare by trained staff that are of the same culture as the families;
- meeting the parents need and desire to learn English with the child's need for quality care programs;
- incorporating parent-child interaction time into the English lessons;
- integrated planning between childcare and English teaching staff; and
- creatively moving past bureaucratic restrictions to provision of childcare.

Engagement of key partners

The project successfully identified key partners who had the appropriate skills and existing knowledge to undertake the project and achieve the objectives. The lead agency is closely linked to the local community and is in direct contact with the target group and potential participants.

The children's program is provided by organisations whose primary focus is Children's Services for Ethnic Communities. They are a Registered Training Organisation in the field of Children's Services as well as operating family day care and Occasional Care themselves in another area. In addition, they have had a long standing role in advocacy for increasing the participation of children from diverse backgrounds in children's services.

The English classes are provided by one of the largest providers of accredited English training in Australia and an organisation that had extensive experience and contact with the target group.

Provision of English lessons and children's program in the same venue

Having parents and children under the same roof has allowed for childcare to be provided without complexity of accreditation. This is because the parents are able to remain in effective control of their children. At all times duty of care and child safety is adhered to. This has overcome the lack of short-time care availability for the target group. With the current shortage of childcare, long day care services are not willing to take children for less than a day and parents cannot afford to pay for a full day of childcare.

Additionally, where children have not previously been in childcare, being in the same venue has allowed children to be very close to their parents while they settle in (sometimes on parent's lap while the parents do English classes). In all cases, the children have fairly quickly found the children's program far more interesting than the English lessons and have happily shifted to the children's space leaving happy parents able to focus on their learning.

Provision of childcare by trained staff that are of the same culture as the families

The childcare staff are all from Central and Eastern Africa and are trained and/or qualified in Children's Services. (An earlier Communities for Children

project trained 20 local African women in Certificate III in Children's Services.) The workers have an intimate understanding of parents' concerns, expectations and experience and are able to communicate easily with the parents. In addition to providing the children's program, the childcare staff are able to provide observations and support to the parent about their child's development. This interaction is used to reinforce the message of the influence that parent involvement has on their child's development.

Meeting the parents need and desire to learn English with the child's need for quality care programs.

After housing, English language classes are consistently the highest priority for newly arrived families. The classes in this project are provided as part of an agreement with the national provider of the Adult Migrant English Program (a program funded as part of Australia's Immigration Policy) and Adult & Community Further Education funds (from the Victorian Government). The majority of the families in the program have not participated previously due to a lack of appropriate childcare.

Even though the childcare program is not registered, the regulated ratios for Children's Services in Victoria are maintained in order to ensure that a stimulating children's program can be provided. The Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) is both a children's services provider and a Registered Training Organisation in the field of Children's Services. Their workers design the children's program based on observations of the children and the desire to provide a stimulating early learning environment.

The target group's culture of origin does not strongly acknowledge the importance of the early years and the benefits of early learning programs for a child's development. For many parents, the first time they become aware of this importance is when the child reaches school and they engage with their teachers. In this program the English classes are the initial enticement to bring their children to the Early learning program.

Incorporating parent-child interaction time into the English lessons

The parent-child time has been the cornerstone of the project as it has created the opportunity to discuss with the families the benefits to be gained for the family by making the time to interact with their child in its early years. The context of this discussion in the early stages was responding to parents' annoyance at having to "miss out on English Class time". The project has fiercely protected the parent-child time as a requirement of participation. This strong stance has reinforced the belief in the value of the parent-child interaction. The discussion of why the project insists on it has created some of the most helpful openings for early years parenting discussions.

After some initial concerns, the women now relate well to this element of the program; they have begun to initiate their own suggestions and requests for more ways to "play" with their child. The English teacher's endorsement of this has been a critical success factor.

Integrated planning between childcare and English teaching staff

Each term, the English teacher and the childcare workers plan complementary programs so that there are consistent themes in the sessions (for example: shopping, transport and nutrition). This has the added benefit of children and parents building their vocabulary at the same time. The activities for the integrated element are planned together to reinforce the importance of this time for both parent and child.

