Gowrie
South Australia

Gowrie SA Report on the

Strengthening Universal Access Preschool

Programs Project – Synopsis

May, 2015

Executive Summary

The Strengthening Universal Access Preschool Programs project was developed to support long day care services implement and strengthen teaching practices within the Universal Access to preschool in their services. It was a twelve month partnership between DECD, Gowrie SA and the University of South Australia.

This unique project reconceptualised professional learning and support into a wrap around model where sites could choose the level of engagement for their team. Of the one hundred and sixty four providers of Universal Access programs thirty eight sites volunteered to participate in a range of opportunities including lectures, leadership modules, hub groups, mentoring, phone support, social media and site projects. The project culminated in a presentation of site projects on May 15th where twenty five sites presented their learning and challenges.

Evaluation was conducted by University of South Australia with both qualitative and quantitative data including; parents pre and post surveys, site needs analysis, ECT/educator surveys, Director and mentor interviews, hub group minutes, project presentations and lecture evaluations. Data and evidence were collected showing the complexities of sites, the strengths of this project model, as well as pre and post perceptions.

Of particular note are the following improvements as a result of this project:

- ECT professional knowledge, confidence, identity and efficacy.
- ECT and Director critical reflection practices and integration into programs.
- Understanding of Universal Access by all stakeholders as a high quality model.
- ECT and whole team motivation and understanding of their program, pedagogy and practices.
- Visibility of learning and teaching through documentation.
- Quality of teaching practices.

- Leadership skills, knowledge, understanding.

- Understanding about the roles of Director, ECT and educators.

- Collaboration and respect within teams.

- Perceptions of Universal Access Preschool (an example of this improvement has been that in two cases families have returned to the UA preschool from a stand-alone model citing the quality of the program).

The ECTs and Directors who participated were at various points along a continuum of understanding of Universal Access, pedagogy and the role of the ECT. Program quality varied from site to site. Currently 23% of the possible Universal Access sites have been involved in this 2014/15 project. Of the participating sites, the majority showed significant improvements in teaching practice and pedagogical and leadership understandings.

Key recommendations include further funding for the purpose of:

- Supporting continuous improvements in practice and enhanced outcomes for children and families accessing Universal Access in long day care.

- Continued mentoring and support for a cohort of 2014/15 participating sites to embed changes into practice.

- A further project to support sites who have not accessed the 2014/15 project. Given the positive results from this project, it is anticipated that more sites will be interested in participating.

Background to the Project

The Universal Access pre-school program was implemented to improve access to preschool for children in their year prior to school entry for 15 hours per week, for 40 weeks of the year. Each Universal Access preschool program is delivered by an Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) with four years of university training.

Specifically the project aimed to:

- enhance the quality of Universal Access preschool programs

- develop collaborative teams and a community of practice

- engage sites in critical reflection through an action research model

- develop leadership capacity within sites

- develop professional networks across services.

The role of an ECT in ECEC services is to lead the team in curriculum and pedagogy to ensure that all four year olds receive an equivalent quality preschool education regardless of whether they are accessing long day care or preschool. For this to occur, it is important that educators in the program work collaboratively with the ECT. Likewise, ECTs need to understand how to work with other educators in a collaborative way. With the ECTs employed in these sites often having limited experience, the involvement of the Director is also crucial in supporting the ECT and team in the delivery of a high quality program.

The process of designing a quality preschool educational program and ensuring that implementation is embedded as part of everyday practice suggested the requirement for an overall change strategy, involving the service Director in leading a change process. To achieve lasting cultural change and to effectively engage ECT and educators, Directors were supported to develop research projects with their preschool team, embedding a specific focus on the development of the educational program.

Our Process

What are the key components of the project?

