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EXPLORING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN OUTSIDE SCHOOL HOURS CARE

Background

Community engagement is an important aspect of service quality in Outside School Hours Care. We identified this as an opportunity to engage in Action Research to systematically explore and improve on our practice of engaging with families, the school and the broader community in a meaningful way.

Through our quality assessment, the team identified that our service was not engaging with our families in such a way that informed our practice and supported children's growth. We felt that our service was not well known within the community and that this was perhaps influencing community expectations of OSHC. We were seeking to change both the community awareness and engagement with our service to improve outcomes for children, families and educators.

We looked to the National Quality Framework for its definition of Community Engagement. We found that National Quality Area 6, Element 6.2.3 described 'Community Engagement' as the Service building relationships and engaging with its community. We reviewed the level of engagement that we had from our families and community in recent times and found that this engagement had reduced significantly over a two year period.

The purpose of Community Engagement is to create an active and informed dialogue that seeks an understanding of the views and aspirations of the community (AIFS, 2016). To support this idea 'My Time, Our Place' offered perspectives which were able to guide our team in identifying our goals for engagement with the community. In particular, My Time, Our Place Outcome 2, sub-element 2.1 states 'Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation.' After reflecting on this outcome and its descriptor, the team came to realise the potential influences our service could have on children's involvement and participation within the community. The team became aware of the importance of engaging and involving ourselves in the community to benefit children and families.

Research Questions

Our research question initially started with exploring the benefits and importance of community engagement in OSHC, however we soon found that the benefits and importance are well researched and known. Consequently, our central focus became:

How can we create connections between OSHC and families through community engagement?

Emerging questions included:

How do connections within our community support children's wellbeing and relationships between school/OSHC/home?

How do community stakeholders value engagement with OSHC?

What else might we learn about perspectives on engagement within our community?
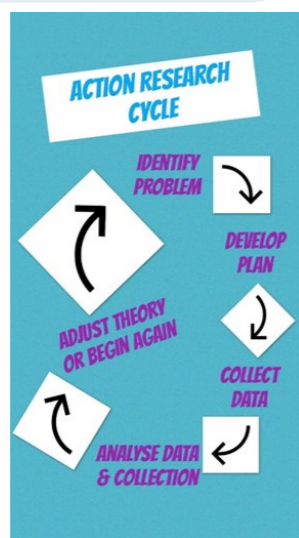
Research Method and Data Collection

Our project applied the Action Research Cycle where we identified the problem, developed a plan, collected data, analysed the data and adjusted our theory to begin again. These are our actions during the cycle:

- We used a survey monkey to collect some data and feedback from parents. We had only a few families complete the survey. The results were used to inform our next steps.

- We organised events within the community which children, families and educators participated in, including:
  - **Toowoomba Carnival of Flowers** was our first event where we participated in the parade with 8 families.
  - Our **Community Christmas Party** was the next event at which we doubled our participation from the previous event.
  - We continued our participation in the **Community Expo** with a new strategy for engagement. We noted that previously other stall holders had promotional material and so we decided to create interest in our stall with a raffle, enrolment packs and a sample holiday program. We also ran some small activities to showcase some of the opportunities available at OSHC. From this Expo we gained 2 new enrolments and had the chance to network with other organisations within the community.
  - Our participation in the **2019 School Fete** did not prove as successful as we had hoped for various reasons. We decided to use these learnings as an opportunity to reflect on and improve how we participate next year.

- We responded to emerging opportunities to engage with the community such as our visitor **'Nelly the Cat'** that we thought was homeless for the majority of her 6 week stay with us (read the findings to learn how she safely returned home!). Nelly became a celebrity within the school following her short 'adoption' by OSHC. A year 6 class also got involved in caring for her and together we reflected on the benefits of having Nelly in the community for children. We had observed children using time with Nelly as a de-escalation strategy as well as what they learned about caring for animals and responsibility.

Theoretical Framework

We used the lens of Bronfenbrenner's theory to help us to identify which parts of the community have benefited our OSHC children and our service. The theory made it easier for us to collaborate in how the community's engagement has helped our children in their overall wellbeing and in particular their self-confidence. The theory supports our findings that the different types of community that children are surrounded by will impact their growth in learning all new types of life skills that they may not have yet had the chance to develop otherwise. Bronfenbrenner's theory for us linked well with National Quality Area 6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities. These partnerships are fundamental to achieving outcomes for children to be engaged within the community through communication and collaboration. This was evident when looking at the circles over time you can see that these collaborative partnerships have been formed with families and communities through various events. When we took a deeper look into how our families were engaged with our service, we found that they were really quite engaged from the start of their enrolment as they had input into service layout, activities and program events. We also found that over the time of our action research our families became aware that we were researching Community Engagement which sparked their interest.

