Incubating new approaches to build capacity of families in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI)

On Friday, 7 and Saturday 8 September 2018, Plumtree hosted national and international guests to discuss new ways to focus on building the capacity of families who have young children with delays in their development or disabilities.

Guiding principles

- Family leadership, like all leadership, manifests as diverse qualities, styles, and forms, which are all valuable;

- Family leaders may adopt many roles to effect change for the community;

- Family leadership can be supported by ECI organisations committed to best family-centred practices by identifying and nurturing potential leaders, modelling leadership, and sustaining and renewing existing leaders, and

- The ECI sector requires sector-wide development to promote and foster family-capacity building and family leadership opportunities.

Potential future actions to promote family leadership

More broadly:
- Explore different government, non-government, corporate/private, and philanthropic models for funding family leadership, family-capacity building and peer workforce options;

- Develop an 'innovation directory' documenting programs and organisations demonstrating innovations nationally and globally, and possibly across sectors to assist in the formation of alliances, and

- Make intentional alliances with culturally-similar partners to grow sector-wide momentum for change.

Specifically for Plumtree:
- Establish a position statement to encode Plumtree's core values to share with its potential national and international partners;

- Establish a charter statement articulating the fundamental principles guiding the Now and Next program, to allow flexibility for adaptations and simultaneously to ensure integrity;

- Identify the 'core ingredients' of a peer workforce in ECI to prevent co-optation and professionalisation of the peer workforce;

- Identify the 'core ingredients' of Now and Next to maintain relevance across contexts and allow for further scalability;

- Conduct longitudinal research into the ongoing effects and benefits of Now and Next in the long-term;

- Assess the cost-benefit analysis of capacity-building programs like Now and Next on families' reliance on formal interventions and supports, in order to stimulate investment;

- Interrogate past participants' motivation to join Now and Next to ensure continuity of enrolment and to maintain the 'leadership pipeline';

- Continue to explore new ways to make the Now and Next Alumni group meaningful, relevant, and to provide new opportunities for current families and leaders to grow and learn;

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In-depth analysis

Led by internationally renowned educator, advocate, consultant and author, Dr Michael Kendrick, the day's three sessions:

- explored the role of families and service providers in nurturing family leadership,
- considered how to promote new approaches in ECI and to expand these innovations with integrity, and
- examined next steps to further new approaches state-wide, nationally, and internationally.

The role of families and service providers in nurturing family leadership

Whilst family leadership as a concept is not new in ECI, this session identified a rationale for actively developing family leadership in an ECI context. It also considered the national and international status quo for growing and sustaining family leadership, and asked what could be different going forward. In the ensuing discussion, the two key themes were examined.

Cultivating, growing and nurturing leadership

In introducing the concept of family leadership, Dr Kendrick articulated the crucial principle that leadership is not the one-dimensional product of formulaic processes, but instead encompasses multifaceted, distinct forms. The possibility for unique and individual leadership styles offers opportunities for productive and valuable alliances between individuals with different skills working together towards a common goal. Harnessing the collective power of divergent leadership styles is the cornerstone of social movement.

In ECI, it is vital to cultivate and generate leaders and leadership opportunities actively, and to embrace the many manifestations of family leadership. Just as leaders present with multiple styles and purposes, so too family leadership can manifest with manifold qualities and diverse forms. It behoves the ECI sector to remember that family leaders do not necessarily emerge lineally from prescribed models or with a single set of qualities and skills. Although some family leaders may choose to accept a Peer Worker role, as they have at Plumtree, many may work outside this structured environment, and others still may work collectively to effect change.

Importantly, investing proactively in leadership and cultivating emerging leaders from the earliest point reaps long-term benefits: investing in leaders early offers longitudinal advantages to ECI as a sector. Equally importantly, an ongoing commitment to such investment in leadership is critical, since leadership is not a static destination, but rather is a continuously evolving and developing dynamic. To ensure enduring leadership impact, leaders need to grow and mature their skills with integrity within a supportive environment in which leadership is both nurtured and actively modelled. Thus it is not only the recognition of leadership that is important, but equally establishing the conditions for sustaining and renewing existing leaders.

