

Building engagement capacity in professionals who work with developmental vulnerability: The effect of a six-session psychotherapeutic training and supervision program for Pre School Field Officers.

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Abstract

Developmental vulnerability, deficits in physical health, behavior, emotions, language, and communication affect nearly one third of Australian pre-school aged children. Early intervention by professionals operating in normal and non-stigmatising environments, such as kindergartens, have much to offer in terms of improving the developmental outcomes of children through their ability to facilitate service uptake and provide a soft-entry point to these services for 'hard-to-reach' families. Effective engagement with 'hard-to-reach' families is, however, challenging and professional development activities focused on these skills may be lacking in professionals whose primary brief is to work with children. We implemented a six-session psychotherapeutic training and supervision program for Pre School Field Officers (PSFOs) who work with vulnerable children and families in the Victorian pre school system. Seven PSFOs participated in the program and seven waitlisted PSFOs constituted the control group. Pre and post program surveys measuring PSFOs capacity to understand and engage with vulnerable families and coach teachers were administered to program and waitlisted PSFOs. Post-program focus groups were conducted with program PSFOs to assess professional benefits of the program. Results showed that program PSFOs significantly improved post-program in their understanding of developmental vulnerability and in their capacity to engage with vulnerable families. Program PSFOs also improved in their confidence to assist teachers to engage with vulnerable families but not in their capacity to assist teacher

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

understanding. Waitlisted PSFOs showed no gains over time in their capacity to understand or engage in the context of developmental vulnerability. Qualitative results provided evidence that the six-session program built understanding and engagement capacity in PSFOs by enhancing reflective function and reducing empathetic strain. This study provided support for using a psychotherapeutic approach to the professional development of pre-service early childhood professionals to enhance their capacity to understand and engage with vulnerable families. More effective engagement with parents of vulnerable children by professionals in normal and non-stigmatising environments is one way to improve the uptake of services by vulnerable families who may be at risk from falling through the service gap.

Introduction

A national reading of the health and development of young children called the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) was taken in 2009 and again in 2012 (AEDI, 2013). According to the most recent of these reports, 22 % of children can be classified as developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains by the time they enter their first year of schooling. The domains include physical health and wellbeing, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills. The domains of physical health and language/ cognitive skills describe delays in physical or cognitive ability. Vulnerability in the emotional maturity and communication skills domains, is largely defined in terms of social or emotional problems, manifesting in behavioural difficulties. Early childhood intervention plays a significant role in reducing the rate of developmental vulnerability, however, the challenge lies in accessing vulnerable families such that early intervention can be provided and effectively implemented. In this paper we argue that building the

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

engagement capacity of professionals working in non-stigmatised pre-service environments, such as kindergartens, is an effective way to enhance parental uptake and retention in services for their vulnerable children, a proposition, which is gaining support (Cortis, 2012; Winkwork, et al., 2010).

Effectively engaging families of vulnerable children, can, nevertheless, pose particular challenges, for which specific skills are needed. Professionals working in this pre-service environment are typically well-trained to work with vulnerable children, but often receive little support for their work involving parents (Brown, Knoche, Edwards & Sheridan, 2009). In this study, we sought to evaluate the effectiveness of providing psychotherapeutic training and supervision for enhancing engagement capacity in early childhood intervention professionals who work in a pre-service environment.

The Pre School Field Officer Program

PSFOs are a particular group of early childhood professionals working in the Victorian kindergarten system in Australia. The PSFO program is a state funded early childhood intervention service that provides consultancy to kindergarten teachers and parents of developmentally vulnerable children. The aim of PSFO work is to improve various developmental outcomes of children and thereby prevent them from being disadvantaged in the school system and throughout life. Children are referred to the PSFO program by a parent, a kindergarten teacher, or by another professional person working with the child and family. Once a referral has been received the PSFO meets with the family and teacher and observes the child in the kindergarten. Services offered to involved parties by the PSFO include observation and screening of children with developmental concerns, advice and ongoing support to teachers and parents with regard to children with additional needs, consultation

with parents and referral to specialist children's services as required, liaison and consultation with community services and other early childhood professionals. Their role also includes assisting in the process for children requiring a second year at kindergarten and advocating on behalf of children and their families. In some cases, PSFOs provide parent education, professional development programs, and short-term targeted small-group interventions for children and their parents (Department of Human Services, 2001).

Hard-to-Reach Families

Amongst the benefits of the PSFO role, is the context in which it is carried out - that is, in kindergartens. Kindergartens in Victoria, Australia, are a universal service accessed by the majority of parents. As such, PSFOs potentially have access to families who have vulnerable children, but who may not engage with the service system and who may be at highest risk for service attrition (Snell-Johns et al., 2004; Nock & Ferriter, 2005). PSFOs are likely, therefore, to have a high level of access to "hard-to-reach" families.

Defining hard-to-reach families. The definition of hard-to-reach families generally refers to sections of the community, who are eligible and advised to take part in services, but who are difficult to get involved (Barrett, 2008; Doherty, Hall, & Kinder, 2003). Cortis, Katz, & Patulney (2009) suggested that families do not engage for a number of reasons, which can be linked to the category of family they are. Firstly, there are marginalised, socially and economically disadvantaged families, whose disengagement is due to the lack of opportunities they face. Secondly, there is the group of "invisible" parents, who are overlooked in the system, and slip through the professional net. The third category defines families that are resistant by attitude to seek professional aid and choose not to engage in services.