The project strategy included 7 key professional learning components designed to engage staff and sites at different levels. These are described in more detail below.
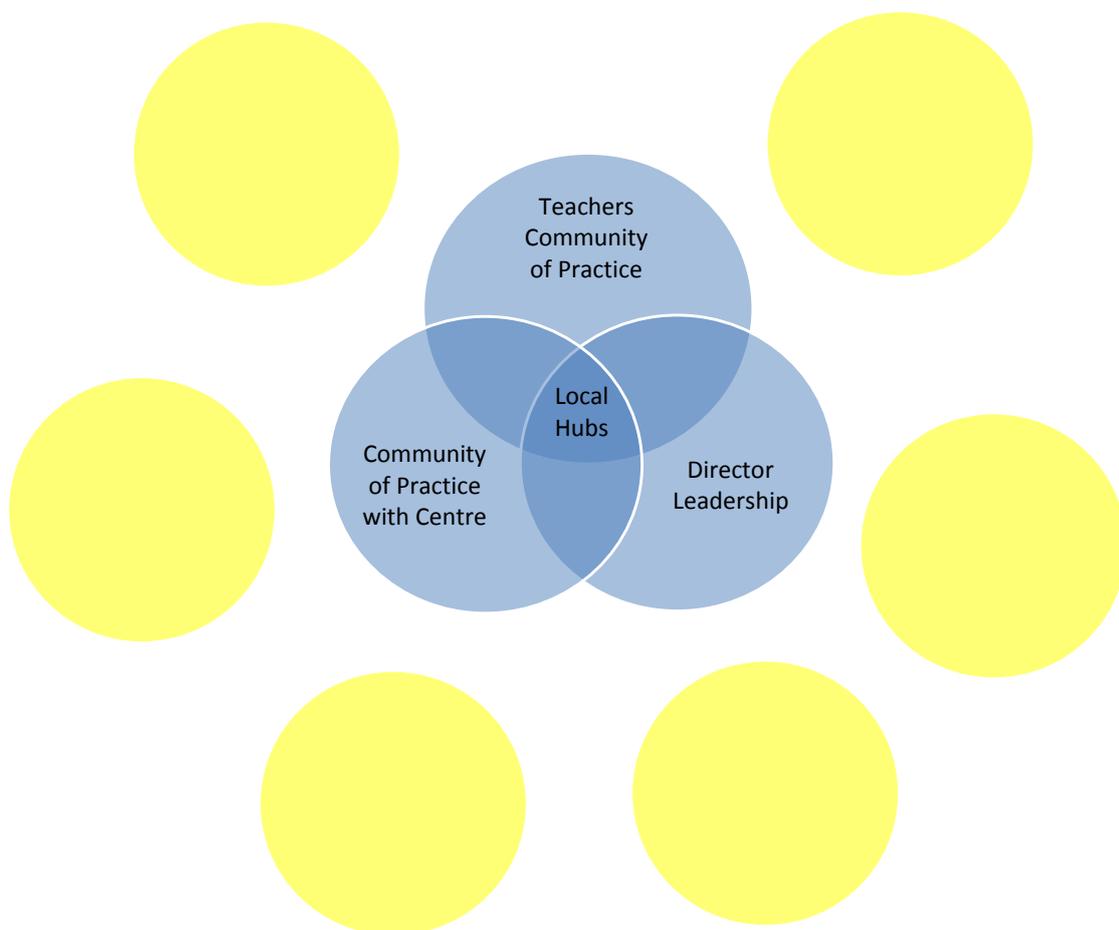
The delivery of the Strengthening Universal Access project involved staff from Gowrie SA, the School of Education of University of South Australia and the Stakeholder Advisory Group comprised of project staff plus service provider representatives, DECD staff, Independent Schools Association and the Catholic Education office.

Evaluation

A comprehensive formative and summative evaluation was carried out by Gowrie SA and the University of South Australia including:

- Directors needs analysis with site context & information
- Parent surveys pre and post on Survey Monkey (hard copies were provided where this was a site preference)
- Educator feedback collected by Survey Monkey at the end of the project
- Phone interviews with up to thirty Directors were undertaken to assess the impact of the professional learning, support and improvements in curriculum, pedagogy and parent perceptions
- Project presentations and guides
- Mentor interviews
- Minutes from hub groups and debrief meetings.

Collection of data from the above assessed the impact of the progress and work undertaken at each site, mentoring and phone support, and the impact of the program overall.

Our learning from the project

The following are some of the challenges experienced in this project.