Sector development and capacity building

There are, of course, practical considerations when approaching family leadership. In a sector in which most investment and funding (both public and private) is directed at services and service delivery, the question arises as to how to encourage government agencies and private investors to redirect funding from policies and programs to instead invest in the development of service providers to establish the 'by families, for families' priorities that promote and foster family leadership opportunities. Given the immediate context of the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in Australia, we are at a crossroads in which the ECI sector is primed for development and change, and in which the need for family leadership to build family capacity and autonomy is especially pronounced.

As a sector, how do we shift focus from interventions and services to dedicate necessary resources into growing family capacity and leadership? As Dr Kendrick noted, as the social movement of 'families leading families' gathers momentum, demand for family leadership opportunities will build, but how do we continue to garner enough initial interest to continue to spread this grassroots movement outside of Plumtree and its current national and international partners?

Promoting new approaches in ECI and expanding these with integrity

In this session we worked together to develop strategies for how family capacity building initiatives might be nurtured and scaled up in light of best practices in ECI. This discussion was situated in the context of Plumtree's Now and Next program as a case study.

Framework to document our principles

There is national and global recognition that Plumtree is an important innovator in family-centred practices in the ECI sector. It is also widely acknowledged that a disparity within the sector often exists between the principles of best family-centred practice, and actual service delivery in which the 'expert model' dominates. It is crucial to Plumtree to uphold its own position of leadership in the sector, and to ensure the integrity of its principles and programs as these are disseminated into the sector.

In this session, then, we considered preparing a position document that establishes Plumtree's value base around genuine family-centred best practice, to ensure that the organisations with whom Plumtree partners in the future share our core values. Having a statement which clearly articulates and encapsulates our values and guiding beliefs about family-centredness and family leadership provides Plumtree with a framework with which to engage the sector more broadly. It is possible that an existing document, such as the Parent-Professional Partnership statement, could form the basis for such a framework, although involving families deeply in the creation of such a statement would be ideal. Similarly, establishing a charter agreement, which would outline the fundamental principles of the Now and Next program and bind participating organisations to those principles, is an important step to ensure integrity and scalability.

Peer Workforces

One of the core, unique 'ingredients' in Plumtree's approach to family-centredness, and a cornerstone of Now and Next, is its peer workforce. Peer workforces, however, don't exist without challenges, not least of which is how to maintain the essential integrity of peer workers so that they aren't co-opted or professionalised to become simply another workforce. Plumtree needs both to understand and to articulate the essence of their peer workforce and implement measures to protect those essential qualities. As part of this process, Plumtree has partnered with the Centre for Disability Studies, affiliated with the University of Sydney, who are undertaking a research project that looks at the experience of peer work on peer workers themselves. This research will complement other research Plumtree has commissioned into the benefits of peer work for various stakeholders, as well as external research into peer work undertaken elsewhere, such as the Ability Links research into the impact of harnessing lived experience.

Currently, early evidence suggests that peer workers foster a benefit mindset in the workers themselves and in the families who they support. However, the issue remains of how to expand such leadership into the broader community to achieve maximum impact. The importance of knowledge translation (the translation of research into knowledge relevant to different stakeholders) must be recognised if we are to move past research into policy change and sector development. ECI organisations should be encouraged to reflect upon the evidence that suggests that parents are change agents for themselves, their families, and their communities, and to formulate ways in which ECI organisations can empower parents to continue this work. Plumtree, too, needs to continue to consider the ways in which it empowers its parents and maximise its diverse family leadership pool.

