

Case Studies of Parent Partnerships in a New Service Landscape

Dr Elspeth McInnes AM & Dr Sue Nichols, School of Education
University of SA

About the Research

- This paper reports on part of a three-phase exploratory study into the ways partnerships are enacted in early childhood and family services in South Australia.
- The research took place in 2006-7 in the first 12 months following the state government's announcement of plans for Children's Centres, bringing together children's services, schools, health and family services and community programs.
- The research process involved a policy analysis, professional development workshops and case studies.
- This paper focuses on the two site case studies examining the ways in which various service providers engaged with families and each other.

Case Study Sites

- The pilot study was supported by an Advisory Group with representation from the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), the Department of Health (DoH) and the Child Youth and Women's Health Service. Two sites were selected in consultation with the Advisory Committee:
- **Site 1** is in a suburban area featuring cultural diversity and high rates of economic disadvantage, an Indigenous presence and a recent influx of new middle-class residents. The site has a history of community engagement featuring an active client advisory group.
- **Site 2** is in an outer suburban area also with high rates of economic disadvantage, a high percentage of young and single parents, a predominantly Anglo ethnicity with some Indigenous presence. It offers a range of programs aimed at supporting local families and children.

Services	Site 1	Site 2
Childcare	yes	new development
Kindergarten	yes	yes
Health services	yes	yes
Adult education	Yes – both formal & informal	Informal only
Early learning program	yes	yes
Co-located school	yes	yes

Case Study Data

Researchers took an ethnographic approach involving

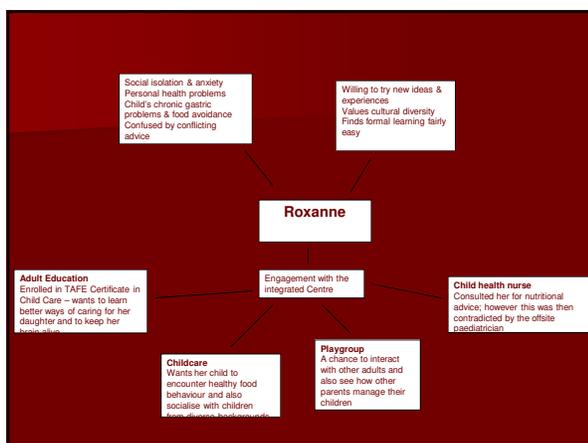
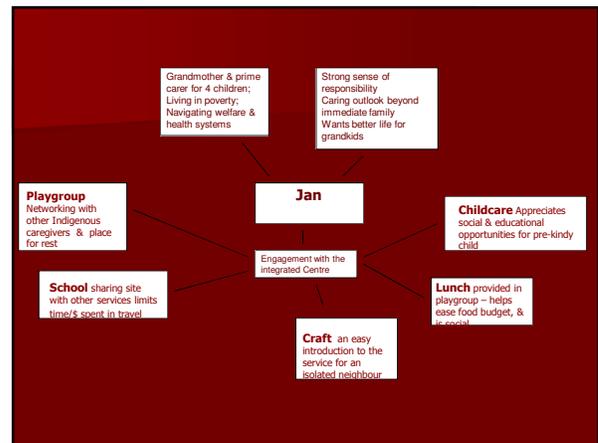
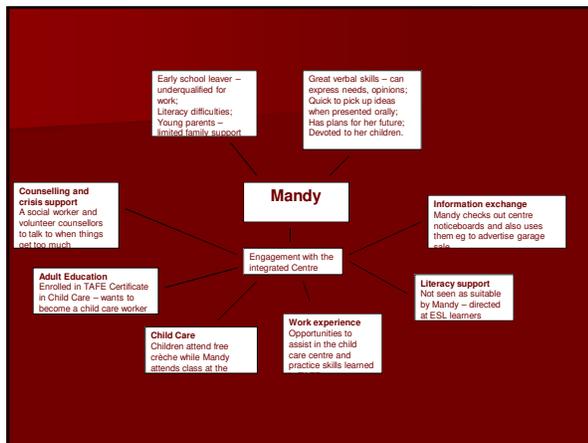
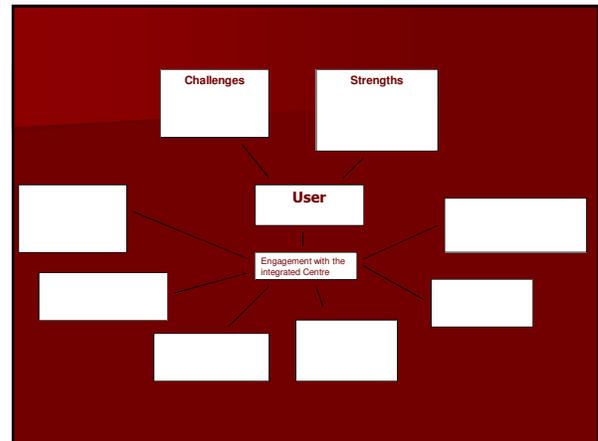
- attending routine events and activities focused on parent partnership and participation
- semi-structured interviews with staff and parents
- collection of documentation
- recording of visual data such as photographs of noticeboards and wall posters

Data Sources

- At Site 1, owing to greater access to activities, the researcher was able to develop profiles of some representative users and their pathways.
- At Site 2, direct access to parent activities was not available and information came from interviews with staff and managers. Site 2 data presented here focuses on staff views of relationships with parents.