Engaging hard-to-reach families. Cortis et al. (2009) have suggested many ways to improve parental engagement with the service system. Cortis et al. urges practitioners to consider both practice and process to effectively engage vulnerable families in support services and encourage their continued participation. Practically, programs need to be informal, flexible, and non-stigmatising, but the process of building relationships through listening and connecting with families is also considered to be essential. Other researchers have attested to the notion that relationships are a significant and successful means for facilitating engagement of vulnerable families (Barrett, 2008; Stanley and Kovacs, 2003). In particular, Barrett (2008) suggests that these relationships are most effective and least time-consuming when built from the inside. This means that members of the community already surrounding the family are in a good position to enhance family engagement. Along these lines, interventions, which have soft (non-judgmental) entry points, utilize places the family usually visit, and include time for building relationships with vulnerable groups, are considered beneficial. Indeed recent research suggests that engaging families of vulnerable children in such normal and non-stigmatising environments is an important, and potentially underutilized way, to reach a population of parents who are typically “hard-to-reach” (Winkworth et al., 2010; Cortis, 2012).

Given the description of the PSFO role and the context in which PSFOs work, it is likely that PSFOs have significant potential to provide such “soft entry points” to a service system designed to assist vulnerable children for many hard to reach families. The reality of these engagement interactions must not, however, be overlooked. In describing hard-to-reach families, Cortis (2012) discusses families who are difficult to engage because of their social and personal circumstances and their personal preferences and behaviours. These broad descriptions encompasses marginalised

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

families from ethnic minorities and indigenous populations, as well as those who are homeless, sick or disabled, involved in illegal activities, or are of concern to child protection authorities. It also includes families who are resistant or disengaged due to mental health issues, low trust, negative attitudes, and because they are living complex and chaotic lives. Interaction in the majority of these cases would necessarily be challenging and would foreseeably require some key skills on the part of the PSFOs. Research suggests that professional development for roles in early childhood often focus on direct work with children, rather than on the skills needed to engage parents (Brown, Knoche, Edwards, & Sheridan, 2009). It is our contention, therefore, that specific training is needed for early childhood professionals in developing their capacity to engage with vulnerable and hard-to-reach families so as to enhance parental service engagement and subsequent outcomes for vulnerable children.

Psychotherapeutic Training and Supervision

Psychotherapeutic concepts have much to offer in building effective engagement practices in early childhood professionals exposed to some of the challenging family contexts described here. In particular, Fonagy and Target's (1997) concept of reflective functioning is relevant in contexts of developmental vulnerability. Reflective functioning describes a capacity to observe and reflect on the mental state of another. Evidence suggests that reflective functioning might be particularly lacking in those families touched by stress, trauma, and, or mental illness such that care-givers are unable to understand and make meaning of their children's emotion (Ackerman, 2012). In these cases, children have difficulty learning how to recognize and regulate their own emotions and are often characterized by emotional difficulties (Field, et. al., 1988; Fonagy, 1998).

As mentioned previously, emotional difficulties are one of the key definitions of developmental vulnerability (AEDI, 2012), and the primary brief of a PSFO.

Ackerman (2012) showed that by building the reflective function in professionals involved in the direct care of traumatised children, the child's parents began to improve in their own reflective function, which was then transmitted to the child with the effect of improving their own emotional difficulties. Ackerman's work involved helping staff at a childcare centre understand the dynamics of the parent-child relationship, reflect more deeply on what might be going on, and develop skills at exploring the wider context. She found that once the staff member started to understand the mother and reflected more effectively on what was going on in the mother's mind, the mother would in turn begin to reflect more effectively on what was happening emotionally for her child.

In addition to encouraging a positive cycle of reflective function, psychotherapeutic-based training and supervision for professionals involved in early childhood can also enhance empathetic attunement and prevent the negative impacts of empathetic strain, which can often be a feature of work with vulnerable families. Etherington (2009) suggests that one of the risks for helpers is that they react unconsciously to the stories and contexts to which they are exposed. Without correct supervision, helpers can become empathetically disconnected and withdraw from or repress the information to which they are exposed. Indeed, Azar (2000) suggested that those who work with vulnerable children in particular run a high risk of vicarious traumatization, one effect of which is numbing workers to the difficulties of their clients. Through psychotherapeutic supervision, helpers may be able to gain self-knowledge and

develop reflective practices, which can assist them to remain in emotional contact with their clients without becoming overburdened themselves.

The Current Study

In the current study, we sought to enhance PSFOs pre-service engagement capacity with vulnerable families by providing them with a specialized psychotherapeutic training and supervision program. This program was designed to enhance PSFO self-reflective practice and ability to engage more contextually when working with developmental vulnerability. We expected that PSFOs who had received this training would show greater efficacy in being able to understand and engage parents of vulnerable children. We also predicted that trained PSFOs would show greater efficacy in coaching teachers to understand and engage with parents of vulnerable children. Since self-efficacy is proposed as a direct predictor of behavior (Bandura, 1986), we expected that measuring efficacy for key skills in engaging vulnerable families would be a good proximal measure of actual engagement capacity.

