

Contributions of School-Based Parenting and Family Literacy Centres in an Early Childhood Service System

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Abstract

Increasingly, governments are seeking ways to integrate early childhood education and care services as a social policy strategy to maximize child and family outcomes. This study examines the role of a school-based parenting and family literacy program to a system of services in one community in Ontario, Canada. Using an appreciative inquiry approach, focus groups and questionnaires conducted with participants of the programs provide a view of how these programs are contributing in a community where there are a range of programs in place. These programs were described by parents as welcoming places with interesting and engaging program activities, facilities, and resources that support child development. Additionally, supports for all family members—including referrals to services which helped families in many aspects of their lives—were described as benefits of participating. The contributions of Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLCs) are evident from the data and are discussed in relation to the contributions of other services and programs in the community. Additional findings examine participants' patterns of service use across the community, which shows they are using school-based services more than community-based early years services. These findings are discussed in relation to the service integration goals of provincial social policy strategies.

Key Words: early childhood education programs, service integration, family literacy, social policy, parenting, transition to school, Ontario, Canada

Introduction

This study is motivated by current international interest in early childhood education and care as a social policy strategy (Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). In Canada, as in the U.S., governments have made a relatively low investment in early childhood education and care compared to other countries with similar resources (UNICEF, 2008). As a result, there is an imperative to expand supports for young children and their families. There is growing interest in service integration internationally, with the aim of making complex systems of services more accessible to families, reducing redundancies and duplication in services, and improving planning and administration while seeking efficiencies in service delivery (Armitage, Suter, Oelke, & Adair, 2009; King & Meyer, 2006). Service integration, however, may also change the contribution that is made by particular service agencies and programs within a system of what have historically been fragmented services. The importance of high quality early childhood programs to support child and family outcomes is widely accepted (Britto, Yoshikawa, & Boller, 2011). What is less well understood are the contributions of unique programs and how they work together from the perspective of families to support both children's development and family needs. This study aims to understand the contribution of Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLCs) where this program is one of many community services for families with young children. The study is relevant in a broader context as many jurisdictions around the world are grappling with how to achieve universal access to high quality early childhood services.

Context

In Ontario, Canada, where this study was conducted, the current policy context includes major political realignment of responsibilities for early childhood education and care. It is important to identify the unique contributions and strengths of PFLCs in order to inform systems level decision-making in this political context. This research, however, has a wider application in understanding parents' perceptions of community supports and their own needs with regard to early childhood and family support services.

A new early years policy framework is continuing a trend toward integration of early childhood education and care services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011) and a "schools-first" policy that values early childhood programs that are linked with or offered by schools (Pascal, 2010). The schools-first policy has two distinct goals: the first is to ensure that early childhood programs focus on children's "readiness" for school transition as an outcome; the second is that schools may benefit from the catchment, recruitment, and community links

of the school that are different in community programs—for example, school-based immigration consultants may be more focused on language services, and school health nurses may have different strategies than public health nurses visiting community programs. PFLCs, located in publicly funded schools, are an example of a school-based program. PFLCs are free drop-in programs where families attend with their children and are open for approximately four hours each morning. Each site has one staff member, and the program is the same at each site with circle time, physical activity (outside or in the gymnasium), crafts, free play, and snack. While parents are not usually turned away, some sites are very busy. The parents/caregivers are required to stay with children throughout the program. These programs were selected for this study because little is known about the differences between school-based and community-based programs or how family programs contribute compared to programs designed for children alone. The research presented here examines family, community, and child outcomes.

Outcomes of Early Childhood Programs

High quality early childhood programs are widely accepted around the world as an intervention that is effective at improving outcomes in health, education, and human development for societies as a whole (Irwin et al., 2007; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). Social policy that supports high quality early childhood programs is believed to be both lower in cost in comparison to social programs that target these domains later in life and more effective than later interventions (Britto et al., 2011). Early intervention is believed to have both a preventative effect by supporting families to provide stable environments for children's development and a direct effect by influencing child outcomes.