Emergent Themes from Case Study Data

- The history of site and service development influences and shapes the relationships between services;
- Funding structures shape what services with different funding sources can do together;
- Changes in government rules, as well as in program definition and objectives, impact on the types of activities which can be provided;
- Intake and referral pathways assist services and parents to identify family needs and available supports and resources;
- Integrated sites cater for a diversity of needs and aspirations and ideally recognise a diversity of resources that parents bring.



Site 2: Service Co-Location and Parent Use

Site Two Children's Centre Staff member

- *When the kindy was not on campus, I guess it was a little bit more difficult for parents to access groups at the school, so some of those families have really just come across from that old site, and so we're still not getting that involvement as much*
- *I think it is more school families that are involved in the groups, but I think that's starting to change...with the Incredible Years programs starting up .. we've got three families who will be involved in that.*
- *We have a really good rapport with the school, obviously, because they're on campus, and I guess they're much more willing... we have a better rapport with the teachers here (than at other local schools) because we see them in the school.*

Site Two: Staff- Parent Relationships

One Children's Centre staff member expressed empathy with parents' literacy problems:

I just know how difficult it was for me, ...say reading a newsletter... for some parents, they don't know where to get the info... and they, I've learnt to mask very well, so if I've learnt to do it, I know that other people have learnt to do it.

Another Children's Centre staff member expressed 'ownership' of families at the service

- *Our families all get the campus timetable on enrolment, and every term when it gets updated.*

Children's Centre staff valued rapport with parents and other carers.

- *We get all sorts, don't we? We've got a fairly good rapport with the family day care workers as well. They set up play dates for child care.*

Talking with Parents about their Pre-school Children

Site Two: Children's Centre staff members relied on a view that parents' desire for the best for their children

we do try and use a gently-gently approach and say "Look we have this concern. It would be great if we can have some permission to just get someone to just have a check". Often you'll find that they'll say, they actually have an issue too and it's all .. "Hooray, someone else thinks that something is going to be done for my child", and I think on the whole, I mean everybody wants the best for their children.

System Constraints on access to help for pre-school Children

- Site two Children's Centre staff member

'we say to families with children under-4, ...what we've noticed, you know, it might be worth checking out with Child & Youth Health Service because at the moment we don't have a health worker...

but the plan is that ..there will be some funding made available by the department, so that we can employ a speech pathologist or an occupational therapist, or whatever we decide as a campus group,

and that person will be able to see those children that are under 4, as well as those that are over 4 that are currently in the DECS system, so once they're over 4 we can actually make a referral and have a DECS speech pathologist or other therapist come out and see them, observe them, so at the moment we're, yeah, at the moment we're really operating within the confines of what DECS can offer.

Site 2: Recruiting Peer Support to reach out to families

Peer Support Worker for Pre-school Parent-Child Health Service

- *I supply transport to clients. I give them an information sheet ... and ...they might say "Well how did you come to this service?" and I say "Well my son had, and I had, trust issues. We were isolated. I had terrible separation anxiety. I had an anger problem. People wouldn't believe that I'm the same person that I was, like even workers are proud of the achievements I've done ...like working on myself.*
- *with this job it's been really excellent, and my contract has been extended three times this term - I don't think another job would have let me have one day off and then two weeks later have two days off, and then a week later I had the Friday off after a public holiday, the Tuesday and Wednesday, so think how many jobs would let you have so many days off.*

Changing Families: Changing Services

Site 2 Peer Support Worker

- *Through this service, I was sort of reconnected with my mum after 13 years. She found out about my son ... she had a grandchild, when he was three... a year and a half later she came here to meet him for the first time when he was five, and my brother too, my half-brother.*
- *I came to Child and Youth Health Service when my son had his immunizations and I said "I need a place where my son can play with kids his own age, and somewhere where I can feel safe".*
- *When we integrated with the Family Reach-out program we became a whole-family service, where originally it was a women's safe space and a child's safe space... and it felt that was a good stepping stone for me, and then we had to all sort of get together and mix together, which was interesting, and then we went from another location to here, and then we couldn't have groups and all that kind of stuff because we didn't have the space because they were building this end. We were squeezed right down the bottom end.... We had, where the pre-school is now, we had a little bit of office space and a front desk, and we didn't have any group rooms or anything.*

Site 2: Campus Committee model

- **Trust and Professional Accountability** were key concepts for service leaders' style of working together, rather than through a hierarchy.
- *We trust what each service does when your accountability is different... to what the schools and that do, so...we figured at a meeting, why change what's working well... they were trying to legislate us into some sort of framework.... and that's not going to work because if you have to work within a legislation you never get the stuff happening.*
- *I trust that you're doing what you're doing, and I don't have to know because we work together to get the services going, but I don't have to know all the nuts and bolts. I haven't got time.*

Concluding Comments on Sites

- Multiple entry points and needs-defined pathways for parents and children are important to success.
- Integrated Children's Services staff trust relationships with families and children are integral to successful partnerships.
- Co-location assists parents to gain access to a wider range of services and to find the pathways that meet their family's needs.
- Drawing on parent strengths and acknowledging and valuing the contributions of community members is significant to building trust.
- Recruiting parents to volunteer and paid positions in governance, program definition and delivery sends a powerful message of respect to the community, which in turn encourages greater parent involvement.
- Integrated services value the capacity to be responsive to the population they serve and to make local decisions about responding to the needs that present in their community.