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Caroline Barratt-Pugh
Edith Cowan University, c.barratt_pugh@ecu.edu.au

Carmel Maloney
Edith Cowan University, cemaloney1@gmail.com

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Growing Better Beginnings: An evaluation of a family literacy program for pre-schoolers

Caroline Barratt-Pugh and Carmel Maloney

Edith Cowan University, Australia

This paper investigates the implementation and outcomes of *Growing Better Beginnings*: a family literacy program for four and five year olds. The program builds on *Better Beginnings: Birth to Three* launched in 2005. Parents, teachers and librarians were surveyed and interviewed to ascertain their perceptions of the program. An analysis of the factors which facilitate the implementation and outcomes of *Growing Better Beginnings* and issues associated with the effectiveness of the implementation process is discussed. Findings indicate that perceptions of the program, central coordination, relationships and resources were viewed as facilitating implementation, whilst communication, impact on work, training and use and sustainability were seen as issues impacting on the effectiveness of the implementation process.

Introduction

The *Growing Better Beginnings* family literacy program is an extension of the *Better Beginnings* program launched in 2005 for families of children 0-3 years. The pilot program was evaluated in 2005 (Barratt-Pugh, Rohl, Oakley & Elderfield, 2005) and extended across Western Australia and continues to be delivered to parents with a new baby. The 0-3 years program has been extensively evaluated over a six year period, from 2007-2012 (Barratt-Pugh, Kilgallon & Statkus, 2009; Barratt-Pugh, Maloney & McLean, 2012; Barratt-Pugh, Statkus & Kilgallon, 2010; Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2011; Barratt-Pugh, Rohl & Statkus, 2011). The initial evaluation led to the development of a *Better Beginnings* web site (<http://www.better-beginnings.com.au>). The web site contains a section that is dedicated to the research reports, as a means of promoting the program and disseminating findings to a wide audience, including stakeholders, librarians, early childhood professionals and parents (<http://www.better-beginnings.com.au/research/research-about-better-beginnings/better-beginnings-making-difference>). In addition, the results are also documented in research journals to increase dissemination to the professionals involved in the program, particularly in relation to librarians and child health nurses (Barratt-Pugh & Allen, 2011; Barratt-Pugh & Anderson, 2013; Barratt-Pugh, Anderson & North, 2013; Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2015).

A significant outcome of this initial family literacy program was the positive impact on mothers' confidence in sharing books with their child, the increased interaction and communication with their child, and the recognition of the importance of sharing books and its impact on their child's early literacy development. More importantly, strong feedback which emanated from this program's evaluation was the articulation of parents' need for continued support of their children's reading and literacy development when they commenced formal schooling. Consequently, *Growing Better Beginnings*, a program targeted at four and five year olds was developed and implemented.

The State Library of Western Australia was committed to the development of *Growing Better Beginnings* as a family literacy program that continued to provide support for families with children aged four and five years when they begin kindergarten and/or pre-primary, and to reinforce the role of parents as their child's first teacher. The program is aimed at strengthening early literacy learning, supporting home literacy practices and encouraging families to have greater access to their local library. A key aspect of the program is its strong partnerships between public libraries, local governments, health professionals and schools to build community awareness of the value of reading and sharing stories, and to encourage and support parents in fostering language and literacy development with their young children. In addition, through *Better Beginnings*, the State Library is committed to promoting the vital role of public libraries as community hubs intent on supporting parents and caregivers in building early literacy skills and giving their children a love of books and reading.

Literature review

There is a wealth of evidence that highlights the significant influence of early experiences on brain development and the effect these experiences have on the development of language and literacy (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). These experiences are mediated through the social, cultural and linguistic context in which they occur (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Thus children begin kindergarten and pre-school with a range of different literacy skills, knowledge and practices (Jones Diaz, 2007; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Research suggests that where there is congruence between home literacy and school literacy, children are more likely to succeed in literacy in their early years at school (Comber & Reid, 2007; Thomson, 2000). In addition, research has established a link between children who are disadvantaged and/or developmentally vulnerable, or at risk in their language and cognitive skills and the development of emergent literacy skills, and later success in reading (Snow & Powell, 2004; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010; Lonigan, Allan & Lerner, 2011).