Family Outcomes

Many early childhood programs aim to support families first. In particular, family literacy programs are commonly used to support families with low income (Prins & Schafft, 2009). Programs that are situated within the cultural context of participants (Masny, 2008; Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2007) and that are able to engage parents to regularly attend (Doyle & Zhang, 2011) appear to have some positive effect on children's literacy development and family engagement in children's learning. Family literacy programs have a long history as a strategy to support child development as well as enhance social and economic opportunities for adults in the family. Family literacy programs were developed with the recognition that the family is a critical context for the earliest language and literacy skill development (OLC/AFLO, 2006). Certainly many researchers now believe that parent involvement in the early years is critical to later school success, particularly in the

areas of reading and language development (Morrison, Rimm-Kauffman, & Pianta, 2003). Family literacy programs deliver direct service to parents and their children with the intent of influencing family factors that are known to positively affect early literacy for children (Timmons, 2008). Research suggests that engaging parents early can be effective as a strategy to keep parents engaged with their children's learning in the school years (Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005). There is, however, limited research on the efficacy of schools offering family literacy programs and whether they provide a unique service to families.

Community Engagement

Early childhood programs and services work to support families to develop social networks in several ways. They provide opportunities to meet other parents and family members, for children to develop relationships, and for parents to connect with a professional who can provide referrals to other community supports. The efficacy of early childhood programs in connecting families with other services is variable. Khan, Parsonage, and Brown (2013), in a study examining mental health referrals in children's services, identify different referral routes and note that the quality of a referral can make a difference in whether a family will actually engage with another service. They found that the way a program is presented, the degree of personalization in the referral, and the trust that develops with the new organization upon the referral can make a difference in whether families participate in the service.

Some early childhood programs support families to actively participate in the workforce. Child care, for example, supports working adults and, with high quality programming, can also support child development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). Child care does not typically serve parents directly as clients, although there is growing interest in the role of child care as a family support program serving families' needs beyond direct service to children (Bromer & Henley, 2004). However, child care plays a critical role in economic participation for families, while family literacy programs typically do not. Overall, as a system of services, early childhood programs function to support family members to engage directly with their children's development, to engage with other families in their communities, and to be connected with other services and in the workforce.

Child Outcomes: Literacy and Language

Literacy and language development are also a universal goal of early childhood programs (McCain & Mustard, 1999; McCain, Mustard, & McQuaig, 2011; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). Literacy development at school entry has been linked to children's school success and to their overall academic achievement (Beswick & Sloat, 2006).

In several studies, children's literacy development is attributed to literacy activities in early childhood programs. Domitrovich et al. (2013) found that low-income children's participation in preschool programs had an effect on their literacy skills and readiness at school entry and that this effect increased when children were enrolled in two years versus one year of preschool. It should be noted that the quality of the program, not just the amount of time spent in the program, is also important. Perlman and Fletcher (2008) found that in child care centers where staff were not engaging in frequent literacy instruction there was not a significant relationship to child language and literacy skills at school age. Similarly, a recent study of child care in Portugal found that high quality programs could contribute to children's early language and literacy development, mitigating home environments that did not support such development (Pinto, Pessanha, & Aguiar, 2013).

These studies show that child care and preschool programs can affect children's academic performance at school, particularly in the area of language and literacy development. However, it is important to distinguish between the programs that are designed for direct interaction between educators and children and those that are designed for parents and families to attend with their children. Family support programs—community-based programs for children and their families or other caregivers such as nannies—are designed to provide literacy activities along with modeling parenting and supporting family needs. In a 2010 study, a survey of family resource programs found that the majority of these programs self-reported that they often engage in informal children's literacy activities such as offering resources in interactions with parents, providing writing materials, and giving access to books, as well as more formal literacy activities with children ages 0–5, such as teaching nursery rhymes, leading games with word play, and making journals or family albums (FRP Canada, 2010). In programs for children ages 6–12, they did fewer formal literacy activities but provided more support for parents to help children with schoolwork and school-based literacy activities (FRP Canada, 2010). While the study relied on self-reports, it does tell us that literacy activities are at least considered to be part of the responsibilities of family resource programs. Child development outcomes are a goal of early childhood services. What is not known is whether all early childhood programs are equally able to support these outcomes and whether parents perceive these outcomes to be attributable to all early childhood programs.

It is clear that a range of program types—including child care, family support, and preschool—can all support children's development directly. From a social policy and program design perspective, these programs are all quite different. What is not clear is how each of these programs works together to support children and their families in their communities.

Research Questions

This study was designed in collaboration with representatives of a municipal social service department and managers from the PFLCs in one urban community with the intent of understanding the contribution of these programs to an early years service system.

This study examines two questions:

1. What do parents see as key outcomes from participation in early years programs, and how are these outcomes met in a school-based program?
2. From the perspective of parents and families, what is the unique contribution of a school-based program to the system of early years services in their community?