Creatively moving past bureaucratic restrictions to provision of childcare

While this activity is not providing registered childcare (as the children remain under the effective control of their parents), it focuses as much on the needs of the child as of the parent in the provision of access to

opportunities for families. Frequently, programs that wish to work with parents will arrange babysitting or child minding for a few hours or encourage parents to find childcare and put the energy into planning the sessions for the parents. This program demonstrates how activities that target parents can and should be also be providing great benefits for children.

Although this is not registered child care, the regulated ratios for Children's Services in Victoria are maintained for the children's program in order to ensure that a stimulating children's program can be provided. The venue is child friendly and safe, workers are trained and skilled, and the parents gain a greater understanding of childcare and children's development by having it happen in the same space.

Limitations

As with all programs, learnings occur through operation, and limitations to program outcomes are identified. These include:

- initial issues around losing English hours to be with children; and
- initial misunderstandings around project objectives.

Initial issues around losing English hours to be with children

As discussed above, there were some initial concerns expressed by the parents about not wanting to lose time from their English class in order to spend it with the children. The turning point on this issue came when the English teacher became an advocate of the necessity for this and endorsed the parent-child time. The status of the teacher within this community is quite high and was utilised to endorse the messages of the early years workers. In the early stages, the level of integration between the Children's program and the English program was not as high as it has now become.

Initial misunderstandings around project objectives

The change of senior staff in the partner organisations (between the project design period and the implementation period) created some initial difficulties with the new person having a different level of commitment to the integrated nature of the project.

Research base

This project draws on four areas of well established evidence. Firstly, the area of integrated child and family services; linked to this is the notion of co-ordinated services; thirdly, the area of family literacy programs; and finally that of the need for culturally appropriate childcare. Each of these has a significant literature, which are discussed briefly below.

Integrated child and family services

There is now a significant body of research evidence that identifies benefits from integrated child and family services specifically targeting the families and groups that experience high levels of inequity and disadvantage (Pannell, 2005). An integrated services is one which intentionally combines Early Childhood Education and Care services with family services and have multiple components that are directed to the child (to achieve positive child development outcomes) and directed to the parent(s) (to enhance parenting skills and positive family functioning) (Pannell, 2005). Pannell argued that research evidences that Early Childhood programs should include the following essential features:

- programs that are integrated (incorporating services for children and parents);
- programs that start early;
- programs that are intensive; and
- programs that maintain quality (Pannell, 2005, p. 5).

Pannell summarised international evidence to show that both children and parents experience significant outcomes from an integrated service approach. She argued that:

parents and families of children who participate in integrated child and family services also benefit. Mothers have fewer

additional births, have better nutrition and smoke less during pregnancy, are less likely to abuse or neglect their children; complete more years of schooling, have higher high-school retention rates, are more likely to be employed, have higher earnings, and engage in fewer criminal acts, have lower drug and alcohol abuse and are less likely to use welfare. (Pannell, 2005, p. 15)

These outcomes are especially important for migrant families who are deemed to be particularly at risk of social and economic isolation (Rogers & Moore, 2003).

Co-ordination across services

Rogers and Moore (2003) provided a range of evidence to argue for the value of a co-ordinated approach to service delivery across multiple service agencies and service focus. Harbin and West (1998) described a range of co-ordinated service models, including one most closely aligned to the Sunshine Learning approach, that of a “strongly coupled co-ordinated system” where decision making is shared by a multi-agency group that delivers services co-operatively. This type of co-ordination includes all services providers sharing a consistent approach where “clients” problems are treated as a whole and individuals are treated as part of family and community systems” (Konrad, 1996, p. 11). Harbin and West (1998) provided evidence to show that the more co-ordinated and comprehensive (in terms of offering a range of children’s and family services) a service approach, the greater the outcomes.

Family literacy programs

The benefits of children and parents learning together have been well documented through the many Family Literacy programs and evaluations undertaken recently. Research has identified the importance of approaching literacy as a family activity. The National Center for Family Literacy argues:

To approach literacy through the family is the surest way to increase educational levels of adults and children because this approach expands the skills of both and draws on the power of the family to affect its own future.