Thus during the last two decades a range of family literacy programs have been developed and implemented worldwide in an attempt to help bridge the gap between home and school, particularly in relation to early literacy learning (Shoghi, Willersdorf, Braganza & McDonald, 2013). Many programs are based on research which indicates that sharing books, songs and nursery rhymes from birth enhances early literacy learning, as well as having additional positive outcomes (Moore & Wade, 2003). These include social and emotional outcomes as well as increased parent/carer confidence and efficacy (Barratt-Pugh & Allen, 2015; Evans, Shaw & Bell, 2000). Providing book-sharing strategies, ongoing support and access to resources have been identified as key features of effective family literacy programs, mediated through long-term partnerships between early childhood agencies (*Bookstart*, *Let's Read*, and *Better Beginnings*). Several studies have also found that successful collaboration supports sustainability, expansion and transferability of programs to other communities (Barratt-Pugh & Anderson, 2013; Bekman & Koçak, 2010). In fact *Bookstart* identified partnerships as a prerequisite for program success. Interestingly, many programs have partnerships with government departments, non government organisations and the private sector, but few have on-going partnerships with

schools (Moore & Wade, 2003). It has been suggested that some school systems do not see the potential of family literacy programs, or want to engage with such programs as part of their literacy strategies, claiming family literacy is not part of their responsibility (Carpentieri, Fairfax-Cholmeley, Litster & Vorhaus, 2011).

Yet, in relation to both enhancing early literacy and easing the transition to school, developing partnerships with parents/carers through family literacy programs would appear to have great potential. In their comprehensive literature review of family literacy in programs in Europe, Carpentieri et al. (2011) made the following recommendation 'As part of all child literacy strategies, schools should be encouraged to utilise family literacy initiatives as a complement to in-class literacy programs' (p.232). Blok, Fukkink, Gebhardt and Leseman (2005) found that combined early childhood centre-based and home-based parental support programs had a greater impact than those that just targeted families at home. Combined and/or complementary programs enable early childhood professionals to share their knowledge and expertise, promoting a move away from disjointed approaches to early literary learning (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). In addition, linking family literacy programs with school literacy has the potential to support parental engagement with school, increasing confidence, knowledge and strategies for engaging their child in reading as they mature (Brooks, 2002). Thus, complementary programs provide a mechanism for increasing parental involvement, interest and support for literacy development. The success of the *Reading Friends* program in Norway (developed as a complementary literacy program for schools), has been linked to its promotion of home language and culture of migrant families and its connection to the school curriculum (Carpentieri et al., 2011).

Furthermore, in a number of European countries there is an attempt to integrate program pedagogies, resources and structures across home and school contexts as part of national literacy initiatives and Government policy to further home-school relationships and encourage parental empowerment. Carpentieri et al. (2011), identified the importance of complementary literacy programs as part of the broader policy agenda in many European countries:

In our case studies, we found that several programs sought to encourage integration and thereby help meet policy goals in this area by focusing on local schools as instruments of community cohesion and social inclusion (p.70).

They argued that this also serves to promote program development and implementation through a coherent and sustainable literacy policy.

Embedding family literacy programs within major institutions as part of government policy has also been found to engender positive outcomes and lead to sustainability. Both state and local libraries have been identified as key players in the promotion of family literacy initiatives (Maynard, 2011; Shoghi, Willersdorf, Braganza & McDonald, 2013). Libraries in Australia are both leading and increasing their partnerships with family literacy programs, through programs such as *Walk to School*, an Indigenous early-years literacy strategy for Northern Territory public libraries and knowledge centres, *Better Little Big Book*

Club in South Australia, the *Young Readers Program* in Victoria, and *Beginnings* in Western Australia, (Shoghi et al., 2013; Barratt-Pugh, Anderson & North 2013). Research suggests that libraries provide a safe and supportive environment for parents and their children and the resources and activities they offer promote not only child literacy, but also parenting skills (Rankin, 2011; Stooke & McKenzie 2009). In a recent report the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2013) stated that libraries provide 'an extensive, diverse infrastructure of informal learning that is equipped to deliver critical early learning resources to young children and families, especially those most in need' (p.5), thus placing the library at the centre of life long learning (CILIP, 2002).

