Connecting families and building capital: The importance of a supportive environment for culturally diverse families through the transition to formal schooling

For families with children about to commence school, adjusting to the new demands presented can be difficult, especially for ethnic minorities or those in low-socioeconomic status areas, where there may be extra challenges at that time. When schools develop early intervention programs to support families, stress related to transitioning to school can be eased.

This paper examines the programs provided by two schools in a culturally diverse, low-SES urban area to support families in transition to school. Participants were parents as well as school personnel, including administrators, program convenors and early years' teachers.

Data were examined through a Bordieuian lens to consider the types of capital families possessed and how that impacted their experiences in the transition programs. Findings revealed that parents and staff felt the familiarity that was gained with the school and members of the school community was beneficial for all concerned. Bourdieu's main concepts offer understanding of effective support and ways it created opportunities to increase capital for families. They also reveal the underlying issues that affect members of such communities, knowledge which assists in future implementation of transition programs.

Key Words: transition; intervention programs; cultural and linguistic diversity; low SES; Bourdieu's cultural and social capital

For families with children about to commence school, adjusting to the new demands can be difficult.

For those who are members of ethnic minorities, especially in low-socioeconomic status (SES) areas,

there may be extra challenges. Research shows that when schools develop early intervention programs

to support families, stress related to transitioning to school can be eased (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Margetts, 2009). This paper reports on a study that draws on parent and staff perceptions of programs provided by two schools in a culturally diverse, low-SES urban area to support local families in the transition to formal schooling. The doctoral research from which the paper is drawn seeks to address research questions relating to the types of experiences that culturally diverse, low-SES families reported about their participation in the programs that schools offered and how perceptions of families and school personnel about such programs aligned or differed. The study uses Bourdieu's (1985) core concepts of habitus, capital and field to examine participant responses to offer understanding of how the forms of capital possessed by members of the community impacted their experiences in the programs, and how the opportunity to build on that capital increased their confidence and ability to function successfully in schools.

The paper looks briefly at research on programs for families in the years prior to the beginning of formal schooling. Details of the present study are then outlined, describing the context of the sites and the research conducted at two schools. It details the range of participants and outlines how data were gathered using qualitative methods before being analysed through a Bourdieuian lens. Interview responses about experiences in the programs and how these were perceived to assist parents and children through transition to school are outlined, followed by a discussion. The final section reinforces how the application of Bourdieuian concepts offers a deeper understanding of factors that can impact on the way families engage with schools and how these factors can be addressed to create the supportive environment needed for diverse families to connect within their school community.

Relevant research

For ethnic minority families in low-SES contexts, different expectations or experiences can impact on educational opportunities and their interactions within the educational system. Grolnick and Raftery-Helmer's (2015) study on creating working relationships with families suggested that understanding was needed about how the cultural assumptions and practices of parents from different backgrounds influenced the ways they engaged in their child's education. Kearney, Fletcher, and Dobrenov-Major (2011) found that a contrast between the cultural expectations of home and school for Samoan families impacted on the way relationships were formed, suggesting that addressing the problems caused by the nonalignment of such expectations would greatly improve educational outcomes for the children. Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) found that schools needed to acknowledge differences in the community to improve relationships with families, as the types of roles parents were willing to take on also depended on their perception of the school, and whether the school was perceived as part of the community. Indigenous families in their study reported that if that were not the case, parents felt they were outsiders and not welcomed as participants in their child's education.

An area of research considered was how low-SES related factors could influence the experiences families have as they interact with the school. As Harris and Goodall (2008) found, families in low-SES brackets often include members with lower educational levels who could experience feelings of inadequacy and may not find the school a welcoming or supportive space. Harris and Goodall discerned that the middle-class values in some UK schools inhibited the confidence of the families in this school environment. According to Dearing, Sibley, and Nguyen (2015), in low-SES areas the effects of poverty impacted in various ways across academic areas due to the limited availability of books and other learning materials in the home; they noted long-term health effects also. A difficulty cited by Sanders and Sheldon (2009) was that restrained circumstances caused by employment situations, whether in time or financial forms, limited family engagement with schools. Australian initiatives such as the Family-School Partnership Framework of 2005-2006 (Saulwick Muller Social Research [SMSR], 2006) were introduced to address the wide-ranging effects such issues could cause, so as to create effective school-family links for all.

