

Encouraging, Educating and Engaging Individuals Across Communities: The Smith Family's Strategy and Programs

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Abstract

The Smith Family's vision is to create a more caring, cohesive Australian community. To do this The Smith Family needs to work with and through others and engage individuals within their own communities. While our focus rests primarily with education, our strategy and broader programs provide opportunities for disadvantaged Australians to engage at social, technological, economic and civic levels.

Our major program, Learning for Life (LfL), currently supports over 22,000 disadvantaged Australian children and youth across more than sixty locations. Over six years ago, The Smith Family identified place management and a place centric approach as our preferred methodology for working with communities. Since then we have been focussing on "identifying community capacities, and using and enhancing assets, rather than being preoccupied with weaknesses or deficits in a community" (Sustainable Communities Network 2003; Black and Hughes 2001; Kretzman and McKnight 1993). To this end, The Smith Family engaged the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) to design two indexes to assist in the identification of communities or regions that had both medium to high levels of need and medium to high levels of capacity to benefit from the resources and investment that LfL could offer (Taylor et al. 2005).

The paper highlights current examples of The Smith Family's whole-of-community universal access approaches in program development in the early years in relation to three program areas: Communities for Children, Good Beginnings, and Let's Read. A further example, which illustrates another of The Smith Family's priority areas — ICT Literacy, is in relation to Community Technology Learning Centres. In the latter instance, preliminary evaluation results highlight how CTLCs assist in re-engaging individuals within and across communities.

The paper concludes with a consideration of the lessons The Smith Family is learning about sustaining momentum in a whole-of-community approach. These include the importance of non-threatening community settings; the necessity of partnerships for sustainability; the necessity of 'local champions' for 'local success'; and the importance of flexibility in identifying how to respond to local needs.

Keywords

Whole of community, community capacity, social capital, early years, ICT literacy

Background

The Smith Family's (TSF) vision is to create a more caring, cohesive Australian society. We have a dual role; increasing the participation of those who have previously been marginalised on the one hand, and increasing the engagement of those who have the capacity to give in terms of time, talent and dollars on the other. As far as participation is concerned, TSF is about unlocking *educational* opportunities for enhanced participation at social, technological, economic and civic levels.

The Smith Family's Learning for Life (LfL) program is aimed at giving children and youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to participate more fully and to achieve in the process of education (Zappala and Parker 2000). LfL is based on known links between economic disadvantage and educational disadvantage (Blanden and Gregg 2005). The suite of programs that comprise LfL has been in development since 1988, and currently supports over 22,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people in the context of their families in over 60 communities across Australia.

The core strategies of Learning for Life until now have been family-focussed, providing financial and personal support for economically disadvantaged children and students and their families from primary through tertiary education. More recently, LfL has also been extended to cover the pre-school years, in recognition of the important part that learning opportunities in these early years play in relation to capacity to take advantage of opportunities later in life. Eligibility for the program is determined through a family income test, and eligible students are awarded financial scholarships to assist with education-related expenses as the starting point of the program. They are also provided with mentoring and other forms of educational support in relation to reading and ICT literacy from educational support workers to overcome barriers to participation.

Over six years ago The Smith Family identified place management and a place-centric approach as our preferred methodology for working with communities.¹ Since then we have been focussing on "identifying community capacities, and using and enhancing assets, rather than being preoccupied with weaknesses or deficits in a community" (Sustainable Communities Network

¹ Place Management was one of eight guiding principles that have been providing direction in the way we are working to bring about our agenda for societal change. Others which are particularly relevant in the context of this paper include being evidence based, moving down the development spectrum to the early years and working with and through others.

2003; Black and Hughes 2001; Kretzman and McKnight 1993). One of the advantages of operating with a community-based focus for Learning for Life is the likelihood that such an approach will maximise the impact of the program in the communities within which it operates. Another reason is the potential to leverage resources across communities to build on and enhance a community's capacity by facilitating access to additional and complementary resources.

Selecting areas as part of a whole-of-community approach

With a whole-of-community approach guiding the growth of LfL, The Smith Family had to ask: "How do we assess eligibility in the new framework?" To answer this question, The Smith Family engaged the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) to design two indexes to assist in the identification of communities or regions that had both medium to high need and medium to high capacity to benefit from and build on the resources that LfL could offer (Taylor et al. 2005). The proposal was based on earlier research that had suggested that disadvantaged communities derive advantage most from the investment of resources when they are able to build on an adequate asset base for greater capacity.