In conclusion, research suggests that partnerships between literacy providers in conjunction with long term policies that reflect an integrated literacy strategy across families and schools are central to effective, sustainable and transferrable family literacy programs. In Western Australia, *Better Beginnings* exemplifies these elements and this paper adds to the growing but limited research on the impact of linking family literacy programs with school-based literacy programs.

Context

The *Growing Better Beginnings* program was developed to provide support for families with children aged four and five years when they begin kindergarten and/or pre-primary school. It aimed to provide children beginning kindergarten and pre-school with developmentally appropriate books and language activities through a *Reading Pack*; support parents in modelling early literacy practices; make links with families through schools, and facilitate teacher support of families and the program.

The program comprised a number of integrated resources which included the following:

- Reading packs with age appropriate picture books and supporting materials for children aged four and five years;
- Discovery backpacks of books, audio CDs, literacy games;
- Read aloud book sets at libraries for schools to borrow;
- Information literacy databases and websites for parents and children to access;
- Training program and handbook for library staff delivering the program.

The reading pack together with an age appropriate book was delivered through libraries, to kindergartens and pre-primary schools in four metropolitan schools and three regional schools. In all schools, the local librarian contacted the school and made a time to visit the school to launch the program for children and families. The program also linked families to public libraries where children and parents were further supported with workshops and resources to enhance positive literacy messages and experiences. A significant feature of this program was the connection established between the State Library and education authorities such as the Department of Education (DoE), Association of Independent Schools WA (AISWA) and the Catholic Education Office of WA, to facilitate family access to the program. The schools participating in this program were in fact used as a conduit between families and the library, whereby teachers endorsed and supported the

program, both through their classroom curriculum and communication with parents and families, and assisted families in making links with their local library.

Methodology

This research builds on the evaluation of the *Better Beginnings* family literacy program 2007-2010. The aims of the research were to document and evaluate the implementation of the *Growing Better Beginnings* program for children, families and early childhood professionals in Perth's east and south metropolitan areas and a regional community. It documented the outcomes of the program and explored perceptions of parents and professionals in terms of implementation of the program.

The research design included both qualitative and quantitative methods which sought to explore the perspectives of the major stakeholders involved in the program. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the *Better Beginnings* program coordinator, 5 individual librarians and 21 classroom teachers in order to give insight into the implementation, strategies and future development of the program. Questionnaires distributed by the research team, were also conducted with 144 parents/carers to provide information about their views of the program, the impact of the program, and suggestions for development. The semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face with participants while the questionnaires were distributed to parents at the school and parents were able to complete it at that time, or were encouraged to respond in their own time and return the questionnaire to the school.

Participants

In 2012 parents of children who attended a kindergarten or pre-primary class at a school involved in the *Better Beginnings* 4-5 year old program were invited to complete a survey. In total 144 parents were surveyed, from seven schools in the Perth metropolitan area and one country school, approximately four weeks after their child had received the 4-5 year old gift *Better Beginnings Reading Pack* in 2012. The children in these classes had received a gift *Better Beginnings Reading Pack* from the local librarian who had been to the school and presented the packs to the children, along with a parent talk on the importance of early literacy learning and the role of the local library. A total of 5 State Library of WA librarians who were coordinators of the *Better Beginnings* program were interviewed shortly after they had delivered the reading packs and parent talk in 2012 to the schools involved in the research. All five librarians had been with the program since its inception. As part of their role in the delivery of the *Better Beginnings* program the librarians visited the primary schools within their areas. In addition, a total of 21 teachers who taught either kindergarten or pre-primary in the schools involved in the research were interviewed after the children in their classes had received the *Reading Pack* in 2012.