Method

Participants

Fifteen PSFOs participated in the study. Seven eastern region PSFOs constituted the program condition and seven western region PSFOs constituted the waitlist/ control condition.

Training and Supervision Program

Research design. The study was a 2x2 mixed design. The between groups variable was the condition in which the participants were placed; either the program condition or the waitlist condition. The within groups variable was the time that the participants were surveyed, pre-program survey (Time 1) and post-program survey

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

(Time 2). Small 2-3 member focus groups were administered to program PSFOs post-program.

Dependent variables. There were two main dependent variables. Teacher self-efficacy, with two subscales; PSFO efficacy to assist teacher *understanding* of vulnerability, and PSFO efficacy to assist teacher *engagement* with parents of vulnerable children and parent self-efficacy, with two subscales; PSFO efficacy to *understand* parents of vulnerable children, and PSFO efficacy to *engage* parents of vulnerable children.

Intervention. The PSFO training and supervision program was a psychologist-led structured case-based session in a group environment. In a small collegiate group, participants received theory around the psychological issues, both individual and contextual, to consider in contexts of developmental vulnerability. Participants were then guided to discuss their individual cases and to think more reflectively and contextually about the issues involved for themselves and for their clients.

The intervention was a semi-structured six-session program delivered over 12 weeks. A guide was produced to provide participants with an outline of the broad topic of each session and to keep the program consistent over multiple deliveries. The six sessions were as follows:

Session 1. Overview of working with children's mental health.

Session 2. Mapping issues and focusing in.

Session 3. Unconscious factors: Client and self.

Session 4. The impact of the work on the worker.

Session 5. Workers perspectives and motivations.

Session 6. Overview, clarification and summary.

Measures

Teacher self-efficacy. PSFO confidence for working with teachers of vulnerable children contained two sub-scales. This was based on Bandura's (1986) recommendation that self-efficacy be measured in as task specific a manner as possible. Two items measured PSFO efficacy for assisting teachers to understand developmental vulnerability. PSFOs were asked how confident they felt in assisting teachers to 1. *Explore and understand the factors contributing to a child's developmental vulnerability* and 2. *Empathise with the wider context involved with developmental vulnerability*. Seven items measured PSFO efficacy for assisting teachers to engage with parents of vulnerable children. PSFOs were asked how confident they felt assisting teachers to interact effectively with 1. *anxious*, 2. *defensive*, 3. *avoidant parents* and 4. *parents in difficult interpersonal*, and 5. *financial* circumstances, 6. *parents who have substance abuse issues*, and 7. *abusive parents*. In all measures of teacher self-efficacy, participants were asked to indicate how confident they felt about assisting teachers to understand and engage with parents on seven-point likert-type scales where 1 (*no confidence*) and 7 (*high confidence*)

Parent self-efficacy. The parent self-efficacy measure was identical to the teacher self-efficacy measure except that PSFOs were asked to indicate how confident they themselves felt about each of the nine scenarios on seven-point likert-type scales where 1 (*No confidence*) and 7 (*high confidence*)

Focus groups. Focus group structure was based on the focus group theory of Kreuger (1994). According to Kreuger, focus groups should follow a particular question structure. The first question should be an open introductory question, followed by two or three transition questions, which are designed to get discussion

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

started. The final questions should be the key question of the focus group. In this way, the discussion is similar to a funnel, getting more and more specific and focused as it progresses. The following general question structure was used:

Introductory question. “As we go around the circle, can you each describe what led you to work in early childhood intervention?”

Transition questions. “Can you describe some of the key challenges of your work?” and “Can you describe some of the key rewards of your work?”

Focus questions. “Can you describe any ways in which the six-session program has helped you professionally?” and “Can you describe any ways in which participating in the six-session program has caused you to perceive or look at your work differently?”

Procedure

After obtaining internal ethical approval from the Cairnmillar Ethics Committee and external approval from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, PSFO's were recruited to participate in a six-session training and supervision program. PSFOs from the eastern region were invited to participate immediately, and PSFOs from the western region were waitlisted to participate at the completion of the eastern region training. Participants were provided with all information and consent forms for the study via email. All participants, program and waitlist, completed a pre-program survey prior to the commencement of the first training program. Participants in the eastern region participated in the six-session program, western region participants performed their work as normal. At the end of the program, all participants completed a post-program survey. Program PSFOs also participated in small post-program focus groups of between 2 to 3 participants, which was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

A set of 2x2 mixed ANOVAs were conducted to measure changes in the dependent variables between the program and waitlist conditions over the two time periods. Inductive content analysis was used to analyse the focus group discussion. Statements made by participants constituted the first order themes which were then grouped following an iterative process by two reviewers into second order themes.

Results

Teacher Self Efficacy

PSFO self-efficacy to work with teachers in the context of developmental vulnerability was measured in two ways; PSFO efficacy to enhance teacher understanding of developmental vulnerability and PSFO efficacy to enhance teacher engagement skills with parents of developmentally vulnerable children. We now describe the results for both these forms of self-efficacy.