Teacher Isolation

In all hub groups, isolation was evident, particularly for the ECTs. The reduction in isolation was identified as a key priority in the first ECT hub group meetings. The ECTs are often also asked to be the 'educational leader' within sites, yet the site needs analysis identified that these ECTs were likely to be relatively inexperienced. One third of the ECTs were in their first year of formal preschool teaching, and 70% had less than one year of formal teaching experience at other sites.

Promotion/Understanding of UA

Much of our initial work was to develop understanding of the terminology and the context of UA as part of the National Reform Agenda. Each site interpreted UA differently with some sites converting a room to offer a separate preschool program and one site withdrawing children for their 'preschool time'.

Access to information

Sites in the project were at different stages of implementing Universal Access. Some had been involved since 2011 and others had recently signed an Agreement to begin offering sessions in 2015. All sites were seeking more information about Universal Access. Information gaps were focussed on the following main themes:

- o   The structural aspects of a Universal Access program – e.g. times/days/locations.
- o   The financial aspects - including claiming, processes, timing of payments.

o Human resources aspect - Conditions for the ECT – hours, non contact time, responsibilities when ECT is on site, process if ECT is unwell/absent, on leave or ECT position is unfilled.

Leadership is crucial

"Effective teamwork grows out of work groups that are transformed into teams by appropriate leadership" (Rodd, 2013).

One of the key determinants of success in the engagement of this project has been the leadership skills and knowledge of the Director and the ability to engage in the project with the team. The team dynamic has a dramatic impact on the quality of the program. In the sites where the most progress was made the Director and ECT saw themselves as learners, and were able to be reflective.

The concept of distributed leadership was introduced through the Uni SA lectures and was further explored in a lecture meeting.

We also advocated that the leader has a crucial role in providing the structures and processes to support a distributed leadership model which in turn supports change and reflection.

Relationships and Trust

Given the site complexities we needed to develop trusting relationships with site staff in order to be able to mentor, challenge and work with them in this project. As mentors we began by looking at the culture in each site. We introduced concepts such as emotional intelligence, leadership styles and distributed leadership while also introducing strategies such as dilemma stories, professional conversations and unpacking discussion, dialogue and debate.

Role of the ECT

Often the ECT also had the role as Educational leader in the site. There was a wide variation in the availability of non-contact time both for planning and for fulfilling the role as Educational leader. The amount of time ranged between two hours per week and a full day per week. Complexities experienced in the non-contact time included:

*"…degree-qualified Teachers in Victorian childcare centres feel able to introduce change into their own programs, but face constraints in initiating change across their centres. Reported barriers included lack of time, a lack of authority attached to their qualification, and the lack of a formal role or title" (*Grarock & Morrissey*, 2013).*

There was strong evidence through the Director interview that this project had significantly contributed to a sense of team and to working in a collaborative way.

Reconceptualising professional learning

The design of this project has been crucial to its success. The professional learning opportunities have been varied with different types of delivery and support. We have focussed on broadening the concept of professional learning beyond the traditional view of professional development, which often are once off events, and offer a transmissive mode of learning.

"Professional development continues to be narrowly interpreted as transmission of knowledge or development of skills to enhance proficiency" (Productivity Commission, 2011).

As mentors we experienced this with some Directors asking us to 'Tell us what to do and we will do it" or 'We need to train our staff so they know" and many asking "Are we doing this right?" These comments reflect a lack of understanding of the way knowledge is developed. There is also a sense of some Directors being overwhelmed in the 'day to day' operation of their sites which leaves little space for being visionary.

The design of the tailored support has been pivotal. We have been able to assess at a site level the complexities and strengths that exist and work together to tailor the support most relevant.

"*Professional learning is supported where groups of educators with varying qualifications work collaboratively in documentation of practice and co-construction of pedagogy*" (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari and van Laere, 2011).

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice were fostered within sites and across sites through hub groups and mentoring. This way of working engaged as many people within sites as possible and also promoted the networking of educators across sites. There were both commonalities in the struggles and strengths noticed which normalised the necessity of change and improvement. One site noted the importance of working alongside others and what this added to their journey.