The first question relates to the capacity for a family literacy program run by a school to deliver the same or similar outcomes as other early childhood programs, such as individual child development, particularly related to language and literacy, as well as family and community engagement outcomes. PFLCs which are situated in schools, in theory, should have closer links to the school system than other early years programs, which could lead to a more closely aligned approach to child development with the Ontario school curricula and the goals of the education system. In fact, the PFLCs have been linked to gains in a range of developmental areas and, in particular, with gains in language development (Yau, 2009). In one study of PFLCs in the City of Toronto, PFLCs were found to have greater developmental effects in the areas of physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language development when parents attended PFLCs, and the effects were greater when attendance was more regular. These findings continued to be true at the end of Grade 1, with parents reporting that they learned about parenting and children's literacy and development through the program (Yau, 2009). While these are impressive outcomes from the PFLCs, what is not apparent is whether there is a unique contribution from the PFLCs that cannot be delivered by other programs. As noted above, other early childhood programs are linked to developmental gains, particularly in relation to language and literacy.

The second question is related to the service system. The question is examining whether a family literacy program operated by schools is actually contributing a distinct service or if this service is overlapping with other services. If indeed the service is overlapping, the analysis should yield information about whether this program is of value to the system as a whole. Current research on PFLC programs does not report if the program model achieves the goal of engaging parents with schools in a way that other programs do not. Theoretically, the relationship to schools could also have some disadvantages,

including fewer links to the community or being overly focused on school curricula designed for older children. Overall, the project aims to better understand how schools are working with communities to ensure that families are getting high quality early childhood experiences and also how families are being served, which is a focus of early childhood programs that is often missed in schools.

Methods

This study used appreciative inquiry, an approach to understanding organizational change that posits that understanding the strengths of organizations and then building up those strengths, as opposed to identifying systemic problems, is more effective to achieve optimal functioning within organizations (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Knibbs et al., 2012). This approach has been adapted for use in social research with the aim of uncovering strengths rather than solving problems (Boyd & Bright, 2007). This study is not a program evaluation of PFLCs; rather, the study gathered collective perspectives of those who used the PFLCs in order to understand the value that school-based family literacy programs held for these families within the context of the network of services that were in their communities. This approach does not mean that there was no interest in the challenges that families have in getting their needs met; in fact, this is an important component of understanding the value of PFLCs. However, parents were asked about the program strengths in order to identify what is working well for families. All focus group and questionnaire wording was consistent with an appreciative inquiry framework, asking questions with the intent of uncovering the strengths of the whole early years system.

Participants

Participants were recruited for the study through advertisements (flyers and posters) handed out by staff at the PFLC sites. Participants were given the opportunity to sign up in advance through an email address. In addition, participants who were at the programs on the day of the focus groups were invited to participate. The majority of participants were recruited at the sites on the day of the focus groups. The participants were parents and family members who use PFLCs. Many paid caregivers also participate in the programs but were not included in the sample as they have a distinct role in their participation that was beyond the scope of this study. There was an average of between 5 and 6 participants at each site. Of the 64 focus group participants, there were 47 mothers, four fathers, 10 grandmothers, two grandfathers, and one foster mother. All were invited to complete the questionnaire and/or participate in

the focus groups. Child care was provided, and participants were given a \$10 gift card for a supermarket as compensation for participation.

Many participants ($n = 106$) completed the questionnaire. Of those, 26 were mailed in self-addressed stamped envelopes that were left at the sites, and the rest were submitted to researchers on site after completion. The participants were invited to participate via the questionnaire or the focus groups or both. As the study was voluntary, this gave parents control over their level of participation, accounting for the much larger number who completed the questionnaire than participated in the focus groups. The questionnaire included demographic questions. Of the 106 questionnaire respondents, the ethnic identity of participants was not representative of the community population, with White, English-speaking participants over-represented. However, the socioeconomic characteristics of the sample were reflective of the community:

- 51% had lived in the community for fewer than 5 years.
- 20% had emigrated from outside Canada (with 9% in the country for more than 10 years).
- 75% of the respondents spoke English only at home.
- 8% spoke a language other than English or French (the community is a designated francophone community).
- 29% of respondents identified their household income as below the 2011 low-income cutoff* for a family of four (CD\$41,000).

(*Note: The low-income cutoff is a measure developed by Statistics Canada which measures income alone. It is not a measure of poverty but is used here as a proxy. For further explanation of poverty measures see Graham & Underwood, 2012.)