Understanding. Observation of the means displayed in Table 1.1 and in Figure 1.1, indicate that PSFO confidence to assist teachers to understand the issues involved in a child's developmental vulnerability generally increased over time. Nonetheless, the main effect of time was not significant, $F(1,12)=3.3$, $p>0.05$. The effect size for time was, however, moderate (partial $\eta^2 = 0.22$) and the p value was bordering on significance ($p=0.09$) providing some support for the assertion that self-efficacy for teacher understanding improved over time. Despite indications in the means that PSFOs in the eastern program condition tended to display higher levels of confidence in assisting teacher understanding than the western waitlist condition, there was no main effect of condition, $F(1,12)= 1.78$, $p>0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.13$, nor was there an interaction effect, $F(1,12)=0.04$, $p>0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.003$.

Table 1.1

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

Means and Standard Deviations for Teacher Self-Efficacy (Understanding) Between Conditions Over Two Time Periods

	Time 1		Time 2	
	Eastern (Program)	Western (Waitlist)	Eastern (Program)	Western (Waitlist)
Mean	5.6	4.7	6.1	5.1
SD	1.1	1.3	1.0	1.9

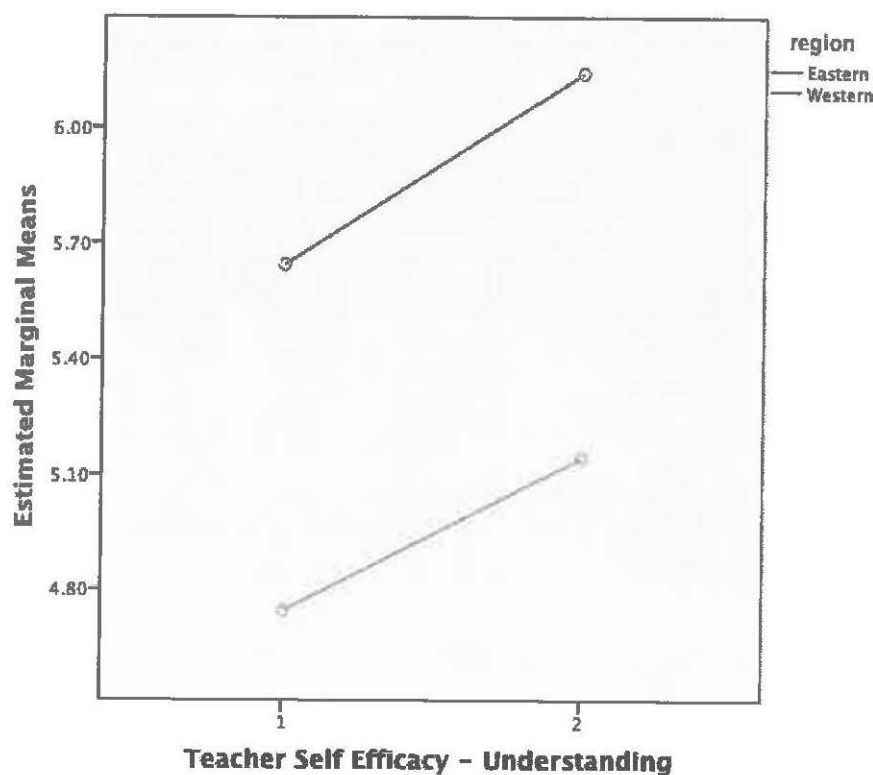


Figure 1.1. Teacher self-efficacy (understanding) for condition over time

Engagement. As can be seen in Table 1.2 and Figure 1.2, the pattern of results for PSFO self-efficacy to assist teachers to engage effectively with families of developmentally vulnerable children was more marked than in the results of PSFO efficacy for teacher understanding. In particular, the means did not appear to change at all for the western waitlist condition, but there appeared to be a noticeable increase in efficacy for the eastern program condition after the program. There was no main

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

effect of condition, $F(1,12)=1.5$, $p>0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.11$, and while the main effect of time only bordered on significance, $F(1,12)=3.4$, $p=0.08$, the effect size was moderate, partial $\eta^2 = 0.22$. The interaction effect also bordered on significance, $F(1,12)=3.4$, $p=0.08$ with a moderate effect size, partial $\eta^2 = 0.22$. On the basis of the effect sizes, we conducted several follow-up contrasts to analyse the interaction. In line with the observations of the means, there was a significant increase in efficacy for teacher engagement in the eastern program condition between time 1 and time 2, $t(6)=-4.8$, $p<0.05$, but no change for the western waitlist condition, $t(6)=0.0$, $p>0.05$. The difference between the conditions at time 2 bordered on significance, $t(12)=1.98$, $p=0.07$ such that the eastern program condition had higher self-efficacy for teacher engagement at time 2 than the western waitlist condition. There was no indication of a difference between the conditions at time 1, $t(12)=0.43$, $p>0.05$ indicating that both conditions started the study with similar levels of efficacy for assisting with teacher engagement issues.

