

Keeping Learners Connected – Four Models of Family Literacy

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Introduction

Taking a mobile approach to the provision of adult literacy has resulted in four inter-agency community-based family literacy programs to flourish in Wagga Wagga. This paper outlines the rationales for developing interagency partnerships with community services to enable new strategies to engage adults in learning, embed literacy learning in authentic community contexts and enhance literacy outcomes for families. Included in this information is some insight about developing partnerships with community services informed in part by experience and also by recent (2009) research as an NCVER Community of Practice researcher exploring the perspectives of community service workers and literacy teachers around partnerships involving team teaching.

In some analogous ways finding and aligning with potential partners is similar to a blind date at a local dance. There may be many services represented in the dance hall. Each may have individual reasons to be there, as well as feelings of uncertainty about who is to make the first move to form a dance partnership, and who knows the dance steps.

The family literacy models presented here exist or have existed in the NSW inland Riverina regional city of Wagga Wagga. The population is approximately 55 000. Although based regionally, the community services involved in the inter-agency partnerships can be regarded as being broadly representative of the range of services in other parts of Australia.

The TAFE STEPS Program is developed

In 2004 a community consultation meeting was held. Representatives from the Department Education Regional Office, family services, the city council, the local primary school and TAFE met to discuss how we could work together in new ways not previously explored to support local families. The common concern was the number of children in the first year of school commencing formal education with limited learning and reading readiness. It was at this meeting that TAFE STEPS program was initiated. For us, it was the first attempt at an off-campus mobile literacy and interagency (cross-sectoral) partnership approach to family literacy. The intent was to offer a user-friendly and easily accessed education venue for marginalised families with young children, who were disconnected from services and education opportunities. The project commenced with the support of DEST Adult Literacy National Project (Innovative Project) funding. The name, the STEPS Program is not an acronym – the word STEPS represents the journey that participants undertake when they are part of the program. In 2007 the TAFE STEPS Program was awarded Adult Learning Australia ‘Runner-up’ Best Adult Literacy Program.

The TAFE STEPS Program has continued since 2004. As community demographics and services have changed – so has the program. Since 2004 four separate Family Literacy models have evolved:

- Parentgroup/Playgroup 2005 – 2010
- Koori Family Homework Centre 2006 – 2008
- MEN Education Network 2009 – 2011
- Community Conversations 2010

What is Family Literacy?

Family Literacy views the family as a 'learning unit' and aims to enhance literacy skills of more than one family member. It comprises an inter-generational approach based upon a powerful premise: *parents are their children's first and most important teachers*. It provides integrated support and learning opportunities for all family members through the combined strengths of practitioners and services. Literacy development becomes a shared responsibility. Some family literacy programs can offer intervention strategies related to literacy development for young children. Central to the described models is the opportunity for parents to pursue their own educational goals, support them in the challenging and critical job of raising children, and to promote and support lifelong and lifewide learning.

Why try a different approach to engaging adults?

In 2006 the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted the Australian Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. The results showed that 7 million people scored below the minimum level for one or more of the literacy domains identified as being required to meet the demands of everyday life and work in this emerging knowledge based economy. There exists a clear statistical link between literacy levels and a range of social and economic indicators.

The TAFE STEPS program commenced in a suburb of Wagga Wagga identified by a workforce participation rate of 30% - when it was 68% for Wagga Wagga. The percentage of public housing residents unemployed was 40% and the percentage of public housing residents under the age of 25 who had completed year 12 was zero. It was also evident that people in this community were not accessing TAFE. It was important to develop new learning opportunities to address this disconnect.

Learning happens in all life stages. Australian learning and education systems are based on the principle of learning early on for use later in life. However this might not be the best model. The Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL 2001) proposed a comprehensive policy agenda which included embedding adult literacy issues in a framework of lifelong learning, addressing social inclusion and community capacity building. The importance of literacy for national economy, society, and individual capacity is also highlighted by Golding (2008) who suggests that the need for government supported opportunities for adult lifelong learning is urgent.

Proponents of adult literacy models between community services and literacy teachers, advocate the potential for improving social capital outcomes. Their potential to contribute to community literacy, their capacity to address social policy problems, and facilitate

social capital outcomes is gaining momentum (Wickert & McGuirk, 2005; Sanguinetti & O'Maley, 2007; Balatti, Black & Falk, 2009; Black, Innes & Chopra, 2009). Social capital refers to the social networks and the connections between people within or amongst groups (Black, Innes & Chopra, 2008, p.5, and Priest, 2009) and the self esteem and confidence gained through respect received from their teachers and peers. For some students, these advantages presumably help them find work and interact more easily with those around them.

For each of the family literacy models we have included a summary of the key elements and a model demonstrating how these elements come together. It is also important to highlight the adult literacy teacher/s involved with these models share: a perspective that literacy learning as lifewide and lifelong, capacity to teach in multiple and possibly unpredictable locations, an holistic approach to relationship building and individual capacity, and a commitment to social capital outcomes.

