Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness

Summary report

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Exploring the impact of Community Hubs on school readiness: Summary report
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Introduction
This report summarises findings from the Centre for Community Child Health’s investigation into the impact of community hubs on school readiness. It outlines what the evidence tells us about school readiness and why this is an important issue for migrant and refugee children and their families, services and schools. It provides key project insights and implications for practice, policy and research. Further information about the project’s methodology and findings, including a literature review and four case studies, is detailed in the project’s full report.

Context and methodology
The community hubs model is a place-based and citizen centric approach to supporting migrant and refugee families in their local communities (Wong, Press & Cumming, 2015). There are currently 39 hubs embedded in primary schools and community centres across Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland (Community Hubs, 2016). They act as a gateway to services, information and learning, and enable families to increase their connections with their local community.

Building on the findings of the 2015 community hubs evaluation (Wong et al., 2015), the Centre for Community Child Health at Murdoch Childrens Research Institute was engaged by Community Hubs Australia to explore the impact of community hubs on children’s school readiness. The project involved a rapid review of the school readiness research evidence, updating the Centre for Community Child Health’s Policy Brief on Rethinking School Readiness (2008), and a pragmatic search for quantitative data and peer-reviewed studies to contextualise school readiness issues for migrant, refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families in Australia. Four long-standing community hubs within Hume City Council, one of the most diverse municipalities in Victoria, were engaged in the qualitative case study inquiry. Hubs were selected based on their length of operation and co-location with primary schools. Five semi-structured group or individual interviews were held with a total of nine participants (four school principals, an assistant principal and four hub leaders). Interview questions were designed to uncover insights about changes in school readiness components, however the most significant change methodology (Davies & Dart, 2005) was not followed.

What the evidence tells us
School readiness
What is school readiness?
Traditionally, school readiness has been thought of as a simple outcome of maturation or chronological age and has focused on the skills and capacities needed by children to benefit from formal instruction and classroom experiences (eg. Bierman et al., 2017; Morrison & Hindman, 2012). Once these capacities were demonstrated (or achieved), the child was considered to be ready for school. The implication was that early childhood services and communities did not have any role to play in promoting school readiness, nor did schools have to do anything about getting ready to meet the child’s needs (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008).

This view of school readiness has been shown to be too limited. Readiness does not lie solely in the child, but reflects the environments in which children find themselves – their families, early childhood settings, schools, neighbourhoods, and communities (Kagan & Rigby, 2003). School readiness is now seen to have three interrelated components: children’s readiness for school, schools’ readiness for children, and the capacity of families and communities to provide the necessary opportunities, conditions and supports to optimise children’s development and learning (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Dockett et al., 2010: Emig et al., 2001; Sayers et al., 2012).
Why is it important?

School entry involves a key transition for all children and a time of potential challenge and stress for children and families (Hirst et al., 2011). This transition is not just to school, but from home, childcare, preschool and kindergarten. It is a transition not just from early care and learning environments, but often from small-scale to large-scale interactions, from highly personalised to less personalised relationships, and from environments with a limited range of ages to an institution with children of many ages. It is a transition to a different learning, education and care paradigm. How well children are prepared for this transition is important as it impacts on their long term outcomes (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Hirst, 2011; Sayers et al., 2012).

In Australia, children enter school with marked differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills needed for success in the school environment (Brinkman et al., 2012; Goldfeld & West, 2014). These initial differences are predictive of later academic and occupational success (Boethel, 2004; Cunha & Heckman, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2007; Le et al, 2006). This is partly because skills develop cumulatively, so that those acquired early form a sound basis for later skill development (Cunha et al, 2006). Schools struggle to overcome these initial differences in children (Cunha et al, 2006; Karoly et al, 2005). Schools therefore have a vested interest in ensuring that children arrive at school ready to continue learning. School ‘un-readiness’ is expensive (Bruner et al, 2005): later attempts to compensate for un-readiness are less effective and may be more expensive than providing the resources, programs and supports needed to ensure that children start school ready to continue learning (Cunha et al, 2006).

What does the research tell us?