Table 1.2

Means and Standard Deviations for Teacher Self-Efficacy (Engagement) Between Conditions Over Two Time Periods

	Time 1		Time 2	
	Eastern (Program)	Western (Waitlist)	Eastern (Program)	Western (Waitlist)
Mean	4.8	4.5	5.7	4.5
SD	1.0	1.7	1.1	1.4

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

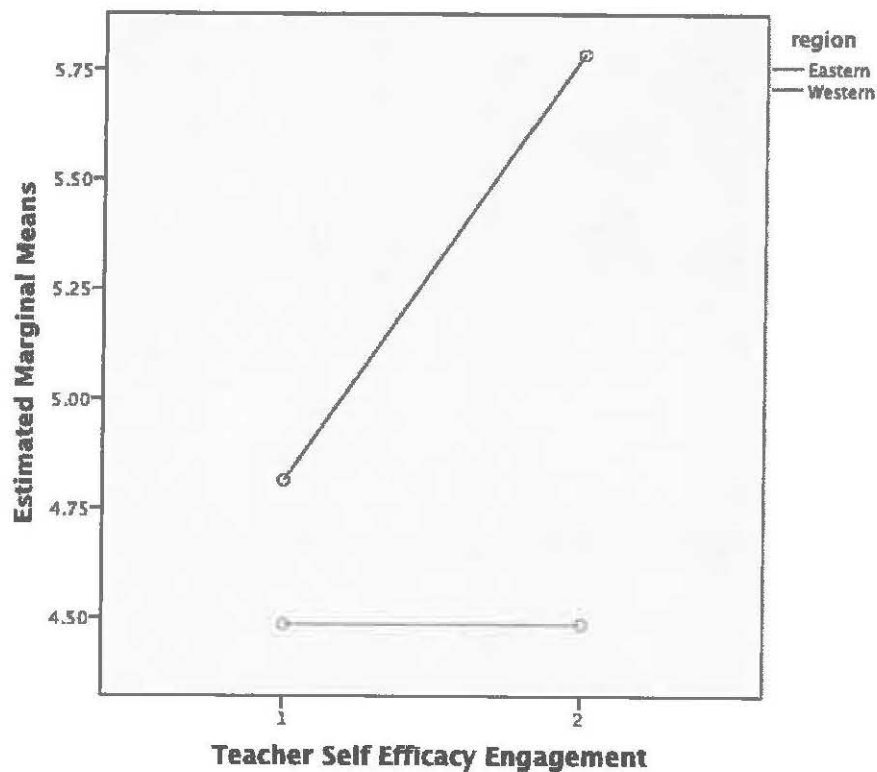


Figure 1.2. Teacher self-efficacy (engagement) for condition over time

Summary of teacher self-efficacy. PSFO levels of self-efficacy to assist teachers to understand developmental vulnerability and to engage effectively with the parents of developmentally vulnerable children generally trended upward over time. There was evidence to support the notion that the increases in efficacy to assist teachers were more marked for the eastern program condition. This was particularly the case for self-efficacy to facilitate teacher engagement.

Parent Self Efficacy

PSFO self-efficacy to work directly in the context of developmental vulnerability was also measured in two ways; PSFO efficacy to understand developmental vulnerability and PSFO efficacy to engage effectively with parents of developmentally vulnerable children. We now describe the results for both these forms of self-efficacy.

Understanding. The results for PSFO self-efficacy to understand the contextual aspects of a child's developmental vulnerability were in the same direction as their efficacy to facilitate teacher understanding. This can be seen by the similar pattern of means displayed in Table 2.1 and Figure 2.1. The main effect of time was highly significant, $F(1,12)=7.6$, $p<0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.39$ indicating that PSFO efficacy for understanding significantly increased over time. Neither the main effect of condition, $F(1,12) = 1.6$, $p>0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.12$, or the interaction, $F(1,12)=0.13$, $p>0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$, were significant. This means that the observed difference in the conditions whereby the eastern program condition appeared to demonstrate greater gains in efficacy for understanding over time than the western waitlist condition, could not be supported. Nevertheless, based on the pattern of the means, follow-up contrasts on the changes in efficacy levels for each condition revealed that the eastern program condition significantly improved their efficacy for understanding developmental vulnerability after the program $t(6)=-2.6$, $p<0.05$ whilst the efficacy levels for the western waitlist condition remained non-significantly altered over time, $t(6)=-1.5$, $p>0.05$.

Table 2.1

Means and Standard Deviations for Parent Self-Efficacy (Understanding) Between Conditions Over Two Time Periods

	Time 1		Time 2	
	Eastern (Program)	Western (Waitlist)	Eastern (Program)	Western (Waitlist)
Mean	5.6	5.0	6.3	5.6
SD	0.8	1.2	0.9	1.1