Community disadvantage

Measuring socio-economic disadvantage across geographically defined areas is a fairly established practice as a means of assessing the extent of social inequities. Vinson (2004) surmised "indicators of social deprivation or disadvantage are now in wide use in many countries" (p. 14). High relative disadvantage in a community can be measured by proxy social indicators — such as low level of education and income — strongly associated with poor life outcomes, or by more direct measures of social or personal problems such as crime and poor health.

The most obvious examples of census-based measures of community need in Australia are the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) indexes. The SEIFA indexes are constructed using Principal Components Analysis² from census data and in 2001 comprise four indexes: the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage; Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage/Disadvantage; Index of Economic Resources; and Index of Education and Occupation. First level variables are education, income and occupation. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) puts forward that there has been a consensus that these variables are fundamental in measuring socio-economic status.

² Principal Components Analysis (PCA) is a statistical technique that reduces a number of correlated variables into one or more new variables, or principal components, which capture most of the variation of the original variables.

Community capacity

Drawing on the relevant literature, and particularly upon the Aspen Institute's (1996) definition, and for the development of a place-centric measure NATSEM defined community capacity as:

"The resources and assets in a community that enable it to address community problems and opportunities positively."

The idea of 'community capacity' has emerged partly as an alternative to the established 'needs-based' methodology associated with the study of geographical disadvantage. Community capacity is a complementary perspective that still holds to the same general aim of addressing differences in community outcomes. Community capacity comprises primary, secondary and tertiary building blocks ranging in significance from skills and organisations within the community, to physical infrastructure and services, then to largely external resources such as welfare and investment programs. Communities usually take this type of approach and engage in asset mapping to identify and leverage hidden or undervalued assets.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993, 1996) have been formative in the development of the 'strengths-based' view: they are widely acknowledged as having developed the concept of asset-based community development (ABCD), which includes the recognition of social capital, and the promotion of participatory development approaches. Community capacity and other strengths-based approaches to community development have informed a number of policy initiatives. Among the most notable are the FaCS Stronger Families and Communities Strategy's Communities for Children initiative; the New South Wales Government initiative People Place Partnerships; and the Victorian Government's Community Building Initiative, all reflecting concepts of community capacity.

Social capital

Social capital and community capacity are closely relation concepts in the context of a view of communities that is strengths-based:

"...social capital requires the active and willing engagement of citizens within a participative community. This is quite different from the receipt of services, or even of human rights to receive services, although these are unquestionably important. Social capital refers to people as creators, not as victims" (Onyx and Bullen 2000, p. 25).

In 2004, the ABS published its indicators of social capital (ABS 2004). The ABS has chosen to adopt the OECD measure of social capital in informing its work: "networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (OECD cited in ABS 2002, p. 4).

Social capital grows out of those social interactions and networks we experience in our daily lives. It is not a quality of individuals, but rather a quality of a group or community as a whole (Edgar 2001, p. 101).³ Bourdieu (1986) understands social capital as the networks that provide access to other resources. Coleman (1988) describes it as those relationships and ties, the networks, norms and sanctions that facilitate the attainment of human capital. Putnam (1993, 2000) defines social capital as the trust, norms and networks that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital arises out of and helps build a sense of social trust, the norm of reciprocity on which social exchange is based. It is a resource to collective action.

On the most basic level of *bonding*, social capital fosters relations with people who are very similar to us. It is usually marked by very strong ties nurtured in the face of the challenges of survival. A second level, *bridging social capital*, is characterised by connections with people who are not like us. The ties are often weaker than those associated with bonding, and are affected by mobility and a desire to get ahead. A further level, *linking social capital* makes possible connections to people in positions of power, and is also often used to leverage resources (Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Woolcock 2001; World Bank 2000).

The different types of social capital have an important role to play in fostering progressive degrees of social inclusion and participation. They can facilitate information exchange by enhancing the quality and quantity of dissemination, and are also critical for coordination, cooperation and resolving collective action problems. Social capital also facilitates conflict management and the pooling of resources, and is critical for public, private, and civic partnerships. All three types of social capital facilitate access to learning opportunities outside of the restrictions of given communities, as well as further investment in the human capital of a given community. This two-way directionality can be illustrated in The Smith Family's dual role of enhancing the participation of the previously marginalised and increasing the engagement of those with the capacity to give of time, talent and dollars.