Research has sought to understand the types of support needed in order to form those links. According to Howard and Reynolds (2008), to attain satisfactory outcomes for all parties, schools need to be familiar with their local situation in order to successfully involve their parents. While schools and families measured this readiness for school differently, there was a shared desire to make the school a place where parents and children were comfortable (Dockett & Perry, 2004). Dockett and Perry (2007) identified a need for schools to focus on the strengths of families and communities to develop strategies to form relationships and then to build on those relationships, thus assisting families to be ready for school.

In seeking to understand how relationships are formed, research in education has often used the Bourdieuian concepts of habitus, capital or field as tools to offer some explanation of the different influences in the school environment, how the engagement process might vary across families and the impacts they might experience as a result. Reay's (2004) work explained Bourdieu's habitus as the complex, internalised ideas formed which guided everyday life, and stressed the connection between the individual habitus and any context entered – in Bourdieuian terms called the field – where ideas influenced and were influenced by the interactions of people in that field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Lee and Bowen (2006) used a Bourdieuian hypothesis to consider types of school engagement across a range of parents from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Through these concepts, they were able to compare the habitus of home and school to reveal the impact that contrasts might cause when parents entered the educational environment, or field, and showed how schools could address those differences to improve the quality of the engagement process.

Mills and Gale's (2004) study used the concepts of field and capital to examine barriers to the ways parents engage in schools in a culturally diverse low-SES community. They examined responses to show an underlying need for recognition of the different types of capital held by minority group parents. Mills and Gale found there was some awareness of a need for parents to be given the "rules"

by which schools operate (p. 273), as well as a need for changes in the dominant habitus of the school to accommodate all parents. Further work by Mills and Gale (2007) used Bourdieu's concepts to explore the interactions of individuals within the school, to reveal what role the school might play in the inequality suffered by some sectors of the school population. Mills (2008) asserted that the concept of capital provided an effective means of examining such inequality; by using Bourdieu's concepts, the researcher could raise an awareness of the cultural capital possessed by students, something teachers could build on, so changing the school approach to include marginalised groups, giving them the necessary skills to flourish in the educational context. Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) also examined advantage and disadvantage experienced by working class or minority groups, using a Bourdieuian framework to consider the types of capital parents possessed to seek knowledge about possible impacts when they did not have the "right" capital or sufficient of it; these researchers found that policies in place did not extend far enough to address the inequality that resulted.

A review of literature has shown an awareness of the need to consider how families who are members of ethnic minorities, especially in low-SES areas, require support as they transition to the early years of formal schooling. Research utilising Bourdieuian concepts has offered further understanding of the difficulties encountered through the engagement process and the support needed when such difficulties arose.

The present study uses Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field to gain an insight to how parents and school personnel perceived the impact of the educational environment on families in a low-SES culturally diverse area. That understanding will highlight how issues can be addressed in future support initiatives. The study focusses on the way two different types of schools in the same culturally diverse, low-SES community sought to support local families and to smooth the transition phase into the school community and formal schooling. A description of each school site where research was conducted, the early intervention programs offered and the range of participants involved follows.

Context

The geographical setting for the study is a low-SES, culturally diverse city in South East Queensland. Research was conducted at two sites. Williamstown, a state government primary school catering for years Prep to 6, offered *Preppy Time,* a pre-Prep program for families during the second half of the year prior to commencing Prep. Pleasantville, a non-government faith-based school catering for years Prep to 12, offered a playgroup, *Playtime,* and it operated from the school's community centre. It was conducted in conjunction with the school to cater for parents of the local community, some of whom already had children at the school.