This paper specifically addresses the following questions:

What are the perceptions of parents and professionals (teachers and librarians) of the implementation of the *Growing Better Beginnings* family literacy program?

What factors facilitate the implementation of the *Growing Better Beginnings* family literacy program?

What are the issues related to the effectiveness of the implementation of *Growing Better Beginnings* family literacy program?

Findings

The *Growing Better Beginnings* program was clearly supported by parents, librarians and teachers who saw it as a tool to strengthen early literacy learning, support home literacy practices and encourage families to make links with the local library. Parents welcomed the *Reading Pack* with 86% of parents finding it 'useful' or 'very useful' as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Parents' response to contents of *Reading Pack*

Resource	'Useful' or 'very useful' Total %	'Not very useful' or 'not at all useful' Total %
Children's book	95	5
Book bag	91	9
'Enjoy reading together' leaflet with book list	88	12
Parent information leaflet about the book	86	14
'My Discovery Book' folder	80	20
Counting frieze	77	23

The *Reading Pack* was seen as a valuable resource and was reported to have a significant influence on literacy practices in the home. Since receiving the reading pack over half the parents (57%) indicated that their children's enjoyment of reading had increased and that the reading pack had positively influenced their beliefs about the importance of sharing books with their child.

It was a very good pack to encourage parents to read to their children and the importance of it.

The packs are great and I'm sure they do encourage parents who don't read to their children.

Parents reported they read more often to their child (63%), and that their child asked to be read to more often (65%). In addition, 8% of parents indicated they had joined the library since receiving the reading pack, while 64% reported they were already members with 43% of those who were members visiting the library on average once a month.

The five librarians who were coordinators of the program in their local library were interviewed shortly after they had introduced the program and delivered the reading pack to the children and families in their local area. The librarians had received training at the initial introduction to the program and this was viewed as adequate by all librarians. However, three of the five participants indicated that they would value additional training

as a refresher and the opportunity to network with other librarians to share successes, ideas and strategies and to monitor progress of the program in different communities.

It's always good to try and find out other ideas of how people do approach their program or what to say to parents, all those sorts of things, so it would be good to have refreshers on that and some new ideas.

The State Library made the initial contact with schools through an email explaining the program and inviting participation. Expressions of interest were then forwarded to local community libraries that made contact with the schools. Although this procedure had lessened the workload for local librarians, it was felt by one librarian that this process also had its shortcomings.

The State Library sent a letter out to all the schools and I just waited for the responses to come back and didn't really chase up. Once I'd seen the schools that did agree to participate, I felt a little saddened that the schools that desperately needed it had somehow missed out, they hadn't seen the email.

This initial contact appears to be vital in raising awareness of the program throughout the school systems and is a crucial step in disseminating resources to participating schools. As schools responded to emails, the librarian scheduled a visit to meet the teacher and negotiate a time and place to introduce the program to children and families. A positive aspect of the implementation process was the flexible take up of the program. A variety of approaches were used by schools, including organising events at which the librarian addressed parents and distributed reading packs; presenting reading packs to children at the end of the day; and involving the school librarian in distributing reading packs during library period. Presentations to parents were varied by the librarians according to their experience and confidence in delivering presentations, convenience to the school and number of parents attending. Content included an overview of the history and rationale of *Better Beginnings*, explanation of the components of the reading pack, the importance of reading to babies and children, and the critical role of parents as the child's first teacher.

I tell them a little bit about the program itself and how we're there to support them and the program's there to support them. And then have a quick talk about what the library can offer them, show them the early readers and ask for any questions. I go over what the children are going to get. It empowers parents to be involved in their children's education as a teacher at home.