By drawing on and facilitating the development of the different types of social capital within communities, The Smith Family's Education Support Workers can network and leverage connections that can lead to enhanced outcomes for LfL students and their families. The approach has the potential to consolidate initiatives that The Smith Family has taken thus far to

³ Edgar describes human or 'cultural capital' as the individual human capacities nurtured within family and community groups, the skills by which we cope with and learn to control our own environment, the knowledge and adaptability gained through education in its broadest sense — experience at work and our general adult experience — and the sense of meaning that grows

encourage and facilitate the participation of disadvantaged families in educational/learning opportunities. It also has the potential to engage and link those with the capacity, skills and resources to invest in the enhanced human and intellectual capital of individuals and families in the context of their communities.

Measuring community capacity

The indexes of community capacity and need do not seek to measure social capital explicitly. Community capacity, however, has a great degree of overlap with this and other terms — including, as identified by the Sustainable Communities Network, “community competence, public capital, civic capital...strong communities, sustainable communities, resilient communities, and healthy communities” (2003, p. 9). Social capital and community capacity are linked. While the indexes allow us to assess measures of assets and strengths, it is much more difficult to assess the current ability of a community to draw upon these strengths.

In Australia, there are three broad possible approaches to measuring community capacity or related concepts:

- Analysing aggregated proxy social indicators from the existing census data
- Collating existing alternative sources of direct measures — such as connectivity and participation within the community, and organisational data
- Administering a new survey specifically addressing the topic.

The advantages of using existing proxy indicators from the census are the availability and coverage of the data. Drawbacks are that the indicators can be viewed as indirect and lacking context. The key advantage of collecting direct indicators is to provide a more satisfactory measure. However, the effort of compiling consistent data across a large number of communities is much more challenging, and little relevant data is available at a small area level. Administering surveys specifically concerned with community capacity has the advantage of providing a very direct insight into the dimensions of the issue. The resources required to apply a direct survey to a large number of communities, however, is prohibitive. In weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each approach, including TSF’s budgetary limits for the project, NATSEM decided to use existing data only.

Regional Capacity Index — variables used

The ten variables of community capacity that have been included in the Regional Capacity Index have all been taken from the 2001 census. They provide the level of small-area data necessary

from the symbolic activities of arts, sports, music, reading and cultural interaction with diverse others.

for the project, as well as possessing positive characteristics that are reflective of an area possessing strong community capacity. The dimensions of community capacity have been divided into six domains, each of which reflects a resource, either communal or individual, that is thought to enhance community capacity. These are:

- Education — retention rates; university qualifications; completion of Year 12 (three variables)
- Housing — home ownership (one variable)
- Internet and Computer Technology (ICT) — Internet use; Internet use at home (two variables)
- Labour Force — employment rate; labour force participation rate (two variables)
- Income — household income (one variable)
- Remoteness — ARIA [Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia] (one variable).

Each domain measures human, social or economic capital, and together the domains create a comprehensive base on which our index of community capacity is founded.

Regional Need Index — variables used

In developing the Regional Need Index related to the Learning for Life suite of programs, NATSEM considered that areas most in need of LfL will have high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, particularly related to income and educational factors. Two variables were selected to construct the index of community need: first, the ABS index of socio-economic disadvantage (one of the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) series); and second, the proportion of families with children eligible for LfL in each area.

Choice of spatial unit

The spatial unit chosen for the development of indexes of capacity and need for the Learning for Life suite of programs is the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ABS 2001) statistical local area (SLA). There were 1353 SLAs in Australia in the 2001 ASGC. It is the base spatial unit used to collect and disseminate statistics other than those collected from the censuses. Other spatial units that were considered for the project were: collection districts; local government areas; postal areas; and statistical subdivisions (SSDs). SSDs are a general-purpose spatial unit of intermediate size. They consist of one or more SLAs, cover Australia without gaps or overlaps and do not cross state and territory boundaries. There are 207 SSDs in Australia. NATSEM chose not to use them as the basic spatial unit as they felt they were too large to provide enough spatial disaggregation (location-specific valuable information) in identifying areas of interest. However, in certain circumstances, NATSEM suggested that SSDs may be a more appropriate level for The Smith Family to assess the suitability of regions for its programs, so as part of the spatial analysis NATSEM analysed and amalgamated SLA results to SSD level.