Participants

Participants at each school included school personnel and parents of children in the programs. At Williamstown, approximately 70 families attended across the four *Preppy Time* sessions each week; 22 parents agreed to participate, and 18 were available when interviews were conducted, 11 of whom had children at the school. Some of the Williamstown mothers worked part-time and others were stay-at-home mothers; cultural backgrounds represented were Brazilian, New Zealand Maori, Indonesian and Croatian, all of whom had migrated to Australia. In the latter two cases, their families joined family members already in Australia. Other participants were Australian-born monolingual English speakers. English language skills were high amongst all but for one Croatian lady who chose to be interviewed with her sister-in-law who helped her out when she requested. At Williamstown, participating staff included the deputy principal – a teacher for 34 years and a deputy at the school for 28 of them, the program convenor, her teacher aide and four of the six Prep teachers. At Pleasantville, the 12-18 parents who regularly attended *Playtime* were all mothers and 8 attended both of the twice-weekly sessions; of the 6 who agreed to participate in the study, four already had children at the school. One was a New Zealand Maori, one from Ireland, while the others were Australian-born monolingual speakers with no language issues within the group. Work commitments varied from part-time to stay-at-home parenting. Pleasantville's participating staff included the assistant principal – a teacher for 27 years and an administrator for 7 years at that school, the program convenor, and four Prep teachers.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used to gather data through focus groups and individual interviews. Data gathering began with parent participants joining together in focus group discussions as a way to introduce the topic areas in a setting which fostered but did not demand a sharing of ideas, with a result that contributions were evenly spread. The individual interviews offered the opportunity to add personal opinion and information that extended the discussions in similar topic areas. Staff discussion groups were conducted with Prep teachers and individual interviews with school administrative staff and program convenors, in a space and time convenient for them. Data were analysed using Bourdieuian concepts of habitus, capital and field, seen as the "three main thinking tools" of the Bourdieuian approach (Wacquant, 1989, p. 40) and described by Bourdieu (1985) as the core of his work and a way to question data.

"Field" was Bourdieu's (1985) term for any arena or context in society, within which individuals need to manage everyday events; in this context, the field was the school. In Bourdieuian terms, the overall aim of the individual is to survive in the competitive nature or structures of power that Bourdieu ascribed to the educational field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The individual manages to do so through the habitus, which produces an innate understanding of how to act in that context (Bourdieu, 1984). Harris and Goodall (2008) noted that difference in habitus such as that resulting from educational levels or socioeconomic circumstances could impact in the educational field. Utilisation of Bourdieuian concepts reveals how that might impact, for example through participant

actions because of their sense of the competition or power relations present in the field. Through the habitus the individual acquires the personal resources needed in the different areas of life, described by Bourdieu (1984) as cultural and social capital.

In its various forms, cultural capital covers behaviour, knowledge and skills, qualifications and material possessions. Bourdieu (1986) posited that to gain the full worth of this form of capital, the holder needs to be aware of its significance and have the ability to use it appropriately. Mills and Gale (2007) described this process as "transmitted via the social ties that are enacted as social capital" (p. 26), since the different forms of capital influence the way the individual adjusts to and performs in a field. When the concepts of cultural and social capital are added for consideration, actions and interactions become clearer.

Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013) suggest that the parents of the area surrounding the schools possess different forms of the capital needed to survive and succeed in the context of the school environment. Use of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field enables data to be analysed to ascertain how participants' perceptions might vary about the conditions of the school context. As the purpose of the programs studied is to engage families and enable relationships to be formed, the application of Bourdieu's concepts reveals the influences of the school environment on participants and the impact of the power relations or competition in the field perceived by them. Data yielded the following findings at the school sites.

Findings: Williamstown

Williamstown's pre-Prep program began as a way to meet needs of which the school was aware in its community. The parents who participated in this research study responded that their participation in the *Preppy Time* program brought benefits for themselves and their children, which included meeting staff members and other families, and learning about the school and the role they could play in their child's education. Most parents interviewed said they wanted to be partners and work with the school in the educational process; the Prep teachers, however, did not perceive the parents of their present students as always acting as partners with them. They recalled examples of parents not completing home reading activities with their children or not taking advantage of the open classroom each morning to interact with their child or chat with them. Opportunities to interact with other parents were appreciated by newcomers, especially those starting their first child at school. They were enthusiastic about visiting around the campus and took the opportunities to talk with and question staff.