In their talk to families, all librarians promoted the use of the library in supporting family literacy practices. They introduced the *Better Beginnings* website, online information package and the literacy resources and activities that are available at the library such as e-books, reading clubs, and school holiday programs for children of all ages. As a consequence, the librarians felt that the program not only supported early literacy, but also helped them to reach and engage with more families, reinvigorated their own enthusiasm for literacy, and transformed what they did at the library.

Although librarians noted that the program had impacted on their workload, this was seen unanimously as a positive outcome as it helped them to network, consolidate their relationship with schools, and engage more productively with families.

When librarians were asked about their perceptions of what families valued most about the activities offered in the libraries, their responses included:

- the variety and quality of resources;
- opportunities to bond and share experiences with their child;
- support for literacy development;
- social support through friendships and networking with other families.

The librarians believed that the program empowered parents and gave them confidence and helped them make links between the family, school and library. An additional key perception was that the program encouraged more literacy practices at home and was a stimulus for those parents who did not read to their children. All librarians noticed an increase in families using the library and attending library programs and activities. As one librarian commented:

I think there are definitely more families attending the library. We noticed it with the first *Better Beginnings* program and now I'm noticing more school age, kindy and pre-primary children in their uniforms coming in and coming to get the early readers and backpacks.

The teachers involved in *Growing Better Beginnings* played a significant role in supporting and promoting the take up of the program by families. Overall, teachers felt that the program promoted early language and literacy at home (43%), supported parents reading to their young children and developed parents' skills to support their children's early literacy learning (37%). Ninety five percent of teachers felt that early literacy family programs were 'very important' and that the *Growing Better Beginnings* program had reinforced this previously held belief. One teacher stated:

I've always thought that early literacy was the key, I think it (*Better Beginnings*) supports, it cements what we are trying to achieve here at school.

All teachers felt that the resources were a valuable literacy tool for parents in promoting reading at home and that it emphasised for parents the importance of their role in the literacy learning cycle. One teacher commented:

Especially in our community it's good because there are a lot of parent who don't get the opportunity to be exposed to things like this, and if *Better Beginnings* wasn't here then they wouldn't know. They wouldn't know that reading at home is good with the kids.

And bringing books into the home so it's really good to get things rolling.

Prior to receiving the reading pack, the State Library of WA sent each participating school a *Teachers' Guide* which provided lesson planning suggestions and activities designed to support teachers' use of the texts found in the reading pack. This guide was linked to the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the outcomes detailed in the *Australian Curriculum* in

order to be relevant and congruent with the teachers' current classroom programs. However, 79% of teachers reported that they had not used the teacher's guide whilst 21% of teachers who did use the teacher's guide and its associated lesson plans and activities all found the resource 'very useful' or 'useful'. Seventy five percent of teachers reported that *Better Beginnings* was consistent with early literacy activities in their class and it provided links to their literacy program. Comments from teachers included:

I think it comes from the same philosophy;
It's helping us with our early literacy and so we need to really make sure we access all the resources;
It reinforces the importance of reading;
We could easily link it together.

All the teachers commented that they felt that parents responded positively to the *Better Beginnings* reading pack and resources. The teachers also remarked that the resources would encourage some families to read to the children at home and it was a positive link between home and school. Several teachers reported that they were optimistic that the resources would inspire and encourage families to access their local library, and that they saw their role in the classroom as more strongly promoting the library and encouraging children to visit their local library.

Liaison between the teacher and local librarian was essentially haphazard. The majority of teachers (71%) did not liaise with the local librarian other than on the day they visited the school. However, 89% reported that liaison with the local librarian in relation to the *Better Beginnings* program was 'very important' or 'important'. These teachers suggested that without strong links to the librarian, the program would not succeed. Maintaining communication and collaboration was viewed as essential in effective implementation of the program and in promoting the use of the library to families, yet it was also viewed as an extra burden on their workload.