SLAs were chosen as the most appropriate spatial unit for the construction of these indexes for a number of reasons. Firstly, the availability and quality of data at this level was seen to be much better than data at the collection district level, for reasons stated above, while still providing a very high level of valuable specific data for analysis. Secondly, SLAs are considered to be a more manageable spatial unit to implement and target programs, particularly as these areas aggregate to form larger spatial units including SSDs and LGAs. Finally, SLA has been chosen by the Department of Family and Community Services to analyse and implement their Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, which The Smith Family has noted as of considerable interest. The disadvantages of SLAs as a spatial unit are that they are not easily identifiable and vary in population size, with Queensland and the ACT having smaller SLAs than the other states and territories. For this reason NATSEM has carried out state by state analysis.

Spatial analysis methodology

The aim of the spatial analysis is to identify regions that have both medium to high capacity and medium to high need, as measured by the NATSEM indexes of community capacity and community need. This allowed them to recommend potential regions for the targeting of Learning for Life. The spatial analysis mostly entails a description of the spatial distribution of the two indexes, and how they overlap.

The challenge in identifying regions of medium to high capacity and medium to high need was to use a meaningful criteria or cut-off to successfully encompass this notion. It had to take into account the spatial patterns of regions meeting these criteria (for example, are there potentially too few or too many regions, are they all in the one city, is there any sort of meaningful commonality?). There was also a need to be conscious of what might constitute practical regions in the context of targeting Learning for Life at a community level. The regions (SLAs initially, and then SSDs) ultimately defined as having 'high capacity and high need' for Learning for Life are:

- in metropolitan areas, SLAs/SSDs which were ranked in the top two quintiles (40 per cent) of regions by the index of community capacity, and in the top two quintiles of regions by the Regional Need Index
- in non-metropolitan areas, SLAs/SSDs, which were ranked in the top half (50 per cent) of regions by the index of community capacity, and in the top two quintiles of regions by the index of community need.

Examples of a whole-of-community approach in program development

The Smith Family has been driving a whole-of-community approach focussing on prevention and early intervention on the basis of its guiding principles for change adopted over six years ago. According to these principles we have been:

- selecting socioeconomically disadvantaged communities with adequate levels of capacity within which to work
- consulting with schools and other agencies within these communities
- collocating our staff with relevant organisations based within these communities, with a particular focus on schools, reflecting our focus on education as a means of prevention
- using the LfL scholarship program to facilitate the development of credibility, trust and local relationships
- extending LfL in these communities to include a range of universal access education support programs, each of which provides opportunities for the engagement of community members in their delivery.

This evolutionary change process in the LfL program towards working as communities, either directly or through others, continues to be driven by a number of our initiatives focussing on the early years. These include Communities for Children, our partnership with Good Beginnings Australia and the Let's Read program. Our leadership in moving toward a whole-of-community approach in program development is also reflected in the growth of our network of Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs).

The early years

Communities for Children (C4C)⁴

In our role as the Facilitating Partner in seven Communities for Children sites,⁵ The Smith Family is developing its internal capacity for place based working which will lead to opportunities for the further evolution of Learning for Life. Communities for Children is a whole-of-community approach to improve outcomes for young children and families focussing on healthy young families, early learning and development, supporting families and parents and child friendly communities. The

⁴ Communities for Children is one of four streams in FaCS's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy Phase Two. It emphasises the importance of building community capacity in the development of evidence-based service integration mixes for enhanced outcomes in early childhood learning and care, parent and family support, healthy young families, child-friendly communities, and an effective system of family and children's services. Under the 'Communities for Children' umbrella, the government is to spend \$140 million over four years targeting up to 45 disadvantaged communities.

⁵ The Facilitating Partner's role is one of stewardship and collaboration with the community. It involves brokering and facilitating a change process in order to achieve better outcomes for young children within the community. TSF is the Facilitating Partner for C4Cs in Mirrabooka (northern Perth, Western Australia), Kwinana, Western Australia, Fairfield (western Sydney, New South Wales), and is the lead agency of a consortium in the role in Raymond Terrace, New South Wales with the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle, and in Brimbank, western Melbourne, Victoria, with ISIS Primary care. In addition, TSF is also the lead agency in a consortium with Good Beginnings in Katherine, Northern Territory, and Townsville West, Queensland.

principles underlying the development and implementation of Communities for Children include coordination of and adding value to existing local services, working in partnership with the community and other stakeholders and implementing evidence based solutions that build on community strengths and contribute to capacity building of personal and collective resources of individuals and communities.