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

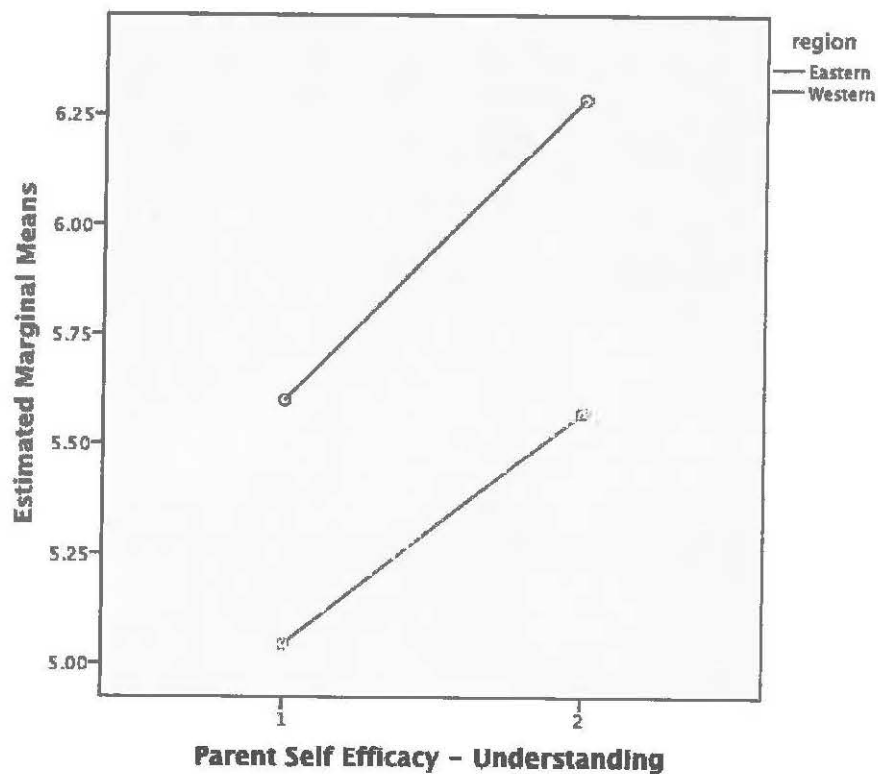


Figure 2.1. Parent self-efficacy (understanding) for condition over time

Engagement. The means for PSFO efficacy for engaging parents are similar in pattern to PSFO efficacy for understating developmental vulnerability as can be seen in Table 2.2 and Figure 2.2. Specifically, there is a general trend towards an increase in self-efficacy over time for both conditions. In line with this observation, there was a significant main effect of time, $F(1,12)=6.2$, $p>0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.34$. There was not a main effect of condition, $F(1,12)=0.43$, $p>0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.002$ and no interaction effect, $F(1,12)=0.03$, $p>0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.002$. As with efficacy for understanding, when post hoc contrasts were performed for efficacy levels within each condition, the results showed that the increase in efficacy post program for the eastern region was significant, $t(6)=-2.98$, $p<0.05$, whilst the observed increase for the western waitlist condition was not, $t(6)=-1.44$, $p>0.05$. This indicates that the magnitude of improvement was more significant for the eastern program condition.

Table 2.2

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

Means and Standard Deviations for Parent Self-Efficacy (Engagement) Between Conditions Over Two Time Periods

	Time 1		Time 2	
	Eastern (Program)	Western (Waitlist)	Eastern (Program)	Western (Waitlist)
Mean	4.8	3.3	5.8	4.5
SD	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.5



Figure 2.2. Parent self-efficacy (engagement) for condition over time

Summary of parent self-efficacy. PSFO levels of self-efficacy to understand developmental vulnerability and to engage effectively with the parents of developmentally vulnerable children generally trended upward over time for both conditions. As with teacher self-efficacy, there was evidence to support the notion that the increases in parent self-efficacy post-program, both in understanding and engagement, were more marked for the eastern program condition than the western waitlist condition.

Focus Groups

Analysis of the focus question as to the key professional benefits of participating in the PSFO program revealed a general dimension with two second-order themes. These are displayed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Inductive Content Analysis on Professional Benefits of Participation in the PSFO Program

General Dimension	Second Order Theme	First Order Theme
Professional Benefits of Participation in the PSFO Program	Feeling Supported	Pressure release/ relax
		Affirmation
		Empowerment and confidence
		Communication improvements
	Developing Skills	Objectivity and perspective
		Tuning-in effectively

Theme 1: Feeling supported. Participants explored the ways in which the PSFO program supported their work and allowed them to carry out their work more effectively through relieving the pressure they had felt in their roles, affirming the job they were doing, building their confidence in their role, and opening up their own ability to communicate about their work. We now describe these four ways in which PSFOs felt supported by the program.

Pressure release/relax. The program was discussed as developing a more relaxed attitude to the PSFO role. One participant noted; *"I'm not going into it*

feeling that there's this pressure on you to be the expert and lay everything on the table" (Focus Group 2, participant 1, p21, 454-455) and, as another participant said, the program provided the opportunity for a release of pressure; *"I feel so much better, I just know I was getting bogged down by my work load"* (Focus Group 1, participant 1, p11, 259).

Affirmation. Participants credited the program as having the positive effect of backing-up and affirming the work that they were already doing. One participant noted; *"My instinct was that there was something more going on and what I got was an affirmation that that was very possibly what was going on"* (Focus Group 1, participant 2, p9, 193-194). Along similar lines, another participant said; *"You doubt yourself sometimes and that is my biggest thing. I think I have done the right thing, it [the program] has been very helpful"* (Focus Group 1, participant 1, p12, 256-266).

Empowerment and confidence. Participants noted that through participation in the PSFO Program they felt a renewed power strength and confidence in their role and they had been experiencing many positive outcomes as a result. One participant said; *"it has empowered me to go back into my work environment and I keep talking about it and we are getting stuff happening!"* (Focus Group 1, participant 1, p12, 272-273), another commented; *"I have had a number of teachers, just in the last five or six weeks say, "you always choose the right words to say with parents""* (Focus Group 2, Participant 1, p23, 505-506).