Hub groups were highly valued by the facilitators as a way to:

- Develop relationships with and between ECTs, Directors and educators
- Share and challenge pedagogy and practices
- Reinforce the learning from the lecture meetings/mentoring
- Support sites with their projects and allow time for teams to discuss their plans, challenges and progress
- Demonstrate resources such as the PSCA online library, project Moodle and Facebook sites and promote other learning opportunities.

Reflective capacity

In the site needs analysis Directors were asked about the frequency of reflective practice and dialogue within their site. The results indicated that 40.6% did a great deal, 25% said

they did a fair bit, 21.88% said they did somewhat, 12.5% said they did a little. In the post project Director interview 78% of Directors felt that critical reflection had increased in their site.

Team dynamics

The complexities of working within a different team structure were highly evident and particularly obstructive in some sites. In these sites the dynamics impacted on team cohesion, respect, professionalism and ultimately on the programs provided. In these instances the Directors appeared to know there was difficulty but did not have the skills or the strategies in place to address the difficulties, or were contributing to them.

Professionalism

One of the major impacts of this project has been on the professionalism of staff. ECTs, Directors and educators highlighted this as a key change in their sites. There was a shift in the language used, the participation in reflective conversations and also in the professional identity of educators. The approach using a wrap around of services for the whole team engaged them far more than one-off professional learning opportunities that they had previously engaged with in the past.

Director qualifications

Director support and information sharing with the ECT varied greatly amongst sites. The site needs analysis indicates the majority of Directors are Diploma qualified. This poses difficulty for ECTs transitioning from provisional to full registration. To fulfill this requirement they need to address the professional standards and be signed off by a Registered Teacher. In our work with Directors there were many who did not know about this process.

Highest relevant qualification of Directors interviewed:

Diploma Childrens services, Dip. CC, Dip Teach EC	Advanced Diploma in CC or Community Sector Management	Dip Community services management, leadership management, business management	Bachelor Degree in Early Childhood Education	Bachelor Degree in Junior Primary	Masters degree
17	7	7	5	1	2

Staffing changes

During the twelve months of this project staff retention and stability has been a major challenge, influence and factor in site progress. Of the 38 sites there have been 11 changes in ECT and 5 changes in leadership, with some sites experiencing both changes, meaning 42% of sites were impacted by staffing changes.

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Achievements of this project

a) Significantly increased critical reflection in sites. This has included documented evaluation, professional conversations, challenging of assumed practices.

b) Strengthening of knowledge and pedagogy, including in emergent curriculum, cycle of planning and documentation of children's learning. An increased number of whole teams being involved in program planning, documentation practices and evaluative processes.

c) Increase in the involvement of children and family in curriculum. Consultation and collaboration with both children and families.

d) Increase in the professional identity of educators. This includes professionalism, the use of professional language, validation of ECT and their role in the program.

e) Engagement of UA teams or in some cases whole teams in learning. We have seen both teams and individuals move from compliance and seeing the barriers to being excited and motivated in their roles.

f) Increased awareness of Universal Access Preschool for all stakeholders.

g) Increased clarity on the purpose and processes for operating a Universal Access Preschool.

h) Connection to DECD and Teachers Registration Board tools and initiatives (e.g. Professional Standards for Teachers and Leaders, Teacher registration processes, transition policies and Statements of Learning).

i) Developing understanding of the role and importance of distributed leadership.

j) Increased networks using a community of practice model which has seen a reduction in the feelings of isolation experienced by ECTs.

k) Increase in commitment to their own learning and the importance of continuous improvement and engagement with current research and thinking by ECTs and educators. Excitement, passion and pride have been evident in those that have participated.

l) Increased understanding of inquiry processes and benefits.

m) Twenty five team presentations (some were unable to participate due to other commitments).

n) Developed an understanding of what contributes to a high quality program and the strengths and advantages of this model.

o) Highlighting the importance of time together as a team and the benefits of critical reflection in refining and improving practice.

p) Mentoring was highly successful in supporting teams in their individual sites and was tailored to the support required in a responsive way.

q) The collaboration with the University in developing professional learning through the lecture series which offered new expertise and perspectives for project participants.

References

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