Another key outcome in C4C, which is also related to a whole-of-community approach, is the creation of *child-friendly communities*. No research has been carried out in Australia to date to assist in determining objectively what such communities might look like. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), of which The Smith Family is a member, has signalled its intention to conduct a major research study to assist in this and to benefit from work which has been completed in other countries, particularly Canada. We are participating in the ARACY research by commissioning local researchers in each of the C4C sites where TSF is the Facilitating Partner to collect relevant data, the analysis of which will help us to understand the challenges as well as the key success factors in creating and maintaining child friendly communities.

Local researchers have been contracted by each of our Community for Children initiatives to undertake the evaluation of activities and services and to undertake a formative (process) evaluation of the Communities for Children model. The collection of data, analysis and reporting in each C4C site will also feed into the national evaluation being undertaken by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) in partnership with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). The formative evaluation will focus on how early childhood services are influenced to work as an integrated service system and how communities are galvanised to achieve better outcomes for children up to five years of age through better parenting, and from a stronger families base, how to become more supportive communities. The formative evaluation will be undertaken by The Alcoa Research Centre for Stronger Communities at Curtin University in Mirrabooka and Kwinana in WA. The evaluation of C4C activities and services will be undertaken by the Institute for Child Health Research (ICHR) in Mirrabooka and Kwinana, the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) in Brimbank, Macquarie University in Fairfield and the Family Action Centre in Raymond Terrace.

Another major endeavour connected with C4C sites is to understand what determines a successful home to school transition. TSF will play an active role in this research and will use the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), an instrument adapted from the Canadian EDI. The AEDI will produce a snapshot of all five-year-olds in the participating C4C sites, providing information on their learning and development stages. It will be collated by the Centre for

Community Child Health at the Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital in conjunction with the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research in Perth. We can gain an understanding from the relevant set of analyses of what improvements we can make in learning programs for future cohorts of children up to five years old, as well as the current cohort's 'remedial' needs. The AEDI results will be geographically mapped from among all the communities where it has been applied.

Good Beginnings

The Smith Family's national partnership with Good Beginnings is a powerful example of our guiding principle to work with and through others. Good Beginnings is an NGO that works to improve the physical, mental, social and educational outcomes for children up to five years old by building on the strengths of families and promoting strong, cohesive and caring communities. It also encourages a partnership approach that directly benefits families and young people, and children by working with families and communities to build parents' confidence in experiencing the joys of parenting; building parents' awareness of community services; and, building safer and secure environments for families. Through this partnership both The Smith Family and Good Beginnings are working collaboratively and leveraging capacities for early years program development. In addition, Learning for Life's focus on pre-school aged children, as well as school-aged children is a 'natural' partner for Good Beginnings, focussing jointly with Good Beginnings on the key home to school transition pathway and providing continuity thereafter.

Let's Read

Let's Read is a comprehensive program to promote reading aloud with young children from birth to five years of age, developed by The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) in partnership with The Smith Family. It has been designed specifically for use in disadvantaged communities and includes a community development resource package to support the development of processes and provide a range of practical resources to enable communities to promote the Let's Read messages in a sustainable manner. Thus, Let's Read potentially provides an opportunity for the LfL program to adopt a whole of community approach in supporting the development of Let's Read by communities within which they are located.

Following the successful completion of a comprehensive literature review in 2003–04 and feasibility testing of program components in 2004–05, the objective in 2005–06 is to facilitate the establishment of the program in up to 20 communities. Let's Read has two interrelated components: the training and resourcing of professionals in community settings who work closely with families with young children; and a community development resource package. This package supports communities to introduce Let's Read and provides a range of practical resources to help promote the Let's Read messages in a sustainable manner. The package will include suggestions

for empowering communities to develop models, structures and systems that promote and facilitate literate communities. Materials to support a community-wide awareness campaign promoting the benefits of reading with infants and young children will be included. The program's Community Facilitator is available to assist communities to establish and manage their program.

A number of communities in Victoria have already been approached and are currently being supported to establish a Let's Read program in their community in 2005–06. A number of Communities for Children Committees, including the one in Mirrabooka, Western Australia, for which we are the Facilitating Partner, are considering the possibility of including Let's Read in their site. The longer-term expectation is that this program will be taken up by a large number of communities around Australia. As the ESW role becomes increasingly community focussed, opportunities may arise for ESWs to assist the communities in which they work to establish and manage Let's Read programs.