When asked about their experiences at *Preppy Time*, parents gave examples such as how children were familiarised with school layout and how they participated in different aspects of the curriculum, seeing such activities as a preparation for school. Staff saw being independent and working as part of a group as more significant factors of school readiness; however, there was

agreement that the familiarity parents spoke of was also beneficial. The program convenor considered that opportunities parents enjoyed through the pre-Prep program assisted them in defining the role they would take in their child's education. The range of opportunities offered by *Preppy Time* assisted families and addressed concerns about the children beginning Prep and parents felt they could enter the school community prepared.

Findings: Pleasantville

The playgroup offered at Pleasantville was a meeting point for families; its location on campus also introduced children and parents to the school environment. Pleasantville parents who attended the *Playtime* group agreed that the relaxed format contributed to the group's success. Responses showed parents felt that many of their needs were addressed and they could familiarise themselves with child development goals as they gained information about entering school. They felt that the playgroup was an ideal setting in which the children could learn social skills, while they met and socialised with other parents. Parents already involved at the school said that the friendly atmosphere of the group reflected the strong community feeling that was present in the school which they attributed to the family focus within its culturally diverse population. School personnel were satisfied that the playgroup fulfilled the function of providing a social context for parents and children, while its location on campus linked parents and children to the school and fulfilled an important function in the transition phase.

Participants at Pleasantville felt that members of the playgroup gained familiarity about the school and what was expected of them, helping them to overcome the apprehensions they had. It enabled parents to increase the types of capital that were valued by the school, so that they could participate more fully in that environment. The discussion which follows considers some themes that emerged in the data from the schools, first from Williamstown, then Pleasantville.

Discussion: Williamstown

At Williamstown, the pre-Prep program was initiated to address what the deputy principal expressed as their "real concern for the readiness of our cohorts as they come to Prep", in a culturally diverse community where census data showed many children could be vulnerable (ABS, 2013). The effects of cultural diversity, particularly if linked with poverty, could also cause students to suffer disadvantage (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013). When addressing such concerns as the deputy principal identified, Gorski (2012) suggested schools needed to ensure programs enacted to redress inequities were not based on a deficit view, as this could contribute to inequities even when the intention was the opposite. He explained the deficit concept as a view that ascribes deficiencies to individuals or communities to explain or justify the unequal outcomes achieved.

According to the convenor, *Preppy Time* was the school's way of supporting families, a way to "empower them to go and do what needs to be done … to help their kids achieve". The school showed an awareness of the community but Gorski's (2012) view was that through such an attitude, schools could misinterpret their community as being not interested in education rather than looking further at related issues. The Bourdieuian approach would attribute any such reluctance on the part of the community to a lack of the forms of social and cultural capital required to function in the context of the school. Bourdieu's concern (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) was that the power structures present in a school, such as that represented in both teaching and administration staff, could be a deterrent for families in such communities.

Parent perceptions of *Preppy Time* note that for a mother starting her first child at school, it showed her something of what was expected, and another agreed, saying it was very different from school in her own country. As the program gave parents the opportunity to meet school staff and immerse themselves in the general environment of the school, as well as learn about the demands their children would be meeting, it can be seen to enable them to increase the types of social and cultural capital they needed to operate in the school, and to deal with the power structures that Bourdieu asserted would challenge them in that field.

The deputy principal described the school's response in *Preppy Time* as "a community effort … we've got to collaborate … work on it together" and stressed that the school had a responsibility in its support through the transition phase to be ready for the child, suggesting that the school considered itself as endeavouring to act for its community. The deputy principal said, "it's us saying what skills do they have, what are they working on, what do we as a school need to do to meet their needs" and so be aware at the beginning rather than have a whole school term pass before action is taken. Literature cited (Grolnick & Raftery-Helmer, 2015; Kearney et al., 2011) suggests that a central concern when attempting to reach community members was the acknowledgement of the cultural assumptions and practices of the families. Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) asserted that it was when families perceived that the school acted as part of their community through acknowledging cultural needs that parents felt welcomed and were then willing to play an active role in the education of their child.