Setting

PFLCs offer a half-day drop in program during school hours, typically open four hours each day, with activities that focus on literacy and child development as well as supporting families (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). In Ontario, the first PFLCs were created in one large urban school board (similar to a U.S. district) as a response to evidence that parent engagement in early literacy practices is an effective intervention to equalize school opportunity (McCain et al., 2007). Since that time, the provincial government has funded a network of PFLCs in what they term “high-needs” neighborhoods (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The definition of “high-needs” is variable and determined by individual school districts, but it is generally determined by family income, school data, and characteristics of families and communities in school catchment areas. There are currently 172 PFLCs in Ontario.

Data Collection

The questionnaire asked parents to agree or disagree with positively worded questions about a range of services for families with young children (grouped into early years supports, developmental screening, supports for children with special needs, and parent supports). Questionnaires were administered at the sites where focus groups were conducted.

Focus groups were selected as a data collection method because they can capture a group perspective (Patton, 1987, as cited in Bernard & Ryan, 2010). While individuals will have unique personal reasons for their actions, the focus group allows individuals to come together and consider the experiences of others and to collectively tell a story about their community (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). This method is different from in-depth individual interviews because it does not elicit individual perspectives, and it allows interaction between participants. We were able to use this dynamic to have participants actively engage in the analysis of their own discussion.

Twelve focus groups were conducted over the course of a six-week period in the spring of 2012. There were 64 focus group participants across 12 PFLC sites. Of those, one site had only one participant and, therefore, an interview was conducted. Individual interviews typically involve a different methodological approach. In this case, the facilitator presented some of the findings from previously held focus groups to elicit the interviewee's responses to other parent perspectives. This served to mimic the focus group dynamic; however, it should still be considered an individual interview. The focus groups lasted between 1–1.5 hours. Focus groups were audiorecorded and transcribed for clarification and analysis. During the focus groups, participants' ideas were recorded on index cards and then reviewed to check wording and make corrections in how participants wanted their ideas represented.

The focus group process began with asking participants to identify via a checklist all of the early years services they use in their community. The focus group setting allowed parents to discuss the services and remind each other of the range of services that they may have used. Focus group questions were adapted from questions developed in a previous study (Underwood & Killoran, 2012). The questions were worded to ask for the positive contributions of programs, consistent with appreciative inquiry. The questions also reflected the policy goals of ensuring all children have access to developmental screening, that their parents have access to developmental information, and that services are part of an integrated network. Participants were asked four groups of questions:

1. In your experience, what were the most helpful elements of the supports and services that you identified on the checklist? Why did you choose to come to the PFLCs, and what are the most useful elements of the PFLCs?

2. How has developmental screening or information about developmental milestones supported you and/or your child? Did you get any of this information from the PFLC?
3. Describe any examples where you have seen evidence of the different services working together. Do you know of examples when the PFLCs worked with other programs or services?
4. What do you want from early years (0–6) supports and services in the future?

Analytical Approaches

Thematic analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage was a participatory activity conducted with participants. The second stage utilized research-driven coding to identify core themes.

Following discussion, a participatory method of sorting the responses was used and recorded on index cards to engage parents and family members in the analytical process. The participants were asked to sort the cards into themes as a group, only naming the theme once they had completed the sorting process. The thematic coding process is very similar to traditional thematic coding, with participants identifying ideas and revising the themes as new codes are considered in an iterative process (Boyatzis, 1998). Through this process, participants identified key themes from the discussion and were able to add new ideas that were missed and clarify ideas that had been discussed. Additional questions ensured detail in the discussion and served to ensure consistency and determine reliability across focus groups.

In addition to the thematic coding done during the focus groups, the researchers analyzed the themes identified by participants by reviewing their thematic categories and identifying themes common to multiple focus groups. When thematic concepts were identified in more than half of the focus groups, the coding was deemed to have reached theoretical saturation, and these themes were identified as core themes. Three core themes are presented in the findings.

Findings

Focus group participants articulated many of the strengths associated with the PFLC programs. Three major themes emerged from the focus groups: (1) the benefits of participation for children's development, attributed to the quality of the program; (2) the benefits to family members who attend the programs and the welcoming atmosphere, which were attributed to staff and other participants; and (3) the convenience of participation along with the connections to other services, attributed to the staff but not to an integrated system

of services. The first two themes address the research question pertaining to parents' understanding of key outcomes from participation in early years programs and how these outcomes are met in PFLCs, specifically. The third theme addresses the research question about understanding the unique contribution of PFLCs to the system of services in their community. The findings from both the focus groups and the questionnaire are presented along with a discussion of how the findings fit with the existing literature on family support and early childhood services systems.