Thus, Learning for Life will continue to be the backbone of our work within communities by evolving from its current form of delivery to one that is more variable from place to place, being a function of both our own capacity and the assets and needs of each particular community. In many communities in which LfL is currently operating, while continuing to deliver the financial scholarship program together with various education support programs, we will concurrently seek out opportunities where appropriate, to work collaboratively with other organisations and to phase in ways of working *with* communities. The 45 Communities for Children sites around Australia provide such an opportunity. For some of these sites this will mean establishing a new presence for LfL, which we will do through collocating with an appropriate organisation. Adopting the approaches used within the Communities for Children Initiative, we will seek to both enhance existing programs and expand the range of programs in the LfL suite to meet the needs and build on the strengths of these communities. In appropriate instances we will also develop the capacity to offer universal access to programs within these communities.

Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCS)

In addition to our developing community based focus in the early years, our work with the Microsoft Unlimited Potential (UP) National Network of Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCS) is also providing a further platform on which to facilitate linkages within and across communities. The objective of UP in Australia is to support CTLCS and networks of CTLCS to enhance their impact in the community and their long-term sustainability of operations. UP does this by providing resources to support CTLCS such as curriculum, Microsoft software, and also by assisting CTLCS in community engagement and in attracting disadvantaged individuals in the community to attend centres, particularly through the 117 Education Support Workers employed

by The Smith Family. UP also assists by linking other relevant local, state and national initiatives, such as PC refurbishing through the Microsoft Authorised Refurbisher program, migrant settlement services, and local iterations of job creation and employment programs.

The CTLCs unlock opportunities for greater numbers of disadvantaged Australians of all ages to learn technology skills and connect with others both in the context of the centres and online. In combination, all of the programs provide opportunities for the civic engagement of more than 1500 volunteers and for the involvement of businesses in corporate social responsibility. UP is Microsoft's principal initiative for increasing the availability of accessible affordable opportunities for people to gain experience and skills in using computers and the Internet. From a small start in 2000 with our initial computer clubs in Collingwood and Sunshine, through to our ongoing involvement in UP, The Smith Family has gained considerable experience and knowledge about providing appropriate opportunities for meeting the technology learning needs of those unable to access other more formal and often expensive options.

Under current growth plans, the number of TSF-affiliated Community Technology Learning Centre (CTLC) Partners will increase from 35 to 51, and the number of TSF-affiliated CTLC locations will increase from 64 to 85 by early 2006. These growth plans focus on expanding UP into locations where Learning for Life is already operating, and on increasing the proportion of Learning for Life families who participate in UP. ESWs will continue to play an important facilitating role by identifying a range of suitable CTLC partners for possible inclusion in the UP program, and by promoting the availability and benefits of the program to LfL families.

In addition to further expanding the UP network this year, we will also investigate and pilot new initiatives with the potential to complement and enhance the outcomes achieved to date. The drivers for these initiatives include:

- moving TSF beyond the basic CTLC skills acquisition model to a whole-of-community approach which integrates our core theme, technology literacy, as a facilitator of community connectedness
- facilitating more comprehensive and detailed delivery of the 'ABCs' of digital inclusion — Access, Basic Skills and Community Connections
- establishing new and sustainable funding sources, both for TSF and for the CTLC partners we work 'with and through' other organisations
- providing further avenues for the engagement of our large corporate partners in this area
- increasingly unlocking opportunities for Learning for Life families and others to ensure they are ready, willing and able to be 'digitally engaged'.

Preliminary evaluation results⁶

CTLCS have been found not only to engage disengaged learners and change attitudes towards learning, but also connect people and communities. This connectedness is a result of providing a public meeting place where locals can interact and Internet access where individuals can communicate with others outside of their area and become part of 'communities of interest' (Muir 2004). Participants of CTLCS have been found to increase their interaction with previous strangers, have a greater awareness of local activities, opportunities and resources available to them, engage in community issues and improve their community identity.

Re-engaging individuals within and across communities

The demographic details of the attendees reveal that the UP centres were successful at attracting the disadvantaged. Not only were the majority of participants financially disadvantaged — 80.2 per cent held a pension, health care or concession care card,⁷ compared to only 33 per cent of the Australian population⁸ — many were also predominantly excluded from other mainstream areas of participation. Not only were many of the UP Centre's attendees financially disadvantaged, there was also a significant proportion who were disconnected from the potential opportunities and social networks that work, study, caring or volunteering can offer. The fact that these individuals attended a CTLC is testament to the important role community centres can play in actively re-engaging individuals in society.