Such philosophies are increasingly embedded in a range of approaches around the world, and particularly in America. As argued by the Family Strengthening Policy Center:

High-quality family literacy programs prepare caregivers to succeed as parents and employees, enhance bonds between parents and children, strengthen connections between families, schools, and other institutions, and revitalize neighbourhood networks, leading to stronger communities. (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007)

Family literacy approaches are now embedded in policy in a range of countries as a means of addressing low levels of adult literacy, social exclusion, and greater economic participation by disadvantaged groups (Rose & Atkins, 2007).

High quality and culturally appropriate childcare

Research evidence suggests that the most positive outcomes for Early Childhood and Care programs involve adequate child/staff ratios, relatively small group sizes and staff that are professionally trained (Powell, 1996). Further, there is evidence that parents on low incomes and those from disadvantaged groups are unlikely to be able to afford such quality childcare without direct targeting and assistance (Powell, 1996).

The emphasis on using childcare workers from similar background to the families involved draws on various documented recommendations. Keating (1994) summarised findings in Australia as follows:

Submissions to the National Council for the International Year for the Family emphasized that the socio-economic

disadvantages experienced by a high proportion of migrant families of non-English speaking background would be exacerbated unless employment and training programs are accompanied by culturally appropriate childcare services. (Keating,1994)

The benefits of this have also been borne out in the experiences of VICSEG and other local services including the Migrant Resource Centre. In addition, in Victoria bilingual workers are loaned to children's centers when children of newly arrived families are having difficulty settling their child into childcare. (See Free Kindergarten Association, www.fka.com.au)

Outcomes

Sunshine Learning has achieved a range of outcomes for parents, children and at the service level:

- Parents of young children have accessed English classes.
- Parents are engaging in English classes and children are happy to be separated from parents.
- Parents have learnt the importance of interacting and playing with their children on a regular basis.
- Children are interacting with each other and are developing appropriate skills.
- A model of quality childcare provision in community venue is being documented.

Evidence of outcomes

This project has been collecting data on the children's development and the development of the interaction between parents and children. The data are in the form of:

- childcare staff observations;
- photo diaries;
- discussions held with the childcare workers;
- record of focus group interviews with participants; and
- reports from English Teacher.

An additional tool of video feedback is being implemented for the second year of the project.

An Evaluation Report *Brimbank Communities for Children Interim Local Evaluation Report 2* prepared by the Centre for Child and Community Health for the Smith Family (December 2008) is also available.

Staff observations, photo diaries and discussions

The observations of the Childcare Staff are recorded in a journal on a weekly basis and are supplemented by photo diaries compiled by childcare workers. Discussions are then held with the childcare workers to identify what development they have observed.

Record of focus group interviews with participants

Focus groups were conducted by an Early Year's professional who was not one of the regular carers. There is no written feedback from the families due to the English Literacy issues for the parents. Focus group responses were documented at the time of the interview.

Reports from English Teacher

The English teacher reports on the parents' progress in English classes as well as observations in relation to the parent-child time.

Data drawn from this range of sources are summarised below to evidence each of the outcome areas.

Parents of young children have accessed English classes

In total, 40 mothers and their children have been through the program in the past year. The average attendance has been 10 mothers. The turnover has been due to the transient nature of this target group—newly arrived in temporary accommodation. Many are moving on to areas with cheaper

housing. Many also have left to have babies, however have returned once the child is old enough to be part of the group. Several of the women have moved on to more formal English classes when a space for themselves and their child has become available. All of the families involved in the program to date had not been able to access English classes prior to joining.

Parents are engaging in English classes and children are happy to be separated from parents.

Outcomes in this area are best evidenced by examples from individuals, summarised below:

One of the children, A, used to cry every visit but now he enjoys coming and has made friends and doesn't cry any more. (Child care worker journal, 2007)

Mother C was walking with her children past the English class venue with her two toddlers on a day that was not a class day. One of the children became very upset because he wanted to go to his child care session. (Report from mother, June 2007)

Further, the English teacher also notes outcomes around parent engagement in class:

Settling into a host country is never easy. Given that nine of the women have never had the opportunity to go to school, they show a great interest in learning. Attendance has been good – allowing for pregnancy, childbirth, sickness and moving house etc. Some women have transferred to VUT or AMES. (Teachers Report June, 2007)