The school's endeavours also focussed on the children, who were taken into Prep classes and the adjacent playground, to music and sports lessons or the library. They became used to school routines, met teachers and learnt the layout of the campus, seeing students out enjoying the grounds as well. Curriculum knowledge came through activities enjoyed during group sessions, which included the interaction of story time and learning the letter shapes. As the convenor suggested, it would also assist as they commenced their Prep year, as the school would not "be so scary and overwhelming". The familiarisation process was building on what Bourdieu considered the essential personal resources needed, the forms of cultural and social capital recognised in the field of education as those required for children to succeed in their formal schooling

Parents stated that the experiences they had in the pre-Prep program supported them in the transition phase as they approached their child's Prep year and learnt about the role they could undertake in their child's education. Their perceptions reflected the aims the school gave for establishing the program of supporting parents and working with the community, which Howard and Reynolds (2008) suggested was the type of shared purpose needed if a school wanted to involve parents in the educational process.

However, when teachers of Prep spoke about parents from previous years, they did not consider the parental role in their child's education was always fulfilled. Their focus group discussed concerns about parents in previous years, not those of *Preppy Time*, of them not coming into classrooms before school, interacting with their child and talking with teachers. These teachers also spoke of reading and other activities set for working with the children at home, but not completed. Gorski's (2012) suggestion of a deficit view could be a factor in how the *Preppy Time* families were received. Allowing that teacher comments did not pertain to *Preppy Time* families, a consideration of time and financial constraints in the culturally diverse, low-SES area, as noted in the Sanders and Sheldon (2009) study, is also applicable in this context. However, the same teachers supported the presence of the program and welcomed both children and parents into the school, and parent perceptions noted support from staff. Awareness of the impact of the contrast in habitus across the range of study participants gives an understanding of the variations of parent and teacher responses and why ideas might differ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The appreciation parents expressed of their experiences illustrates how the program aided families to form connections in the school environment, for parents and children. The increase in the social and cultural capital is evident in their willingness and ability to connect with each other and school personnel. Responses by staff offer some different perceptions but are indicative of their endorsement of what the *Preppy Time* program can achieve for the school community and the importance in Bourdieuian terms of enabling families to build the necessary capital.

Use of Bourdieu's key concepts of habitus, capital and field to consider responses across the range of participants illustrates why parents and families of the community were assisted by the opportunities offered through *Preppy Time*. Staff perceptions of how parents in previous years had not responded to their endeavours of support are clarified when consideration of a contrasting habitus and the different forms of capital families possess are made. An awareness of how such difference might impact on the ways parents interact with schools and perceive their role in the education of their child addresses the deficit view cautioned against by Gorski (2012). Knowledge of these underlying factors allowed the school to offer the support and work as they intended with their community, informing future endeavours to ensure the equality of outcomes they desired.

Discussion Pleasantville

Knowledge of the local community was also an incentive for the establishment of a playgroup at Pleasantville. *Playtime* was intended as a community outreach which would provide a social space for local families as well as an introduction to the school. To the assistant principal, the playgroup established at Pleasantville was about "connectedness" and its clear purpose was "to provide a social outlet" for parents, somewhere also where children could learn "how to play". For parents of the school and others in the local community, *Playtime* provided a setting to connect with others, whether or not they intended enrolling children at the school. The venue of the school's community centre offered those attending an opportunity to network with other members of the school community and newcomers were able to gather information about how the school operated, from parents and also from the group convenor. The opportunities the group presented to network and form meaningful connections are in accord with Bourdieu's (1984) concept of social capital, where it is increased as people use the resources of others in a way that benefits them, as they are availing themselves of the forms of capital valued in a particular context (Field, 2005).