Findings

We learned a lot from the events we planned, the data we gathered and the unplanned opportunities that arose. Upon reflection, the Carnival of Flowers 2018 was an ambitious start with our community engagement. While we were disappointed that the council's age restrictions impacting our capacity to reach our initial goal, the day went really well as a starting point for our research. The early indication that our sights were possibly set 'too high' enabled us to focus on some smaller events that would welcome everyone into our service. This focus guided the team in the planning of the Community Christmas Party which provided a more easily accessible engagement opportunity due to the casual and informal nature of the event where we were able to celebrate the joy and spirit of the season. Although this event seemed small, it was a great success in helping us be known to the greater community.

Having Nelly, the Cat with us for a term was great and really helped make connections with some of the teachers and teacher aides within the school. Although she may have seemed like a distraction to some of the school employees, Nelly helped the children regulate their emotions. This has led to further discussions with the school and our families about getting an OSHC pet to accommodate all those children in the school community who may be struggling. (Nelly belonged to a relief teacher aide who unbeknown to her owner had hitched a ride to school one day and missed the ride home.)

The community expo and the fete were both great in allowing us to be involved once again with our school community and close neighbours. The expo highlighted the importance and benefits of networking with other organizations in the community that can help our families within our service as well as giving us the chance to reach out to new families. The fete was able to give us another chance to connect with our close community and provided opportunity for reflection about how we can use regular events to improve future engagement. Overall these events showed us that community engagement is an important part of OSHC and that the benefits will slowly come as the engagements grow.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

http://drewlichtenberger.com/6-shaping-influences-human-development/
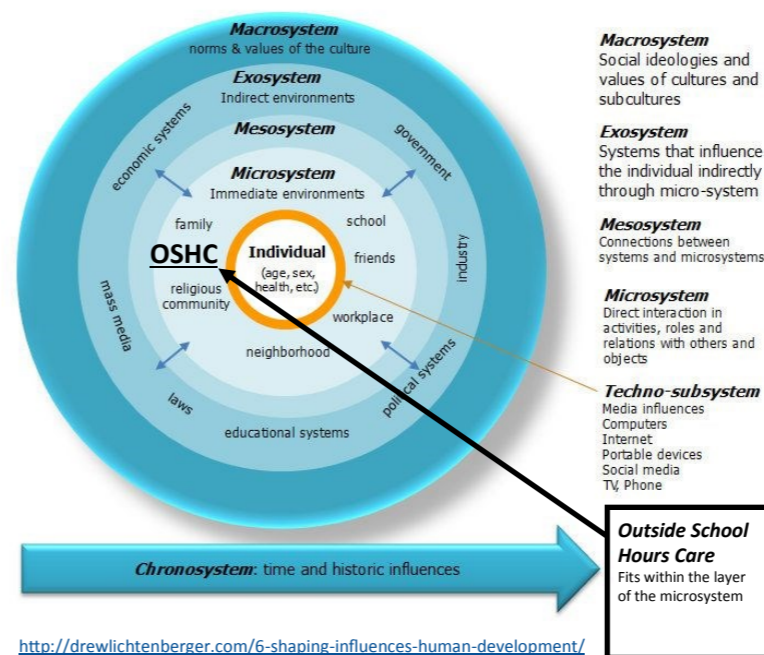
Conclusion

In conclusion the events that we have held over the research timeframe were a success in that they created opportunity for community engagement and relationship building. Together we are continuing to build on the ideas and learnings as we progress with future plans. The events were a great way for the team to connect with families without the limitation of not having time to talk (as typically occurs at drop off and pick up time). Throughout the past year we have seen many benefits for the children we care for, their families, the school and also for our service. The benefits that we've seen are collaborative relationships between educators and parents as well as a community that is focused on the children's wellbeing and interests. We have also found that through attending school and P&C events we have had more of a connection and relationship with school staff and community. Throughout the year we have found that Community Engagement is important to have within an OSHC service as it is fundamental to the children's growth and citizenship awareness. Overall Community Engagement is both important and beneficial to OSHC and should continuously be extended over time to make it meaningful for the children and families within the service.

Recommendations

Our recommendations from our research to other services looking to engage with their community , would be to brainstorm as a team where you are currently at with engaging in the community and what you would like the children's community to look like. From our experience, the best ways to implement this process would be to have staff gatherings dedicated to discussing educators' ideas for community involvement and the establishment of short and long-term goals. This creates a collective identity of what the team want the children's community to be. We recommend looking at Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems theory and begin to identify the connection and relationships that are already influencing the children's day to day lives and extend them further. Do not be disheartened if along the way you face many challenges. Self-doubt is unhelpful, so instead embrace the experience as an opportunity to learn which can be overcome with time and patience. These challenges will be making connections, building relationships and creating momentum with families and children wanting to contribute time towards the service's shared goals. The Action Research Cycle helped us overcome these challenges as they arose and provided a strategy for planning, enabling us to achieve our goal. Ongoing reflection, data collection, adjusting our goals, helped us to focus and reach the overall outcome.

References

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