Using a logic model to evaluate the Kids Together early education inclusion program for children with disabilities and additional needs

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ABSTRACT

Despite clear evidence that learning and social opportunities for children with disabilities and special needs are more effective in inclusive not segregated settings, there are few known effective inclusion programs available to children with disabilities, their families or teachers in the early years within Australia. The Kids Together program was developed to support children with disabilities/additional needs aged 0–8 years attending mainstream early learning environments. Using a key worker transdisciplinary team model, the program aligns with the individualised package approach of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).
Aim: This paper reports on the use of a logic model to underpin the process, outcomes and impact evaluation of the Kids Together program.
Methods: The research team worked across 15 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres and in home and community settings. A realist evaluation using mixed methods was undertaken to understand what works, for whom and in what contexts. The development of a logic model provided a structured way to explore how the program was implemented and achieved short, medium and long term outcomes within a complex community setting.
Discussion and conclusion: Kids Together was shown to be a highly effective and innovative model for supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities/additional needs in a range of environments central for early childhood learning and development. The use of a logic model provided a visual representation of the Kids Together model and its component parts and enabled a theory of change to be inferred, showing how a coordinated and collaborative approached can work across multiple environments.

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1. Introduction and background

The inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education is a relatively new practice within Australia, despite the growing evidence that developmental gains from early intervention for children with disabilities is as good or better in inclusive settings as opposed to segregated, specialist services (Lee, Yeung, Tracey, & Barker, 2015; Odom, 2000; Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011; Sainato, Morrison, Jung, Axe, & Nixon, 2015; Tanner, Cook, & Clapham, 2013; Underwood, Valeo, & Wood, 2012). Intensive, tailored interventions provided effectively in mainstream settings have benefits for the children's social development and the wellbeing of their families. However, there are few rigorously evaluated inclusion programs in early childhood education settings in Australia (Dew, Bortoli, & Brentnall, 2014; Bortolli & Bundy, 2015).

Kids Together was designed to support children with disabilities/additional needs, aged 0–8 years, attending mainstream early learning environments. The model represents a significant change to the way therapists and children's specialists deliver services to children with disabilities. Using a key worker transdisciplinary team approach, key workers are supported by colleagues from allied health and educational professional backgrounds, working with children with disabilities within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres, at home and in the community. The key worker transdisciplinary teamwork approach has grown in popularity across a range of healthcare services in recent years. It has been shown to have the advantage of

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supporting families in an efficient way by providing a team of professionals, led by a main key worker, working collaboratively to evaluate, plan and investigate appropriate services and programs (Moore, 2012).

The model is also consistent with an individualised package approach to disabilities support provided by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), a major reform in the way people with disabilities are supported in Australia (National Disability Insurance Scheme, 2014). The move from program based funding to individualised support packages promises new opportunities, but also poses important challenges for service providers in the disabilities services sector which have been highlighted in recent research from the NDIS trial site (Howard, Blakemore, Johnston, Taylor, & Dibley, 2015). Howard et al. (2015) for example describe "a parade of different services" in the ECECs in the NDIS Hunter trial and report parents' distress at having continuous staff changes or different professionals providing components of support in isolation. Two other significant challenges with the NDIS changes include assumptions about the capacity of parents and families to support their children through this new approach and equity of access to appropriate services, particularly in regional and rural settings (Howard et al., 2015).

This paper presents the results of the evaluation of Kids Together as it was implemented for the first time across 15 sites in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, in the lead up to the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). A realist evaluation was undertaken to test the effectiveness of Kids Together in this context and to assess its suitability for future expansion across a broader range of settings (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The overall goal was to bring together lessons learnt in the delivery of the program and to capture evidence of its impact and effectiveness from all project sites. The evaluation aimed to assess what had been achieved, whether it made a difference and why, and to understand the processes by which any changes had occurred and how the program might be expanded to other areas and contexts. This paper focuses on the development and core components of the Kids Together program, highlights the importance of the logic model in undertaking a collaborative realist evaluation and reports on the findings. A more comprehensive and detailed account of the evaluation is reported in elsewhere (Author & Author, 2015).

2. Methods

The evaluation of Kids Together employed a realist approach. Derived from the work of Pawson and Tilley (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Pawson & Tilley, 2004), realist evaluation is a theory driven method that assumes that programs 'work' in different ways for different people and that the context in which a program operates must be taken into consideration. The key focus of a realist approach is on "what works for whom, in what contexts, and how'. Realist evaluation is particularly useful when new interventions are being developed; when interventions are being considered for replication or scaling up; when programs are complex or are being introduced in complex settings; or when previous evaluations of programs have found mixed outcomes (Westhorp, 2014).

The evaluation of Kids Together was also a shared activity; working collaboratively with Noah's Shoalhaven, a not for profit children's charity based in Nowra, New South Wales (NSW, Australia), and an expert Steering Committee, enabled the researcher team to gain a better understanding of the broader social, policy and organisational contexts in which the program had been developed and was being delivered. The evaluation had formative, process and summative elements. The key questions for the evaluation were:

1. What were the outcomes for individual children?
2. What was the impact on the early childhood educators and the Kids Together key workers delivering the program?
3. How effective was the transdisciplinary approach (training/coaching/modelling) in developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for ongoing implementation of the Kids Together model in an early childhood learning setting?
4. What was the broader social impact?
5. What are the prospects for the broader implementation of the model?

The evaluation was conducted in three local government areas (Illawarra, Shellharbour and Kiama) in New South Wales over a 12 month period (January–December 2014) by a team of researchers from a regional Australian university. The sample of ECEC centres for the formative and process elements were chosen to reflect the socio-economic differences and geographic diversity of the region, the various service delivery groups and ethnicity. Qualitative data was collected from five of the 15 ECEC centres. An outcomes evaluation was based on quantitative data collected across all 15 centres. We assessed the wider impact of the program at the community and societal levels and the suitability of the program for broader implementation across multiple sites. Ethical approval for the research was obtained.

2.1. Developing logic models

While there is considerable variation in the way logic models are used by evaluators, including the degree of complexity in the logic model, the primary purpose of a logic model is to articulate the underlying assumptions about how the expected outcomes of a program will be reached in the short, medium and long term. The underlying theory or 'program theory' explains how the program works and how the components of the program work together, rather than what it is expected to achieve. According to Gugiu and Rodriguez-Campos (2007) a program theory has two purposes: to determine how inputs support activities to produce the desired outcomes; and secondly to form the basis of a theory driven evaluation. Therefore, a program theory, which includes a program's inputs, activities, and its short, medium and long term outcomes, becomes a useful tool to guide the evaluation (Weiss, 1972).

The development of a logic model does not assume that a program is static or unchanging. Community programs are usually dynamic and continually evolving; the logic model can be thought of as a 'snap shot' in time in relation to a program and can be revised over the course of a program's life. Program logic models are frequently developed as part of the design phase of a program to communicate the program elements demonstrate the 'logic' of how inputs and activities will contribute to the desired impact and outcomes. For established programs the logic model provides the basis for a shared understanding about how the program works, and informs the development of an evaluation framework, systematic data collection and reporting. Alternatively the logic model may be reviewed after an evaluation is completed to ensure that the program learns from the evaluation findings and adapts appropriately. This process is most effective when it is collaborative and done through involvement of key stakeholders (Yeatman et al., 2013).

2.2. Developing the kids together model

The Kids Together logic model delivered a visual representation of the underlying rationale or logic of the program. It provided the basis for a shared understanding about how Kids Together worked, and informed the design of an evaluation framework, systematic