The teachers in this study were almost equally divided in their thoughts about the impact of *Better Beginnings* on their work. Fifty three percent reported it did impact, while 47% said it did not impact on their work. Those teachers whose workload was not impacted suggested that the program reinforced what they were already doing in the classroom and appreciated the links to their curriculum outcomes. They noted a positive influence in that they were challenged to review their practice and try new ideas, and appreciated the extra classroom resources.

Discussion

This study revealed several factors that facilitated the implementation and outcomes of the *Growing Better Beginnings* program whilst at the same time raised issues related to the effectiveness of the implementation of the program.

Factors that facilitate the implementation and outcomes

Perception of the program

The stakeholders - librarians, teachers and parents surveyed and interviewed for this study - were committed to the program, albeit at different levels. The librarians felt that their role in *Growing Better Beginnings* was not only to support early literacy development, but also to promote the library as a community hub for families, which was part of their core business and that working through schools had helped them to reach and engage with more families. Liaison with local community groups about early literacy was described as paramount for all librarians, and liaising with families in particular helped to reinforce and extend the *Better Beginnings* message. The initial talk held with parents emphasised the valuable contribution the library made to developing positive family literacy practices and the support available through its various resources and organised programs. As a consequence, librarians noted an increase in families using the library and they reported that the same families were using the library and attending programs and activities more often.

The teachers welcomed involvement in the *Growing Better Beginnings* program. Using the school as a focal point for the distribution of the reading pack and family liaison, and involving the teachers of four and five year olds was seen as a strength of the program. Teachers recognised the value in having parents directly involved in supporting their children's literacy development through the reading pack and library resources. Input from the librarians served to reinforce the schools' message about the importance of reading and early literacy development. Those teachers who were able to link the *Better Beginnings* program to their classroom programs could see the benefits across the curriculum, such as in early numeracy, language development, creativity and concept development. Teachers also valued the role of the librarian in visiting classrooms, meeting parents, and promoting the local library.

Both the librarians and teachers reported that parents responded positively to the reading pack and resources. Librarians reported parents valued the variety and quality of materials and support available to them, which was at no cost to families. Parents were able to describe children's increased enjoyment of reading and recognition of the importance of sharing books as positive outcomes of the program. In addition, the program provided opportunities for parents to share experiences with their child and develop friendships and networks through attendance at library activities. Librarians also believed the *Better Beginnings* program impacted the whole family, as it empowered parents and gave them confidence to make stronger links between themselves, the school and the library.

Central coordination

The central coordination (State Library of WA) of the *Better Beginnings* program over a period of seven years has enabled the development of the *Growing Better Beginnings* program which builds on and extends the original program in a coherent and timely manner. Central coordination of the design, training and implementation of the program ensured

consistency in its aims, while allowing flexibility in its delivery according to the needs of the schools.

The coordination facilitated partnerships with the Department of Education and other key stakeholders to ensure the program was appropriate and was delivered effectively and efficiently. Central coordination also enabled the development of a web site for librarians for the purpose of sharing best practice and updating information about the program.

Relationships

Collaboration between the school and library personnel at state and local levels was central to the success of the program and to the efficient distribution of the resources and information. Once the librarian had visited the school to distribute the reading packs it was important to sustain the program within schools. This was best achieved when the librarian made more frequent visits to the school to become involved in the class program, such as reading to children and contributing to after-school activities. The librarians found the connection between the library and school an important and positive experience and key to strengthening the delivery and outcomes of the program and ultimately sustaining the program. They commented that teachers encouraged the children to visit the library and also arranged for class library visits. Thus the majority of teachers and librarians had developed strong relationships.

In their talks to families, librarians introduced the web site and online information package available through the library. They also explained the range of multimedia library resources available to them. As a consequence there was a notable increase in families using the library and a familiarity with local families that helped to sustain collaboration.

Resources

The parents, teachers and librarians were overwhelmingly supportive of the reading pack and saw it as a valuable resource capable of influencing literacy practices at home. The quality and informative nature of the reading pack and associated resources ensured it was well received and highly valued. Having the teacher's guide linked to the *Early Years Learning Framework* and *Australian Curriculum* was a bonus for those teachers who accessed the guide as they could see direct links to their literacy program.