Open communication. PSFOs felt that the program had developed in them a new openness to acknowledging and talking about what was happening in their work. One participant noted that; *"I have actually been more open and I think that some of that is feeling safe"* (Focus Group 1, participant 2, p23, 539-540). Along similar

lines, other commented; *“I often don’t share, but I think I’m better for doing that now”* (Focus Group 2, participant 2, p10, 211-212)

Theme 2: Developing skill. PSFOs discussed the ways in which the PSFO Program helped them develop new skills in their work. The key skills that were discussed were the development of objectivity and perspective and the ability to tune-in more effectively to families. We now describe these two areas of skill development.

Objectivity and perspective. Participants noted that the PSFO Program built in them a broader understanding of the issues they encounter on a daily basis and allowed them to develop a framework which gave them enhanced objectivity and a broader perspective. One participant commented that she now understood; *“it is not just the immediate situation that’s impacting on what’s happening right now”* (Focus Group 2, participant 1, p9, 188-198). Along similar lines, another participant noted; *“So it sort of gave us a greater understanding of the whole picture, the big picture, and looking further than just this child in the kindergarten”* (Focus Group 2, participant 2, p15, 325-326). Others commented that the program helped them feel *“more objective”* and helped them *“put a structure around a whole lot of things”* (Focus Group 1, participant 1, p10, 239-240).

Tuning-in. The PSFO Program was credited as developing a heightened and more focused awareness of the families they were working with. They found that after participating in the program they were able to approach a family interaction more effectively and get more out of it. One participant noted; *“I think I’ve got better at asking questions ... I try not to answer questions, but to ask questions”* (Focus Group 1, participant 2, p21, 452-453). Another commented; *“I know there’s a language that I’ve started to use.. or thinking ahead. Like with this parent I’m going*

to see. It's started to make me think, "why is this non-issue turning into an issue?" ... so I think I think wider, I think I think deeper" (Focus Group 3, participant 1, p8, 168-174).

Focus group theme summary. Thematic analysis of the focus groups conducted with Program PSFOs at the conclusion of the PSFO Program revealed that the program was professionally beneficial for two main reasons. The first was that the program supported PSFOs in their work allowing them to carry out the job they were already doing with greater confidence and ease, and the second was that the program built new skills that PSFOs needed in their role but which they had not previously been able to develop.

Discussion

The results of this study provide evidence that psychotherapeutic training and supervision for early childhood intervention professionals is effective at enhancing capacity for engagement with vulnerable families. The quantitative results show that the program was effective in enhancing PSFO capacity for both understanding and engaging in contexts of developmental vulnerability and that this applied to PSFO own work with families and their work with developing the capacity of the teachers with whom they worked. The qualitative results provided additional insights into the ways the program assisted PSFOs to carry out their work and revealed that the program both supported the skills of the PSFOs and developed new skills in understanding and engaging that they had not previously developed. We now discuss how the quantitative and qualitative results taken together provide evidence that psychotherapeutic training and supervision is effective in building engagement capacity in early childhood professionals working with vulnerable families. We also

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

discuss the implications these results have for improving the outcomes of vulnerable children.

Building Understanding

PSFOs own efficacy for understanding developmental vulnerability was significantly enhanced post-program for program PSFOs but not for waitlisted PSFOs. This finding was enriched by qualitative results, which showed that program PSFOs felt that they had developed new skills in appreciating the wider context of their cases and developing an objectivity and perspective on their work. One way to account for the improvements in program PSFOs understanding can be through the concept of reflective function.

In addition to providing theoretical information on the psychological dynamics potentially involved in cases of developmental vulnerability, one of the core aims of the psychotherapeutic training and supervision program was to develop reflective function. According to Fonagy and Target (1997), reflective function is the ability to reflect on the mental state of another and is implicated in the healthy emotional development of others. When care-givers are able to understand, empathise, and name the emotion of their charges, more effective emotional functioning, and emotional regulation, in particular is the result. Reflective function happens relatively naturally in many care-giving contexts, most notably in the mother and child relationship, but in contexts of developmental vulnerability, evidence suggests that reflective function may be lacking (Ackerman, 2012). Often the stress of the situations characterized by vulnerability can be overwhelming and can lead to numbness, a shutting down, or withdrawal, which can prevent reflective function and therefore the subsequent emotional development of dependents. This shutting down can happen in direct care giving relationships, as in between a mother and a child,

which then negatively affects the child's emotional development. Shutting down can also happen in helping relationships, as in between the PSFO and a parent. According to Ackerman (2012), increasing reflective function between helper and parent, where the helper has an enhanced understanding of the mental and emotional state of the parent, is positive for the parent's emotional development and this then can flow on to the relationship between parent and child.