Research suggests there are a number of factors that either facilitate or hinder school readiness; these can be at the level of the individual, the family, early childhood services, schools and the community. Evidence indicates the best approach to promoting children’s readiness is to concentrate on providing children with environments and experiences that maximise learning (Gopnik, 2016). Positive relationships with caregivers (Cozolino, 2012), nurturing home environments (Janus, 2011; Edwards et al., 2009) and participation in high quality early childhood education and care programs (Farrar et al, 2007; Fox & Geddes, 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2013) are key factors known to promote school readiness.

Research also tells us that effective transition programs and ‘ready schools’ promote smooth transitions from early years programs to schools and are particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Schulting et al, 2005). The key features of effective transition programs include relationships, parent and caregiver involvement, school involvement and collaboration between educators. Schools also need to be able to provide options that meet the diverse needs of the children they enrol and their families (Hirst et al., 2011; Petriwskyj, 2010; Pramling & Samuelsson, 2012). Creating welcoming and supportive environments tailored for the needs of each child is critical – as Peters (2010) observes, ‘almost any child is at risk of making a poor or less successful transition if their individual characteristics are incompatible with the features of the environment they encounter’.

Migrant and refugee children and families

Issues at school entry

There is a growing body of evidence which indicates children who begin school with limited proficiency in the language of instruction at school are more likely to experience poorer outcomes across a range of health and developmental domains that exceed language and academic challenges (Dawson & Williams, 2008; Dowdy, Dever, DiStefano & Chin 2011; Goldfeld, O’Connor, Mithen, Sayers, & Brinkman, 2014; Han, 2010). For example, a recent Australian study (Goldfeld et al., 2014) found that children who were not proficient in English when they began school were significantly more likely to be developmentally vulnerable across four Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, and language and cognitive development) at school entry. The unique vulnerabilities experienced by
CALD children were raised in the 2015 State of Victoria’s Children Report (Department of Education and Training, 2016) which reported that children from non-English speaking backgrounds demonstrated higher rates of antisocial behaviours, peer problems and emotional symptoms, than the general population upon school entry.

One of the most commonly cited factors that contributes to discrepancies in levels of early childhood vulnerability is poverty. Given evidence that shows CALD families face disproportionately high rates of unemployment and poverty (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Parliament of Australia, 2014) there are strong grounds for the assertion that CALD children are among those living in the most economically disadvantaged areas of Australia. Results from the 2015 AEDC national report show that children living in the most economically disadvantaged areas of Australia are more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those living in the least disadvantaged areas (four times as likely to be behind in language and cognitive skills) (Productivity Commission, 2016).

Engagement in early childhood services
Children from non-English speaking backgrounds are among those who are most likely to miss out on early childhood education experiences (Baxter & Hand, 2013). Data also indicates lower levels of participation by CALD children and their families in early childhood services, including preschool and maternal and child health (MCH), compared to the national average (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, 2009; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013; McDonald, Turner, & Gray, 2014; Productivity Commission, 2014). There are many potential reasons for this underutilisation of services including: negative perceptions of formal service institutions; language and cultural barriers; lack of awareness of available services; lack of awareness of the importance of early learning, development and the value of play-based activities; and competing priorities, i.e. newly arrived families living in low socioeconomic areas or in poverty often have other issues superseding early childhood development (Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth & Nelms, 2004; Rogers & Martin, 2004; KPMG, 2006; Department of Education and Training, 2016).

Such trends are echoed by state and community-based research which indicate lower early childhood education and care (ECEC) participation and engagement rates by CALD children (e.g. Rogers & Martin, 2004; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011; Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture, 2004).

Family awareness
There is evidence of low levels of awareness of ECEC and its importance by CALD Australian families, especially those relatively new to Australia and/or non-English speakers (Rogers & Martin, 2004) and families from a refugee background (Multicultural Development Association, 2012). Many parents also had little to no understanding of child development, and lacked the personal resources to meet their child’s developmental needs without assistance (Rogers & Martin, 2004). An Australian national survey of CALD parents with children birth to age eight also found that these parents were less likely than other parents to be aware of the importance of the early years, including engagement with ECEC services, and the value of home-based learning (Winter, 2010).