Child Outcomes

Focus group participants described two important constructs as evidence of children's outcomes: the individual development that participants saw in their children, and their degree of preparation for school. Participants were very happy with the curriculum in the PFLCs, which they said supports school readiness, literacy, and social development. Many participants described the structure of the program as a strength because it taught children about routines. For example, one parent said, "She [the staff] has a very structured day for them, and she often does a lot of songs in the same order. For my girls, because they have some speech issues, that really helped them develop their speech." Others said they liked the fact that the program was not too structured but responded to the children's needs. Singing and rhymes and book reading, as well as storytelling, are part of a good literacy curriculum for young children. The participants reported that this was part of the curriculum in these programs. The individual skills associated with literacy development and "school" behaviors were described as important for school preparation. The location of the programs in schools was perceived to have some advantage for getting both children and families prepared to participate at the school. Like many participants, one said, "they already know somebody in the school [the staff of the PFLC], and it's scary if they don't know anybody." Several families continue to attend the PFLCs with younger children so that they can be close to their older children attending the school.

One of the other curricular goals of family literacy programs is to have parents gain literacy skills. Some focus groups discussed the name "Parenting and Family Literacy Centres," saying that it sounded like a place for parents who could not read or were not good parents. They did not feel that the programs had this deficit approach embedded in them; in fact, they described feeling respected and listened to in the programs. Deficit approaches to family literacy are known to have negative effects on families (Prins & Schafft, 2009). PFLCs are reported to be programs where families do not have this experience, but the name may not match this program goal. The questionnaire data provide

some insights into participants' satisfaction with early years services in their community. The sample ($n = 106$) is likely skewed to participants who like the program, given their willingness to participate. These findings are therefore exploratory, and further research should identify population level satisfaction with services in communities. Since the study was investigating the experience of families across programs, participants were asked about child care and other early years programs, screening programs, programs for children with special needs, and parenting supports in their communities. For each service type, participants were asked whether they agreed with the following statements: (1) there are enough programs and services in my community; (2) the quality of programs and services is good in my community; (3) The programs and services meet my family's needs; and (4) my child had a positive experience in the programs and services. The findings from this questionnaire confirm findings from previous research on early childhood services in Ontario communities (Underwood & Killoran, 2012). These findings are consistent with research by Summers et al. (2007) who found families typically have high satisfaction with child-level outcomes for early childhood services, but lower satisfaction for how they serve families. While satisfaction ratings were very high for all service types, they were consistently lower for meeting the family's needs than for the experiences that children had in the program.

Overall, more than 80% of parents who used the services indicated that there were enough early childhood services, that they were of high quality, and that they met their family's and their children's needs. There were two exceptions: fewer than 70% of parents felt that there was enough child care (64%) or that it was high quality (67%), and even fewer (only 55%) of parents who use services for children with special needs felt that there were enough programs or felt they were of high quality (66%). These findings indicate that parents in this study had very high satisfaction ratings with early childhood services overall but were less satisfied with the quantity and quality of child care and special needs services. Full results for the questionnaire are available in the Appendix.

Program Characteristics

In addition to the curricular approaches at PFLCs, some of the structural characteristics were the most important components of the program described by participants. One of the unique characteristics of PFLCs is that they are targeted programs, meaning they are strategically placed in neighborhood schools that are known to have demographic characteristics that are predictive of school difficulties. Families in these programs identify migration and poverty as two experiences that increase their vulnerability and for which they want support (Realmo, 2012).

The welcoming atmosphere at PFLCs was the most commonly cited reason that families attended and continued to participate in PFLC programs. This attribute of PFLCs was a function of staff personal characteristics, such as remembering details about children and family members and responding to the individual needs of families, which have also been identified in other studies as critical to the success of family support programs (Dunst & Trivette, 2001). While this finding is not unique to PFLC programs, the fact the PFLCs are available in targeted communities means that there are many programs to choose from in these communities. One focus group participant said, “Child care is for rich people. We come here [to the PFLC].” Linking the attributes of the program to the concerns about access to other programs in the community identified above provides evidence of the need for more than one entry point into services with protocols for ensuring connections to services are made for families and children and, in particular, to a free service that does not have a waitlist. Both child care and services for children with special needs often have access issues because of costs and waitlists.