For many individuals, attendance at the centres went beyond simply learning about and getting access to computers and related technology. The sense of place was clearly important to the participants. The centres provided a public space where individuals could come and meet other locals and interact with people they may not normally associate with. Over 90 per cent of participants in the post-program evaluation reported talking to other people using the centre; 69.4 per cent talked to other people using the centre on most occasions; and 83.7 per cent of the group admitted that some of the people they communicated with at the centre were different from them in age, background, ideas and/or religion.

Contact went beyond communication because once at the centre most people were not only talking, but assisting each other. Over three-quarters of participants (77.6 per cent) reported that they had been helped by someone in the class for computer problems and 61.2 per cent stated that they had helped others in the class with computer related problems. Perhaps more striking,

⁶The overview of the evaluation is drawn from work carried out by Kristy Muir (2004)

⁷ Only 53.5 per cent of pension, health care and concession card holders were retired.

⁸ Based on ABS 2002 data and it includes Pensioner Concession Card, Health Care Card and Commonwealth Seniors' Health Card holders (ABS 2002).

however, was the broader assistance given. People within the group clearly formed trusting relationships with others because almost half reported helping other people in the class with non-computer related problems and half stated they had received help for other problems. Having an increased network to draw upon for assistance is known to be beneficial and for ten per cent of participants this may be especially so because they reported getting help for problems unrelated to computers most of the time they attended the centre. These centres are places that facilitate building social capital for some individuals.

Testament to computer technology learning centres going beyond places where individuals learn ICT skills, is the 75.5 per cent of individuals who noted that attending the centre has made a 'difference' to their lives and the 46.4 per cent who felt that the centre has made a real difference to their community.⁹ This was further reinforced by participants' unsolicited comments. Three individuals noted the benefit of being able to communicate via email with friends and family, and 13 spoke of gaining friends, having a "great social outlet" and increasing "contact with many more people". One respondent wrote that he/she was now "more confident in my ability to deal with other people" and another felt it has "helped me communicate with people". Three participants echoed the sentiment of one individual: "Socially, it has enabled me to communicate better with family and friends as they all knew about computers. Now I know what they are talking about". Others noted that it has made them "more independent" and "more employable". For some it had filled a gap in their lives: "...my daily activities are interesting as I am now able to use computers"; "I now have something to look forward to each week".

Like their adult counterparts, centres helped youth connect with family, friends and their community. Over half of the youth (56.6 per cent) used the Internet at the centres to keep in touch with relatives and friends and almost one-third of youth (30.3 per cent) used the Internet to find out about events in their local area. Most notable, however, were the connections youth made with each other within the centres. Not only did 91 per cent of the youth talk to other students at the centre and 72.4 per cent talk frequently, but 89 per cent reported that some of those they spoke to were different from them in age, background, ideas and/or religion. Youth also commonly assisted each other while at the centres. Fifty-one per cent reported frequently helping others with computers and the Internet and 79.3 per cent had helped others at some stage.

Overall, the literature portrays digital inclusion programs as a proven approach to helping disadvantaged individuals enjoy a greater degree of social inclusion and connectedness, as well as helping them to become more ICT literate. The evaluation of UP has revealed that TSF's UP

⁹ While the latter figure was lower than expected, the preliminary findings from surveys received for the second phase of the evaluation indicate that this will be significantly higher.

centres may go some way to increasing digital and social inclusion. The centres provided free access to computers and the Internet in a non-threatening environment and they attracted a number of disadvantaged participants, many of whom were otherwise excluded from mainstream activities like work or study. From the self-reporting of participants, attending the centres helped to increase ICT skills, foster positive attitudes towards learning, contribute to personal growth and increase social connectivity — electronically connecting people to relatives and friends and physically networking people with other locals (Muir 2004).