Parentgroup/Playgroup

WHY?	Promote parents' awareness of pre-school literacy skills
HOW?	Steering Committee Community Housing for venue Council Grant for minor painting expenses Rotary Club assisted with minor repairs and painting Planned, negotiated education sessions Individual literacy teaching Resources 'library'
WHO?	Families NSW – funding and early intervention and prevention context DET Regional Literacy Officer WW City Council Community Health – Early Childhood TAFE

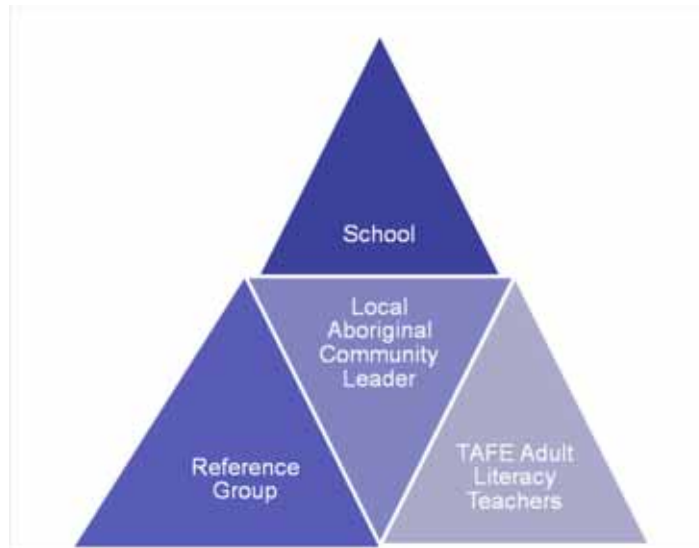
Figure 1 Parentgroup model



Koori Family Homework Centre 2006 – 2008

- WHY?** Improve educational outcomes for local Aboriginal students through family literacy learning
- HOW?** Reference Group
Aboriginal culture and identity promoted
Develop school teacher cultural and family literacy understanding
Planned, negotiated education sessions
Individual teaching
- WHO?** Reference Group comprising local Aboriginal community family members
Local public primary school
Families NSW/DET/ACYFS
TAFE

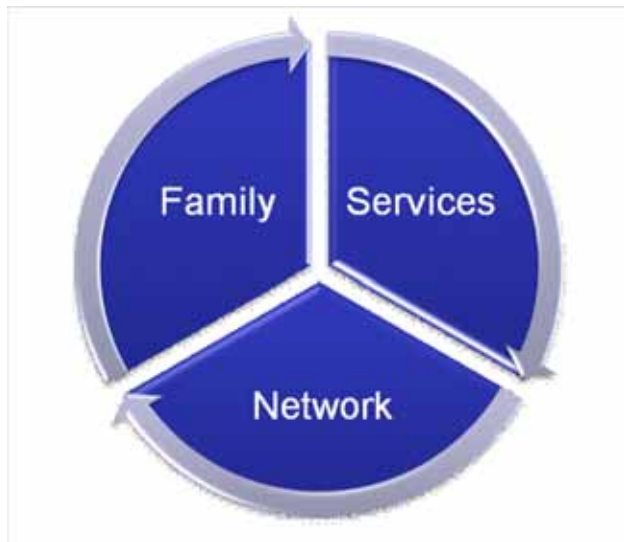
Figure 2 Koori Family Homework Centre Model



MEN Education Network 2009 – 2011

- WHY?** A request from WAFRICA , a local incorporated body representing African men. The leader said ‘our men need education about life in Australia’
- HOW?** DIAC funding
Steering Committee including local African men
Activity plan for the year
Communication via SMS technology
Planned, negotiated education sessions
Individual teaching
- WHO?** TAFE,
Centacare
Communities NSW Sport and Recreation
WAFRICA, community nominated African men
Rotary Club

Figure 3 Men Education Network Model



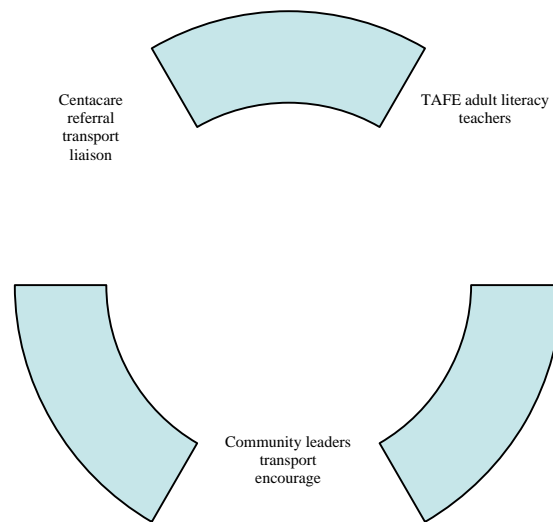
Community Conversations 2010

WHY? Request from local Burundi community to address barriers to participation in society

HOW? Community learning
Volunteer Interpreter
Planned negotiated education sessions
Individual teaching

WHO? Local church
Community leaders
Centacare
TAFE

Figure 4 Community Conversations Model



Common Elements

The four Family Literacy models share common elements which underpin their success. These core elements fall into two loose groups which can be described as professional perspectives and partnership perspectives. Our experience with a partnership approach to developing new learning opportunities is that the professionals involved matter more than the services they represent.