In addition to staff, the other participants at PFLCs are important in creating the environment. Participants said, “[This is the] only place no one judges you [for your parenting];” this atmosphere, “helps parents ‘let go’” and provides a “sanity check.” At PFLCs, participants feel “you’re not alone.” Some of the participants had had negative experiences at other programs; for example, one parent said that at another program, the families all had fancy strollers, which made her feel uncomfortable. The characteristics of the staff and the atmosphere of programs increase the likelihood of finding a program where participants “click” with the staff. Statistics Canada (2008) identifies social networks as critical to Canadians when they are experiencing major life changes. These changes can include job loss, moving, immigration, illness or death of a family member, or the birth of a child. Statistics Canada also identifies family as the most helpful social support as reported by Canadians, followed by co-workers, friends, professionals, and the Internet. PFLCs were described in all focus groups as having a role in social integration for families.

Most participants said they would like longer program hours during the day, for the program to run in the summer, and for the PFLC to provide programming that fit with their schedules. Programs are operated in school classrooms, and the size of the space was thought of as intimate. However, some participants acknowledged that this was subjective and other people might prefer larger rooms and more people, which are offered at other family support and recreational programs in the community. While the structural components of the program that “work” are subjective, many families found the program to be convenient since they are located in schools in their communities. Some

families felt this was especially important in their unique communities. For example, one participant said,

I think that people who live below the poverty line especially would define their community as being smaller than someone who is more affluent. Because if you're relying on public transit to access the programs that you need, that really limits you.

Overall, the relationship of the staff with the families was the most frequently cited characteristic of the program identified in the focus groups. Epley, Summers, and Turnbull (2011) also identified parent–professional partnerships as critical in parent satisfaction with early childhood services and found an association between the quality of these partnerships and family quality of life. This finding shows that the characteristics of the program that parents value are similar to characteristics that parents value in other types of early years programs, as noted in other studies cited throughout the findings. This is important because the contribution of the program may not be related to its curricular approach or focus on parenting and literacy. However, for the parents in the study sample, it was the PFLCs that had supported them and their children. The following section examines the theme of how the PFLCs fit into a broader system of services and whether this program provides something that cannot be delivered in the other community programs.

PFLCs in an Integrated System of Services

In addition to the structure of the program itself and the benefits of participation to children, participants described how the PFLCs were part of a larger system of services. Interestingly, when directly asked whether participants saw evidence of PFLCs being part of an integrated system of services, many participants said “no.” Service integration is a key aim of new early childhood social policy in Ontario, with the purpose of reducing redundancy and creating efficiencies for families as well as for funders of early childhood services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). The concept of integration has been defined as:

Focusing on client and community needs rather than on the mandate of a particular agency or organization. It means local programs and services are delivered according to a community plan that is based on information about the needs of local children and families. It may include the consolidation of resources, the co-location of different service functions, and/or re-engineering of existing resources. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011, para. 5)

In the focus groups, there were several themes related to services integration, including locating the program within schools (discussed above), access

to the program, and referrals. Referrals were a critical integration theme; in one case, staff were described as being “connectors” who provided referrals to other programs, such as speech and language supports, and also directly provided information about topics of interest such as discipline, language development, car seats, and toilet training. Some staff also provided supports to families that were not directly related to the children, such as intervening in a dispute with a landlord, finding a dentist, and filling out immigration forms. One focus group referred to PFLCs as a “gateway to other services.”

The proximity of the PFLCs is another strength described by participants. Several parents came to the program because it was accessible when their older children were in the school. In at least two sites, all parents in the focus group had older children in the program, indicating that schools were creating an access point for families to the PFLCs. Several participants said they learned about the PFLCs at kindergarten registration. One parent explained how the integration of kindergarten and PFLCs had benefited her son:

My son had some special needs. I honestly found that, of all the programs I've been to, this is one of the most helpful because it really helped the school get to know him, and it helped him get to know the school, so that the transition to school was that much smoother for him—which when you dealing with any kind of special need, to have a smooth transition is a very good thing.

In addition to themes related to service integration, there were examples of service collaboration. These themes included visiting professionals attending the PFLC programs and sharing information to enhance awareness of other programs. With referrals, it is not always clear if the family will attend or follow through with a referral. PFLCs intend to help families to connect with other families and with services that are available in their communities. As described in Khan et al. (2013), the nature of a referral can affect the experience of a family accessing a service.