A key outcome of receiving the reading pack was the increase in parents' awareness of the importance of sharing books and the positive change it brought about in the parents' own literacy practices. It was reported by teachers that the children were excited about having a book of their own, enjoyed having the book read to them and that the majority of parents found the resources supported discussion, reading and writing activities at home. All teachers were appreciative of the potential the resources had for promoting home literacy and for being a focal point for discussion about literacy practices at school.

All librarians offered literacy activities in the library specifically for four and five year olds where additional resources were available to parents to borrow. The *Discovery Backpack* was

a collection of additional resources that complemented the reading pack and was aimed at maintaining links between families and the library. From the librarians perspective parents valued:

- the variety and quality of resources provided;
- the opportunity to bond and share experiences with their child and the social support through the development of friendships and networking.

Issues related to the effectiveness of implementation

Communication

While the program was highly valued by those involved in the implementation process, the greatest challenge lay in the initial contact and method of communication between the local library and schools. All schools received an email from the State Library, inviting participation. Responses from interested schools were then forwarded to the local community library for follow up. While this procedure had reduced the workload for local librarians it proved somewhat haphazard and unreliable in ensuring teachers received the initial invitation and correspondence, and resulted in some teachers not receiving information about the program in a timely manner. Other teachers reported not receiving a reading pack or components such as the teacher's guide and this impacted negatively on effective preparation and integration with their classroom program. The lack of coordination at this stage of implementation had a negative effect on the perceptions some teachers held about their role in the program and this was evident from feedback such as: "I honestly thought it was a library thing, and that it was the library putting it together." This in turn impacted on their sense of ownership and commitment to the program. Those teachers who were actively involved in promoting the program and local community library reported the need for more parent information from the library to families. These teachers could see how a greater effort on their part in promoting the library through handouts and fliers for parents, taking the class to the library to establish links, and actively promoting attendance at the information session would enhance commitment by all stakeholders in the program.

The five librarians negotiated with the schools about the best way of introducing the program to the children and families and the distribution of the reading packs. In all cases a presentation was delivered to parents albeit at different times and places convenient for schools. However, in some cases it was reported that this process was rather ad hoc. The difficulty of finding the most effective time for the information session meant that not all parents could attend and this in turn impacted on the depth of communication and degree to which the liaison between groups was effective. As a consequence the majority of teachers (71%) did not liaise with the local librarian other than on the day they visited the school for the information session, and attendance by parents at information sessions was poor. Time constraint, alluded to by teachers and parents, was held responsible as a hindrance to effective distribution of resources and dissemination of key messages about the program. In order to strengthen communication ties, it was suggested that coordination of the program could take a joint approach between local librarian and

classroom teacher, with ongoing collaboration throughout the school year involving reciprocal visits, discussions and activities. Hence, the power of the liaison between schools and librarian was seen as the cornerstone to the success of the program.

Impact on work

The implementation of *Better Beginnings* has been celebrated as an extremely effective and noteworthy community program. The coordination of information, materials and personnel has been an enormous task, which has invariably impacted on the workloads of all stakeholders. Librarians have found the demands on their time a major issue and therefore tasks originally assigned to the local librarian, such as initial contact with schools, were allocated to the State Library. This however, introduced an additional dilemma in the potential for communication to break down when information must pass through a number of channels. Although librarians felt their workload had increased, they were nevertheless, positive about the outcomes achieved. The consolidation of relationships with schools, opportunities to network within the community and engage with parents were seen as ways of stimulating their work and changing the way in which their library operated. In addition being involved in *Better Beginnings* had positively impacted on librarians' theoretical understanding of the importance of early literacy.