In the PSFO-Program we offered, we sought to develop reflective function in PSFOs by guiding PSFOs to look at their cases with new eyes, and encouraged them to ask questions and wonder about what might be happening. We argue that it was by enhancing reflective function, PSFOs developed greater understanding of vulnerable families and began to reflect more deeply on the emotional and psychological states of the families they worked with. Quantitative measures confirmed this increase in understanding but the qualitative results enriched the statistical finding. In the "skill development" theme, we saw evidence that the PSFOs had genuinely started to appreciate the complexity of children and families touched by developmental vulnerability and had begun to develop new perspectives and objectivity in their interactions with family members. In the theme of "feeling supported" participants noted that the program was affirming and developed an increased calm, relaxation, and confidence in their work. It can be expected that PSFOs who feel confident and calm will have a greater potential to approach challenging cases, which require a high degree of sensitivity. The qualitative results indicate, therefore, that the program both built reflective function and encouraged a relaxed, calm, and confident state of mind that enabled reflective function to occur, both of which, we argue, enhanced PSFOs understanding of vulnerable children and families. The results indicate that PSFOs were able to develop their own understanding but were not as confident in

passing this onto teachers and building teacher understanding. It can be expected that with more ongoing training and supervision, PSFOs would develop their understanding to such a point that they would be able to successfully transmit this to teachers. Investigating this program participant transfer to teachers may be a pathway for future research.

Building Engagement

The quantitative results for building efficacy in engagement were particularly strong. Results showed that PSFOs participating in the PSFO-Program felt significantly more confident in engaging families of vulnerable children and coaching teachers to engage after participating in the program than they did prior to commencing. In contrast, the waitlisted PSFOs showed no change in their confidence for engagement or building teacher capacity to engage post-program. The qualitative results for program PSFOs under the theme of “skill development” confirmed that PSFOs felt that they had obtained new skills in “tuning-in” to families and were now able to more effectively explore the issues, ask questions, and establish clearer communication.

We argue that the psychotherapeutic training and supervision program we provided built this enhanced confidence in engagement by enhancing empathetic attunement and reducing empathetic strain. This was achieved through providing professional psychological support for PSFO work via work shopping cases in a group environment. According to Etherington (2009) one of the key risks for helpers is empathetic strain caused by unconscious reactions to challenging clients and potentially traumatic situations. Importantly, empathetic strain can cause disconnection and withdrawal from clients and therefore reduce effective engagement with families. By giving PSFOs a professional outlet and a way of understanding

their challenging cases via professional and group support, we argue that empathetic strain was reduced and attunement enhanced. With the reduction of empathetic strain, the risk of PSFOs withdrawing and disconnecting from families reduced and freed them to develop an enhanced connection with the families with whom they worked. The enhancement in PSFO confidence in engagement was clear in the quantitative results and the qualitative results supported this. Under the theme of “skill development” PSFOs indicated that they found tuning-in to families, asking questions and exploring issues much easier after the program. The comments by participants in the “feeling supported” theme also suggest that the program did negate the tendency to disconnect and withdraw, particularly in the “open communication” comments in which participants indicated that the program made them feel safe and allowed them to open up more to others. The quantitative results indicate that the program built confidence in family engagement and the qualitative results support the idea that this increase occurred due to a reduction in empathetic strain, which enabled more attuned connections to be made with families.

Outcomes of Enhanced Understanding and Engagement

The PSFOs who participated in psychotherapeutic training and supervision developed an enhanced understanding of vulnerable children and their families and developed heightened engagement skills with vulnerable families. The Results also suggest that program PSFOs were also able to begin enhancing the capacity of the teachers with whom they worked, particularly in engaging families. We have argued here that the program achieved these results primarily through building reflective function and reducing empathetic strain. Research has suggested that building engagement skills with families is not a common professional development activity for professionals who work in pre-service environments, such as kindergartens and

schools, because their core brief is to work with children (Brown et al., 2009).

We argue, however, that for these professionals, who often have unprecedented access to hard-to-reach families, building their engagement capacity with families is both important and necessary. It is important because research suggests that normal and non-stigmatising environments, such as kindergartens, are the best environments in which to build relationships with hard-to-reach families (Winkworth et al., 2010). It is necessary because it is usually through good connections and relationships with pre-service professionals, like PSFOs, that typically hard-to-reach parents might begin to engage with a service system designed to assist (Cortis, 2012).

Limitations and Future Research

The statistical findings may have been enhanced by greater participant numbers and the strength of the findings could have been enhanced had the study employed a true randomized controlled design whereby PSFOs were randomly allocated to the program or waitlist condition. Due to practical considerations, however, the eastern and the western PSFOs were allocated to conditions based on their regional grouping. The self-report nature of the quantitative measures may have also limited objectivity and it would be productive in future research to obtain more objective measures of PSFO engagement capacity. Future research utilising a randomized control design, greater participant numbers, and other objective measures of capacity in developmental vulnerability, would provide more support for psychotherapeutic training and supervision programs for building engagement capacity in early childhood professionals.

Conclusion

Providing psychotherapeutic training and supervision to professionals who work with vulnerable children in a pre-service environment is an innovative way to

Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

improve the outcomes of vulnerable children. The research here shows that this form of training can build reflective function and reduce empathetic strain such that professionals are able to develop greater understanding of vulnerable families and develop heightened engagement skills with families as well as build teacher engagement capacity. Enhancing the ability of pre-service professionals, such as PSFOs who work in normal and non-stigmatising environments, to engage with vulnerable families is a key way to facilitate service participation which improves the outcomes of vulnerable children but which is often underutilised by those most in need.

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Building parental engagement capacity in early childhood professionals

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