The effect of community hubs on school readiness
Principals and hub leaders were invited to share the most significant changes they had observed in school readiness by children, families, early childhood services and schools, and how these changes came about. Case studies showcasing the four selected hubs’ work to promote school readiness and the effects of this work are presented in the full report. Overall, hubs provided numerous examples of positive changes in children’s
readiness for school, schools’ readiness for children and in family conditions and environments that influence children’s learning.

**Children’s readiness for school**
Children’s smooth transition to school and their increased confidence and familiarity with hub and school environments was highlighted as a significant change created by hubs. Principals and hub leaders spoke of how early education experiences and hub transition efforts minimised children’s distress and promoted a sense of belonging and wellbeing when starting school.

> What I see [about children] is an ownership of the space, and the school already... this is their school... they’re really happy to be here, and to connect to teachers who they’re familiar with, who they’ve already had heaps of conversations with. (Acting principal)

All hubs reported general improvements in children’s skills and abilities upon school entry (since commencement of the hub model) and attributed this to their increased exposure to and participation in early learning programs and activities. Improvements included English language skills, including the capacity to follow instructions, early literacy and numeracy, and the ability to follow school routines.

**Schools’ readiness for children**
An early focus on transition has also resulted in teachers gaining a better understanding of children and families arriving at school. Teachers were reported to have greater awareness about the circumstances of migrant and refugee families and the degree of cultural and linguistic diversity in the local community.

> I think what it has done is raise the awareness of our teachers of how many different languages we have here... a little bit of understanding around what it might be like to not be able to participate in that as freely as you’d want. That cultural stuff about what’s polite to ask and not... We’re constantly building that understanding that when people don’t return notices or do exactly what it is that we ask when we send home a notice in English, that there’s some reasons why. (Hub leader)

This enhanced understanding of children and families’ needs at school commencement has accelerated the development of relevant learning programs and led to adaptations in practices such as parent and teacher interviews. Although few specific strategies or resources schools used to cater for the diverse needs of children once they started school were raised, broader strategies, such as the need for all staff to foster an inclusive and welcoming school environment, have been implemented.

**Family conditions, environments and supports for children’s learning**
Positive changes in families’ social and emotional environments were described in interviews, with increased parent confidence, a sense of belonging and wellbeing all recurrent themes across the hubs. Principals and hub leaders emphasised that family engagement with hub activities and community services had led to these changes in self-confidence and wellbeing. They considered this to be foundational to families’ abilities to function positively within the school community and, in turn, support an effective transition to school. Many stories of families engaging in adult education programs, such as English language and vocational training, enabled through increased self-confidence, were also shared.

> [Through] having more participation and being engaged in their children’s learning, it’s helped to build the confidence of families too. I know of a particular parent who bought her children here for kindergarten, would pass by the office and have her head down just so no one would say hello to her because she was really embarrassed to speak in English because she didn’t find
herself adequate enough. We worked with this mother for a long time, and just kept insisting on making her talk and speak in English...[now] she’s off doing courses here, there and everywhere. (Principal)

Stories of increased parent understanding of the expectations and practicalities of school, critical to supporting a smooth transition to school, as well as increased family involvement in school were raised.

For parents, it’s still part of their journey...understanding their role in their children’s learning, that they are their children’s first teachers. They continue to be the most significant teacher in their child’s life. They don’t just drop the children at the front door, push them in, but that learning continues...For some families, it’s been understanding schooling in Australia because it’s much different to what they have experienced. (Principal)

Several participants commented on effect of family involvement in the school in terms of the sense of pride children showed in their parents when leading a school activity: ‘they’re proud of it, they think it’s important’ (Hub leader).

Hubs also spoke of providing parents with developmentally appropriate activities to undertake at home with their children, however specific examples of changes in the home learning environment were not provided.

Common features of the hubs’ approach
Principals and hub leaders spoke of implementing responsive, relationship-based approaches, informed by the needs of their communities, to achieve these changes. Common features within hubs’ approaches were: relationship-building practices; family engagement; an early focus on transition; flexibility and adaptability; and coordination.