While participants in the focus groups described high quality referrals, the study also had some evidence that parents using PFLC did not use other services as frequently as families who were primarily attending other types of early childhood programs. Focus group participants identified the services they use in their community on the checklist (such as child care, other early years programs, screening programs, programs for children with special needs, parenting supports). Parents in this study reported that they use the PFLCs more than any other program. While some participants in the focus groups ($n = 64$) used other services, their use of child care (43%), recreational programs (40%), and developmental screening (39%) appears to be fairly low when compared to findings from a previous study of parents in Ontario communities ($n = 43$,

child care use 95%, recreational programs 79%, developmental screening 95%; Underwood & Killoran, 2012). This is an exploratory finding, but it is worth examining further whether family participation in school-based programs affects parent participation in community-based services or vice versa.

Interpretation of Findings

Responses to the research questions are interrelated. The two questions were:

1. What do parents see as key outcomes from participation in early years programs, and how are these outcomes met in a school-based program?
2. From the perspective of parents and families, what is the unique contribution of a school-based program to the system of early years services in their community?

Overall, parents report that these are good quality programs. However, they did not describe curricular approaches that indicate they are doing literacy activities that are unique in comparison to other early childhood programs. While parents did report child development as one of the reasons they attend the program, as a unique contribution, the PFLCs provide many family benefits.

The focus group data indicate parents perceive referrals to be a strength of the program. However, some parents who attend these programs have a harder time accessing other services, as described above with regard to child care and services for children with special needs. The type of referrals made at PFLC sites may affect the participants' service use in the community. Many of the services that participants described using outside of the PFLCs were school-based services such as the school public health nurse, language or immigration services in the school, and kindergarten teachers. The role of PFLCs in the system of services may be related to connecting families with schools, while community-based family support programs have greater linkages to other community-based services. In the context of an integration policy framework, a question to be considered is whether this model of school-based referral should branch out in order to increase family access to services. Certainly, PFLCs are in prime positions for ensuring families get connected to services, especially since they may serve populations of parents other community services may not see.

Satisfaction with PFLC programs is *extremely* high, which is a function of quality staff and peer relationships and is also likely a function of positivity bias, which has been identified in parent perceptions of children's services (Zellman & Perlman, 2006). This program provides a unique experience that parents value and which provides a program that is different in some ways from other programs in the community. The program is small, and these participants feel welcomed here. This study, therefore, indicates that PFLCs are part

of the system of services that allow parents to have a choice of programs and find a “good fit.”

The PFLC programs are universal in that any families are welcome to attend. However, the programs are also targeted in their placement, with the intent of equalizing opportunities for children who are statistically at-risk because of environmental factors. The demographic of parents intended to be reached through PFLC programs may not be represented in this study sample. Many social policy analysts have debated the question of whether universal or targeted programs are more effective. McQuaig (2012) theorizes that universal programs are more likely to reach the most vulnerable members of a community. She posits that targeted programs often miss the parents they are intended to support, and they can be unstable due to political trends and economic considerations. On the other hand, targeted programs can be much more focused on attracting those who need the program most, and a more homogenous group can be welcoming to some parents as described by participants in this study. Overall, this study would suggest that PFLCs, as targeted programs, work well as one option in a community where there are also universal programs, such as kindergarten and family support programs.

This study indicates that school-based programs may attract parents who are concerned with establishing a relationship with their child’s school before they begin kindergarten. This is an important function of the school-based family programs that is not possible with other programs. Not surprisingly, participants in the study had extremely high rates of satisfaction with these programs. However, the participants had lower satisfaction with quantity and quality of child care and special needs programs than other early years supports in their community. The participants also had higher agreement with statements that their children had a positive experience in early programs than with statements that their families’ needs were met. The satisfaction ratings are consistent with findings from a previous study (Underwood & Killoran, 2012), with this study contributing to the reliability of these findings. These findings suggest that the PFLCs are making a unique contribution in communities by offering a link to schools that no other early years program offers, and therefore, the program warrants support through social policy. However, attention and resources should also be directed toward child care and specialized supports as critical elements of an early years social policy strategy, given that they are the most difficult to access and may be the least responsive to families.

Conclusion

The study indicates that many of the overall goals of early childhood education strategies are met for these families involved in PFLCs, such as introducing

them to schools and creating opportunities for children to be in a stimulating and educational environment. This study also indicates that school-based programs are more closely linked to school-based services than to community services, which could be a function of staff connections or the needs of families, and given that the schools themselves operate these programs, this makes sense. The study findings indicate that there should be a mix of school-based and community-based programs as they serve distinct functions in terms of supporting family connections to other services. Further research should be done to examine extended possibilities for interagency linkages with community-based programs in order to capitalize on the school linkages that are possible through school-based family programs. Overall, it is clear school-based literacy programs can be an important part of the early years system of services, and their contribution should be considered in social policy planning.