As indicated earlier, the teachers were almost equally divided in their thoughts about the impact of *Better Beginnings* on their workload. Forty seven per cent reported it did impact and therefore these teachers viewed their involvement as positive, challenging long held practices and providing new ideas and resources. The fifty two per cent of teachers who reported it did impact on their work, cited lack of initial information, which resulted in fragmented take up of the program and communication with parents. These teachers reported confusion about their role in the program, poor attendance by parents to the information session and the inability to make links between the *Better Beginnings* program and their own classroom curriculum.

Training for librarians

Overall the librarians conducted successful information sessions; nevertheless they felt that receiving additional professional development in public speaking would be beneficial. Most librarians were inexperienced in delivering presentations to groups of people and therefore welcomed the opportunity to refine these skills. Three out of five librarians reported the need for a refresher course to develop deeper understanding of the research behind the program, including the importance of early literacy for four and five year olds. The librarians were keen to establish networking groups to share successes, ideas and strategies and to learn how the program had progressed in different communities.

Use and sustainability

The successful implementation of the program was linked to the degree to which teachers supported and promoted the take up of the program by families. Although teachers reported they felt family literacy programs were very important in promoting early

language and literacy, a significant number of teachers (79%) had not made use of the teacher's guide, and therefore were not fully informed of the potential for incorporating aspects of the program with their own curriculum.

Teachers reported they needed to have copies of the reading pack and resources well before the commencement of the program, in order to use them effectively in the classroom and to liaise with parents about their use both in the school and at home. This timing was crucial as it was the difference between teachers embracing the resources and using them as part of an integrated and supported home-school literacy program, and teachers regarding themselves as being a distribution point for parents receiving the resources. Those teachers who regarded timing as a major issue felt the program did not link with their own curriculum plans for the term, or that the program was for parents and not their responsibility. Thus for these teachers sustainability of the program was negligible and reinforces the notion alluded to in the literature that school systems may not recognise the true potential of family literacy programs and how they may link to school programs.

Conclusion

The *Growing Better Beginnings* program was clearly endorsed and supported by parents, librarians and teachers, who saw it as an opportunity to strengthen early literacy learning, support home literacy practices, and encourage families to take out library membership. In addition, the program was seen by librarians as an important continuation of the *Better Beginnings: Birth to Three* program. However several challenges have been identified for the future. Firstly, there is a need to strengthen the lines of communication and liaison between librarians, teachers and families through improved methods of disseminating information. Communication needs to be more direct, prolific, streamlined and consistent, so messages reach stakeholders in a timely manner.

Secondly, establishing ways to substantially engage teachers with the program is a priority. The sustainability of the program would be enhanced if it became an integral part of the classroom curriculum and acted as a means of building a bridge between home and school literacy practices. Stronger partnerships and collaboration between librarians, teachers and families would lead to greater congruence between school literacy and home literacy practices. The program is well placed to do this, and has already been successful in these aims for some schools.

Thirdly, building strong partnerships between school-based and home-based programs so teachers recognise the potential of family based learning for enhancing their classroom program. Working in partnership with parents and families has traditionally been a fundamental aspect of early childhood education; however, working within complementary programs has not been a significant feature of school policy. Complementary programs have the potential to take parent involvement in schools to a deep and meaningful level through participation and collaboration.

Further work in these areas has the potential to substantially increase the impact of the *Better Beginnings* program. Continuation of the program will enable schools to become familiar with the program, begin to integrate it into their early years curriculum planning, and develop strong partnerships with families as they become identified as a *Better Beginnings* school.

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Caroline Barratt-Pugh PhD is a Professor in the School of Education and Director of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood, Edith Cowan University.

Email: c.barratt_pugh@ecu.edu.au **Web:** <http://www.ecu.edu.au/schools/education/staff/profiles/associate-heads-of-school/professor-caroline-barratt-pugh>

Carmel Maloney PhD is Honorary Associate Professor in the School of Education, Edith Cowan University. **Email:** c.maloney@ecu.edu.au

Web: <http://www.ecu.edu.au/schools/education/staff/profiles/honorary-professors/associate-professor-carmel-maloney>

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