Summary — lessons learned to sustain momentum

The Smith Family is learning a number of lessons as part of our moving toward a whole-of-community approach in relation to Learning for Life. Preliminary evaluations of three major initiatives in the early years and another in relation to ICT Literacy have already begun to suggest the how to consolidate and build on these lessons. At present, four areas in particular have become especially clear about moving forward with a place-centric model:

1. Non-threatening community settings can provide inviting contexts for learning and opportunities to develop self-confidence

Preliminary evaluations of CTLCs suggest that providing non-threatening contexts for learning and opportunities to develop self-confidence are instrumental in enhancing capacity (OECD 2001; Oliver 2001). The OECD found the most common barrier to learning is not having an appreciation or understanding of the benefits of learning. So even if we remove the other barriers of time and financial constraints, certain people will still lack the 'drive' to learn (Selwyn et al. 2003, p. 179). A key feature of UP in Australia is its focus on non-formal learning as a means of re-engaging disadvantaged Australians in lifelong learning.

Within the Communities for Children sites the inducement to learn is at the community level and focuses on the attraction of programs that have clearly understood benefits for children up to five years old and support for their parents in their role as carers and early educators. C4C interventions are readily accessible within the context of communities in non-threatening and user-friendly settings. In addition, all of the interventions are designed as universal access initiatives to ensure that no stigma or shame might be associated with taking part in them. While we are still only setting up the evaluation frameworks to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions at this point, we have been able to assess high levels of community interest and a healthy motivation to take part in C4C activities. The community centric focus of the initiative is especially appealing for parents of children up to five years old in that it has the potential to introduce them to networks of support and other services of which they may not have been aware.

2. Partnerships and community engagement are vital for sustainability

Partnerships, and working with and through other organisations are a key to leveraging the attraction of further investment and resources to achieve sustainability for C4C and the CTLCs beyond initial funding periods (CTCNet 2002). Indeed, C4C sites cannot be set up and approved without the establishment of partnerships and active community engagement. In addition, the stronger CTLCs in the UP Network often have links to entrepreneurial leadership or leadership that is well integrated into their community. It is important that both UP and C4C build on the leveraging of resources and investment with a well-developed network of volunteers.

The Sydney Olympics reminded us all that volunteers can make an invaluable contribution, as long as we are prepared to make an investment in preparing them to take on specific tasks. Volunteers also require time-consuming management, ongoing support, precise information and clearly defined policies. While managing volunteers is not the same as managing staff, volunteer management still consumes significant resources. C4C and UP both require significant volunteer engagement for set up and ongoing operation, ownership and sustainability.

3. 'Local champions' are needed to ensure 'local success'

Sufficient social infrastructure must be in place for any whole-of-community initiative to be effective. While the required level of physical infrastructure is relatively simple to define and procure, the required level of social infrastructure is more nebulous. When recruiting CTLC partners for UP, the single most important factor TSF has considered is the strength, capacity and quantity of 'local champions' or proactive leaders who are well connected and engaged in the community. Such 'champions' cannot be easily defined, except perhaps for displaying a proven track record for making a difference in the community through worthwhile initiatives.

The importance of local champions is also proving to be critical in the lead time activities that are critical in the setting up period of C4C initiatives. For example, the convening of the C4C committee, which has a lead responsibility in the development of an evidence-based service integration mix, requires the capacity to engage a significant range of stakeholders from service providers to those who use the services to potential sources of additional investment. In addition, local champions are also critical to the negotiations that have to take place in the formulation of the Community Strategic Plan (CSP). The latter projects the plan of action over a four-year period and provides a platform for the development of the yearly service delivery plans. It is highly unlikely that either the C4C Committee or the CSP could be respectively established and drafted without the type of engagement that local champions have the capacity to facilitate.

4. Communities need to be involved in identifying local needs and how to respond to them

The key challenge in responding effectively is for communities to be engaged in adapting programs suitably to local situations. This involvement is a key characteristic of both C4C and UP. Community-focussed program development is a precondition for the setting up of C4C initiatives. It is seen as the starting point for community ownership and sustainability. A similar starting point and dynamic is also a part of UP. While UP in Australia is a national program, it is delivered locally by selected community partners who are already actively engaged in their communities. We recognise that local community organisations are best placed to assess local needs and demands, as well as connect with individual fields of fascination. Participants in both C4C and UP have acknowledged that community engagement requires greater periods of time in reaching agreement about the way forward. However, they have also acknowledged that the challenge of reaching consensus on what problems to address and how to address them represents time well spent.

Acknowledgments

Elizabeth Taylor, Rebecca Cassells, Rachel Lloyd and Justine McNamara are acknowledged with warm appreciation. I drew on their report for The Smith Family *Capacity and Need: Identifying Regions for The Smith Family Learning for Life Program* in drafting the first major section of the paper 'Selecting Areas as Part of a Whole of Community Approach'.

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