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Appendix: Perceptions of Services (by Quantity, Quality, Family Needs, Child Experience)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Waiting List or N/A
There are enough spaces/programs in my community					
Child Care	8%*(n = 6)	55% (n = 43)	23% (n = 18)	12% (n = 9)	(n = 29)**
Early Years Programs	18% (n = 19)	66% (n = 69)	11% (n = 11)	4% (n = 4)	(n = 7)
Screening	15% (n = 14)	67% (n = 62)	15% (n = 14)	2% (n = 2)	(n = 15)
Special Needs Programs	9% (n = 4)	48% (n = 22)	37% (n = 17)	7% (n = 3)	(n = 61)**
Parent Support	17% (n = 14)	67% (n = 57)	14% (n = 12)	1% (n = 1)	(n = 22)
PFLC	20% (n = 20)	64% (n = 65)	13% (n = 13)	3% (n = 3)	(n = 2)
There are good quality programs in my community					
Child Care	10% (n = 7)	58% (n = 42)	23% (n = 17)	10% (n = 7)	(n = 33)**
Early Years Programs	20% (n = 20)	63% (n = 64)	15% (n = 15)	3% (n = 3)	(n = 4)
Screening	14% (n = 12)	71% (n = 60)	12% (n = 10)	2% (n = 2)	(n = 20)
Special Needs Programs	9% (n = 4)	57% (n = 2)	30% (n = 14)	4% (n = 2)	(n = 59)**
Parent Support	17% (n = 15)	69% (n = 61)	14% (n = 12)	1% (n = 1)	(n = 17)
PFLC	41% (n = 42)	51% (n = 52)	7% (n = 7)	1% (n = 1)	(n = 4)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Waiting List or N/A
This program/service meet(s) my family's needs					
Child Care	18%* (<i>n</i> = 12)	52% (<i>n</i> = 35)	27% (<i>n</i> = 18)	3% (<i>n</i> = 2)	(<i>n</i> = 39)**
Early Years Programs	25% (<i>n</i> = 25)	66% (<i>n</i> = 65)	8% (<i>n</i> = 8)	1% (<i>n</i> = 1)	(<i>n</i> = 8)
Screening	41% (<i>n</i> = 48)	50% (<i>n</i> = 58)	6% (<i>n</i> = 7)	3% (<i>n</i> = 3)	(<i>n</i> = 24)
Special Needs Programs	18% (<i>n</i> = 7)	56% (<i>n</i> = 22)	20% (<i>n</i> = 8)	5% (<i>n</i> = 2)	(<i>n</i> = 67)**
Parent Support	20% (<i>n</i> = 16)	67% (<i>n</i> = 54)	12% (<i>n</i> = 10)	1% (<i>n</i> = 1)	(<i>n</i> = 24)
PFLC	44% (<i>n</i> = 44)	54% (<i>n</i> = 53)	1% (<i>n</i> = 1)	1% (<i>n</i> = 1)	(<i>n</i> = 6)
My child has had a positive experience with this program/service					
Child Care	42% (<i>n</i> = 27)	48% (<i>n</i> = 31)	9% (<i>n</i> = 6)	2% (<i>n</i> = 1)	(<i>n</i> = 41) **
Early Years Programs	46% (<i>n</i> = 45)	50% (<i>n</i> = 49)	4% (<i>n</i> = 4)	0% (<i>n</i> = 0)	(<i>n</i> = 8)
Screening	37% (<i>n</i> = 25)	57% (<i>n</i> = 38)	5% (<i>n</i> = 3)	1% (<i>n</i> = 1)	(<i>n</i> = 39)
Special Needs Programs	39% (<i>n</i> = 11)	43% (<i>n</i> = 12)	14% (<i>n</i> = 4)	4% (<i>n</i> = 1)	(<i>n</i> = 78) **
Parent Support	35% (<i>n</i> = 28)	56% (<i>n</i> = 45)	8% (<i>n</i> = 6)	1% (<i>n</i> = 1)	(<i>n</i> = 26)
PFLC	64% (<i>n</i> = 65)	35% (<i>n</i> = 36)	1% (<i>n</i> = 1)	0% (<i>n</i> = 0)	(<i>n</i> = 4)

* Note the percentages illustrate the proportion of responses amongst those who indicated they use the service. It does not include the N/A or waitlist categories. The total sample is *n* = 106.

**Sample size for families who use child care or services for children with special needs is smaller, because fewer families use these services.