Investment in relationships

It is just about relationships really. Having good relationships with people, because if you do then it will make it a successful school place for the kids and the parents. (Hub leader)

Principals and hub leaders reflected that the hub model has facilitated the development of relationships between families, services and schools, which has had a powerful role in promoting family involvement in the hub and school. Authentic and responsive relationships with children by both hub and school staff has also been a central feature of hubs.

Family engagement

You’re often seeing parents enter the classroom more so than what we ever did in the past. (Hub leader)

A dedicated outward facing role and the development of warm, trusting relationships between families and hub workers has underpinned families’ participation at the hubs and, in turn, at school and more widely in the community. The benefits of family involvement and a school and family ‘alliance’ to promote children’s learning have been increasingly recognised through the work of hubs.

The establishment and ongoing promotion of a culture of inclusion at the hubs was also emphasised as critical, with principals and hub leaders noting that all staff from teachers to administrative staff must be on board with an inclusive and family-centred approach for it to be effective and break down barriers for families. This was noted to be particularly important for families with a refugee background, who could view the school as an institutional service and a ‘very scary place’.
Early focus on transition

*The more we can give them in the early years, the more successful they’ll be.* (Principal)

All hubs described the need for children and families to begin to prepare for the transition to school at a young age, not just in the year before school, and described facilitating this by developing families’ understanding of the importance of the early years and providing connections into early learning. Hubs offered children a range of early education experiences (e.g. playgroup, supported playgroup, kindergarten) and reported that the model had contributed to more CALD, migrant and refugee children participating in playgroups and kindergarten in their communities.

Flexibility and adaptability

*I think just an openness to being flexible and possibly needing to change the model to make it work.* (Hub leader)

Principals and hub leaders indicated that services and schools have increased recognition of the need to adjust and adapt practices to better support the diverse needs of children and families. At all hubs, participants reported kindergartens and schools working together to adapt school transition processes to improve the transition experience for children and families. For example, changes to the timing, length, frequency, resources and range of activities in transition programs were made at various hubs.

Coordination

*We talk closely with them [educators], that’s the main thing.* (Hub leader)

Hubs spoke of improved coordination between services and schools to achieve the common goal of improved children’s learning. This incorporated information sharing, network meetings, joint activities and programs, and different professionals working together to facilitate holistic support for families and their children. Some hubs noted coordination with secondary services, such as speech pathology and nutrition, had also developed since the hub’s inception. However, hubs were not immune from common coordination challenges, particularly when there was a high turnover of staff.

Lessons and improvements

Principals and hub leaders reflected on the journey of their hub and the lessons learned. They emphasised the importance of effective and early engagement of families and the time it takes to build an inclusive culture across the entire school and community. Participants also learnt about the benefits of taking an integrated approach to promoting school readiness and children’s learning by working closely with schools, services and the community and the importance of clear transition pathways from playgroup to kindergarten and on to school.

Improvements hubs considered might assist their work to promote school readiness included continuing to be flexible and adapt to changing community needs; the need for outreach to reach and engage additional families; investing more resources into early learning (i.e. playgroups and three year old kindergarten); providing childcare for families attending adult-focused hub activities; improving community facilities; and better measuring success to maintain sufficient funding and resourcing for ongoing activity.

Alignment of community hubs to the evidence

There is sufficient evidence from various demonstration projects, such as the Toronto First Duty Project (Arimura et al., 2011), that community hubs can be an effective way of promoting healthy child development.
and learning, seamless transitions to school, and parental engagement with the education system. The findings from the present study support this general conclusion.

Key observations concerning the alignment between the case study findings and the literature concerning the factors that promote school readiness are as follows:

- School community hubs increase the likelihood of smooth transitions by providing facilitated playgroups and kindergarten programs on school sites. Although co-location of services is not a guarantee of collaboration, the findings indicate that school and kindergarten staff did, in fact, work together in adapting and improving the transition experience for children and families. Other features of effective transition programs, such as relationship-building practices and an extended transition period (well beyond the year before school), were consistently reported by hubs.

- Hubs reported that more CALD, migrant and refugee children were now participating in playgroups and kindergarten in their communities. However, it is unclear whether these programs were of the kind identified in the literature as best practice. There is nothing to suggest otherwise – this study simply did not explore this aspect in any detail.