Parents have learnt the importance of interacting and playing with their children on a regular basis

Initially there was a lot of resistance to the parent-child time, as parents did not feel that this was a good use of time and that they would be better off doing more English. The workers also observed that there was little interaction between parent and child apart from giving a child instructions or direction (Report from lead agency, June 2007). However, over time, staff have adopted practices that support interaction:

We have observed that the skilled interactions of the teacher and childcare staff with Mums and preschoolers contributes significantly to the success of this project. For example, the modelling in both literacy & developmental sessions occurs in ways that respects, affirms & values all participants. (Lead Agency report, December, 2007)

As a result, a range of outcomes in this area have been identified:

- Parents all know how to read and sing to their children and borrow library books from the library.
- They know how to cook and play with play dough.
- Parents have been contributing to lessons with encouragement to their children to participate and most of all enjoyed the experience.
- Parents are better informed about what play is and how children learn through play (Evaluation data, childcare facilitator journal).

Such outcomes were also confirmed in examples provided as part of the focus groups held with parents:

Parent A has increased the number of days she reads to her children she is now reading three/four times a week she reads for 15–20 minutes per night. (Focus group Dec 2007)

Children are interacting with each other and are developing appropriate skills

Childcare staff report through data collection and discussion developmental improvements in children:

- children have become familiar with the routines and are more settled on arrival and throughout the sessions;

- children are learning to be more co-operative with each other. They join in games and activities and are learning to take turns and share equipment;
- children are aware of the guidelines, boundaries and playing together activities which will help them progress into the school system; and
- children have settled well and are familiar with routines of eating and playing with equipment appropriately.

A model of quality childcare provision in community venue is being documented

The provider of the English classes is investigating replication of this model for use in its other delivery areas across Victoria.

Policy analysis	The Sunshine Learning Together project is a positive example of an integrated approach to family literacy, early childhood education and child care that is achieving outcomes for migrant families.
Evaluation	The Sunshine Learning Together project has been evaluated both internally and externally. At the time of printing the external evaluation report was not yet complete.
Project related publications	<i>Documenting the Sunshine Learning Together project</i> and the <i>Lessons Learnt</i> by Chris Black, Black Ink Writing and consulting.
References	<p>Centre for Child and Community Health. (2008, December). <i>Brimbank Communities for Children Interim Local Evaluation Report 2</i>. Melbourne: The Smith Family.</p> <p>Family Strengthening Policy Center. (2007). <i>Family literacy</i> (Policy Brief 19). Washington, DC: National Human Services Assembly.</p> <p>Free Kindergarten Association www.fka.com.au</p> <p>Harbin, G., & West, T. (1998). <i>Early intervention service delivery models and their impact on families</i>. Chapel Hill: Early Childhood Research Institute on Service Utilization, University of North Carolina.</p> <p>Keating, C. (1994). The child care needs of non-English speaking background women for education and training. Sydney: Association of Non-English Speaking Background Women of Australia.</p> <p>Konrad, E. (1996). A multidimensional framework for conceptualising human services integration initiatives. In J. Marquart & E. Konrad (Eds.), <i>Evaluating initiatives to integrate human services. New directions for evaluation</i>, 69, San Francisco Jossey Bass Publishers.</p> <p>National Center for Family Literacy. (no date). <i>What is family literacy</i>. Retrieved 11 March 2009, from http://www.familit.org/site/c.gtJWJdMQIsE/b.1423091/k.6B7E/What_Is_Family_Literacy.htm</p> <p>Rogers, R., & Moore, T. (2003). The Early Years Project: Refocusing community based services for young children and their families. A literature review. Melbourne: Centre for Community Child Health.</p> <p>Pannell, J. (2005). A good start for children: Integrated child and family services in Australia (Discussion Paper). Sydney: UnitingCare Burnside.</p> <p>Powell, D. (July, 1996). <i>Do early childhood programs make a lasting difference to children and families?</i> Paper presented at Child and Family Policy Conference, University of Otago, New Zealand.</p> <p>Rose, A., & Atkins, C. (2007). Family literacy in Europe: Separate agendas? <i>Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education</i>, 37(5), 601–615.</p>

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More information

More information on the Sunshine Learning Together and Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website.

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