Professional perspectives

Each family literacy model began with a vision held by either a community service or literacy teacher professional. The vision was connected to an identified community and/or cultural need and contributed to the identification of other 'like-minded' professionals whose work can add value to the overall program intent. This professional perspective has led to commitment by a team of cross-sectoral professionals with a shared responsibility for outcomes and long-term program continuity.

Partnership perspectives

Sometimes, developing new work models requires a preparedness to push boundaries – new ways of working don't always fit existing work practices. Often it is necessary to clarify in what way the respective workplace can support the potentially new 'enterprise' and how this commitment is demonstrated in practice. It is important to clarify in what way(s) the respective partners can add value to the program outcomes. Each model demonstrates adult literacy teachers plus community service professionals. The value and effect of this partnership is a community and education-based adult literacy and social

capital focus which can offer outcomes not previously experienced by each partners on their own. In some circumstances this opportunity to align with other colleagues also adjusts the community service worker and the literacy teacher's 'usual' role as the provision of the new learning environment unfolds.

Adult Literacy pedagogy, Social Capital pedagogy, and definition of literacy

Underpinning each program is adult literacy pedagogy which emphasises participant involvement with the program direction and session activities. Aligned with the adult literacy pedagogy is social capital pedagogy which creates a safe and supportive learning environment, and acknowledge the capital the learner brings to the group. The approach should also engage the learner with networks at many levels: learner to learner, learner and teacher, learner and the community and networks (Balatti, Black & Falk, 2009a, 2009c).

Each program is delivered by adult literacy teachers. Sometimes this has involved co-facilitating with community service representatives or community 'leaders'. It has been essential to identify literacy teachers with a shared perspective on the definition of literacy. Perspective influences planning, practice, and possibilities. It has also been necessary to 'unpack' literacy for the interagency partners as their perspective also influences planning, and can lead to presumptions about how and where adults learn and what a literacy teacher does.

Our preferred definition of literacy is that *Literacy* involves a continuum of learning through life. It is viewed as a flexible group of skills and strategies that enable a person to make sense of what they want to know. Literacy acquisition is complex, cumulative, interactive and closely linked to context and purpose, which enable a person to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, reflect, compute and use information to make informed choices (Hartley & Horne 2006).

Our approach to engaging marginalised families

It is important to note that each family literacy model aims to engage families who are disconnected from mainstream community services and may have had negative experiences of learning in the past. For these families information is generally accessed through informal conversation with friends, family, and services rather than local newspapers, letter-box drops, personal correspondence, and flyers in prominent locations. Developing a united approach to engage marginalised families is integral to the professional and partnership perspective and the program outcomes.

Consistent with each model is a three stage approach. **The first step** is to create a program that offers potential participants an 'enticing' purpose to step into a new, potentially threatening, setting. The venue familiarity, ease of access and timing are all relevant. The 'content' or reason to come together should be personally relevant and potentially satisfying. **The second step** is to have a member of the interagency partnership recommend the program to the adult in a non-formal conversation. At this point initial interest can be gauged. Having an additional person take a personal interest in the referral outcome makes a big difference to connection. Engagement may not

happen straight away. It may be beneficial to raise the possibility of interest and participation again. If there is sufficient interest shown, then **the third step** is to ask the adult's permission to forward their telephone number to the program contact person who can make an informal call or SMS which can be an opportunity to enable the potential participant to reply in their time and discuss at a distance their family circumstances and have questions about the program answered. Or even better, it may be possible for the referring agency representative to attend with the adult. Where non-English speaking participants are concerned the use of telephone interpreter services is also valuable.

The ongoing interest of more than one partner is an effective and positive 'wrap-around' effect. Being genuine about your intention to engage and build rapport is essential. The interrelationship between the interagency partners, the personal referral and the family are represented in Figure 5.

Figure 5 The 'wrap-around' effect



A feature of each program is the capacity to connect with individual participants between sessions. This can be via face-to-face or e-communication, or telephone. These opportunities are identified on a needs basis and are individually arranged and personally negotiated. These sessions offer a valuable one-to-one opportunity for teaching and learning to follow up or expand on the participant's goals as they align with the program intent.

To get started – we offer the following considerations and practical ideas

1. Become familiar your community – services and demographics. Look for ways of locating your role in the community. Develop internal radar for what is happening locally - are there gaps?

2. Develop an idea and see who is interested, from which community services?
Focus on engaging new learners
3. Prepare how to communicate your intent. How will you present what you do?
4. How will you talk about literacy? Determine what literacy means to you
5. Be prepared to have answers to questions. Define what you do – how is it different? What can it contribute?
6. Are there other ways to use existing ‘working’ hours or resources? Clarify the expectations of partners and self .

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