- Models of school readiness clearly identify ‘ready schools’ as a key component in supporting smooth transitions to school. There is little in the findings of this study to indicate what specific strategies or resources schools used to cater for the diverse needs of new students once they had started school. This does not mean that schools did not use such strategies, or do a good job of catering for individual differences.

- Hubs have provided families with examples of how they might implement developmentally appropriate activities at home, although there was no direct evidence of the extent to which this was effective in changing children’s home learning environments. While the hubs described facilitating school transition by providing more practical connections into early learning and promoting the importance of the early years, it is not clear what proactive strategies are being employed to share this knowledge around the importance of the early years with families.

Key observations concerning the alignment between the case study findings and the literature concerning processes for ensuring successful provision of school readiness support are as follows:

- The hub model helped greatly in building positive relationships between staff (both early childhood and school staff) and parents. Inevitably, this took time to achieve, but the positive and trusting relationships that resulted helped ensure greater parental involvement in the early childhood and school programs, and greater capacity to support their children’s learning. However, it is not clear whether this was universal result or whether there were some families with whom staff were unable to build strong relationships and who therefore failed to attend regularly or at all.

- Hubs succeeded in promoting positive collaborative relationships between school and early childhood staff, with many positive benefits for the children’s transition to school.

- The hub model also appears to have contributed to a better integrated support system for families although the nature and extent of these connections were not explored in any detail.

Taken together, the case study findings suggest that the community hubs are largely succeeding in their central task – of ensuring that children arrive at school ready and able to take advantage of the learning and social opportunities that schools provide. The findings also show that the community hubs have had wider benefits for families – most notably building the confidence of parents to be involved in education, including building
their own vocational skills. This is in keeping with reviews that suggest that school community hubs have the capacity to achieve a range of positive outcomes beyond the immediate school readiness agenda (Arimura et al., 2011; Horn et al., 2015; McShane et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2015).

Implications

The evidence stresses the importance of school readiness and the subsequent benefits of children arriving at school ready to make the most of the rich learning opportunities available. Data suggests that CALD children are among the most developmentally vulnerable in the Australian community and that it is important to intervene early before differences in ability gaps become fixed and difficult to close. Such interventions should focus on all three components of school readiness simultaneously: children’s readiness for school, schools’ readiness for children, and the capacity of families and communities to provide the necessary opportunities, conditions and supports to optimise children’s development and learning.

The community hubs model is a promising approach to enhancing migrant and refugee children’s school readiness that addresses these three components. The case studies provide insights about the strengths of the model, including relationship-building practices, family engagement, an early start to transition, coordination and the adaptation of services to better meet the needs of children and families.

The case study hubs provided evidence of:

- Facilitating practical connections into early learning, which appeared to result in the increased participation of CALD, migrant and refugee children in playgroups and kindergarten in their communities
- A smooth transition for children and families, enhanced by the co-location of hubs and schools
- Positive relationships between staff (both early childhood and school staff), parents and children
- Collaborative relationships between school and early childhood staff, with many positive benefits for the children’s transition to school
- Action to build family capacity and the quality of the home learning environment
- Building a more integrated support system for children and families in local communities

Project findings about the hubs promoting children’s early education experiences, a smooth transition to school, positive relationships between hubs and families and collaboration between schools and services align with 2015 evaluation results (Wong et al., 2015).

The project findings also provide insights about areas for possible hub focus, investigation and/or improvement. These include:

- Ensuring the most vulnerable families are reached and engaged by community hubs
- Investigating and monitoring the quality of playgroup programs and practices, as well as other strategies designed to build family capacity and improve the home learning environment, to ensure they align with best practice
- Investment in strategies that proactively share the importance of the early years with families
- Exploring and/or developing further specific ‘ready school’ strategies to cater for the diverse needs of children once they start school

Creating evidence-informed resources to support practice monitoring and evaluation, targeting the above areas of focus, and capturing and sharing exemplars across community hubs could provide two main benefits. First, important evidence on the program’s implementation and outcomes will be collected and documented. Second, this information could be used to inform local community hub planning and improvements so as to amplify the positive impact of hubs on children, families, communities and schools.
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