Now and Next program

Now and Next is Plumtree's award winning family-capacity building program, facilitated and co-designed by Plumtree's peer workforce. It forms the foundation of Plumtree's family-centred, family leadership practices. A recent evaluation by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute indicates that there are many active ingredients leading to the success of Now and Next: Plumtree's challenge is to identify which of these active ingredients are critical to achieve family capacity- and leadership-building. Equally, Plumtree needs to develop materials which not only document a manualised process for replicating the Now and Next program, but also captures stories that demonstrate different approaches to leadership, facilitation, and implementation. In this context, it was discussed that understanding active ingredients and capturing stories would help to ensure the transferability of Now and Next to the broader ECI sector and to ensure relevance in other geographic regions. Maintaining the model, intent and integral principles of the program by identifying the 'non-negotiable' components key to the program's evidence base and ideologies is key, but this endeavour must be approached within a flexible framework that allows Now and Next to evolve organically in response to the needs of different communities.

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Future research on Now and Next might include a longitudinal consideration of the economic benefits if families (both with and without formal NDIS funding supports) reduce their formal supports and early intervention requirements as a result of the program. Importantly, if Now and Next is to be marketable to families utilising NDIS funding, both cost benefit and capacity building evidence must be rigorously attested, and the sustainability of results over time verified. Research should thus seek to qualify what elements impact on quality of life for families of children with disability, and to address why past participants have been motivated to enrol and be involved in the Now and Next program. Such research not only acts to maintain an enrolment pipeline and to promote Now and Next in meaningful and relevant ways, but helps to establish a causal relationship that shows direct and immediate benefits to potential participants. Returning to our earlier discussion regarding leadership diversity, it also remains important for Plumtree to interrogate pathways not only to maintain a leadership pipeline, but also to develop leadership niches that recognise and foster different leadership preferences and roles.

Next steps state-wide, nationally, and working internationally, to further other new approaches.

The final session of the day asked whether it was appropriate to explore other new approaches at this juncture, and to evaluate the status quo to understand how to stimulate new approaches with new partners.

In finding appropriate partner organisations, which already possess the requisite organisational culture and structures to support Plumtree's initiatives to build family capacity and leadership, it is crucial to survey other organisations both nationally and internationally to find those organisations that are already invested in parent education for capacity building. These organisations are our natural allies and partners, and functioning together as a cooperative or formal alliance is more likely to bring systemic and sector-wide change. To this end, establishing a directory of innovation (for example, organisations engaging in peer-to-peer, family-to-family, family leadership, or family capacity building programs) would help to maintain national and global connections and to build momentum for change.

Dedicating time to discovering innovation across the sector is necessary to create a collective movement for change. Not all innovation is as public as Plumtree's efforts, and many innovative programs can be 'hidden' within community development environments. Interrogating the sector to determine which programs and organisations demonstrate the core values and principles which align to Plumtree's will help to streamline efforts to create authentic and reliable partnerships and alliances. It also is incumbent upon us to explore innovation and to pursue alliances in related sectors and across sectors (for example, the Mental Health, or community disadvantage programs).

Pre-emptive planning and funding for sustained alliance-building to grow innovation is essential to sustainability; utilising the potential for governmental support and finance to develop community principles is an ongoing challenge. Learning from examples such as the Community Resource Unit and Belonging Matters (both in Brisbane) which are actively channelling state government support to sustain their efforts will aid the effort to establish governmental assistance, although exploring non-government funding opportunities such as corporate or philanthropic sponsorship is also vital.

Of course, beyond initial alliances, many organisations have untapped potential if given appropriate resources, knowledge and support. Finding resourcing to increase the level of relevant marketing and communications (knowledge translation) is key to sustaining the movement into the future.

Plumtree, too, must continue to innovate. Establishing new approaches to continuing building family capacity, leadership and knowledge into the school years (that is, moving beyond a strictly ECI timeframe) is one potential next step, as is continuing to explore ways to make the Now and Next Alumni concept relevant and meaningful for families as they grow and to provide new opportunities for growth and learning. Plumtree must continue to ask the question, 'are we building community leaders for the future?', and to adapt and modify its programs to ensure an affirmative answer.

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