The convenor planned the playgroup program from her experience, to offer a structured framework for the sessions; however, it was ultimately offered in a less formally structured style in response to those attending. Mills and Gale (2004) asserted that in disadvantaged areas, schools successfully engaged their parents when they took steps such as the convenor's approach to *Playtime* to ensure marginalised groups were included. The approach avoids the deficit view which Gorski (2012) stated could influence incentives to cater for community needs in such a context. While *Playtime* catered for those already involved in the school, the outreach philosophy underpinning its establishment and the consultative approach taken ensured the school's initial purpose was fulfilled, and the aim to include others addressed what Bourdieu asserted was the essential need in such a community: to enable families to build the types of capital required to succeed in the school context.

Parents already at the school, described by the Prep teachers as those who "know the ropes", were quite aware of the benefits the playgroup could offer those about to join the school community. Several had a child who had already progressed through the playgroup and were in the early years of formal schooling. They had experienced the lack of knowledge of how the school operated and knew the feeling of not knowing the basic expectations the school had, of themselves and their children. Their comments reflect Wacquant's (2011) idea that in the Bourdieuian field, there were rules which peopled needed to know in order to succeed. Teachers described the conversations the school parents had with newcomers as "beneficial" for "new" parents as it gives them "knowledge … put[s] a mother's mind at ease". That was attested to by one of the "new" mothers who reported she was pleased with her "practical knowledge about the uniform shop for second hand uniforms". Through this basic knowledge, the parent was able to feel adequate to the task ahead and see the school as supportive and welcoming, a step Harris and Goodall (2008) noted as vital when a school sought to engage with families in an area such as that surrounding Pleasantville.

Parents were also impressed with the social benefits the group gave the children. They spoke about the opportunities offered to "socialise with other kids" and learn "how to play with others … how to share". In addition, for some whose child was to begin Prep in the following year, attending *Playtime* not only accustomed them to the physical aspects of the school environment; as the convenor conducted the pre-Prep program in the latter part of the school year, the children were already used to working with her. Through the playgroup program, they enjoyed free play, different craft activities and story time, as well as outside play, all of which gave them incidental preparation in their progress through the transition to school. The experiences of both parents and children at *Playtime* evidence the requirement Bourdieu (1984) identified for the possession and building of the forms of cultural and social capital needed to succeed in a field, in this case, the Pleasantville school. The playgroup was building the children's skills through fun activities and assisting them to accumulate the forms of capital that would ultimately benefit them as they advanced to their Prep years.

Those new to being a school parent were also able to think about their role in the education of their child, and hear first-hand ideas about interacting with teachers or volunteering, through focus group and informal discussions. One young mother saw herself building a relationship with the teachers through her volunteer role and regular contact with them, asserting that then they would "see me as a caring mother, and they will care more for my child". Her statement anticipates Gorski's (2012) deficit view of her community which she chose to address in such a way. When viewed through the Bourdieuian lens, such aspirational comments give credence to the notion of building the types of capital that are valued in the field in which the person would participate (Gibson, Harmon, & Guilfoyle, 2015), in order to obtain and maintain a place in that field, in this instance, for the mother and her child in the educational context. Parents were able to learn about and from each other, affirming the cultural capital of members, and extending the social capital of the "newer" parents by linking them to each other and to members of the school community (Monkman et al., 2005).

As only eight or nine mothers attended *Playtime* on most days, they were able to talk informally and the relationships formed reflected findings in the Jackson (2011) study that such a setting also assisted parents to build their own parenting skills. They could share what they observed about their own child, learning from each other, and this was shown in comments such as "I can see what my child is capable of" or that "they can form relationships and play with other children". Their perceptions are evidence that experiences shared in the playgroup assisted to lessen the impact parents felt when they entered the school community. The connections that the school hoped to form were taking place within the group, building on the forms of capital that would help them as their child transitioned to the Prep years. The presence of *Playtime* on the school campus also ensured in Bourdieuian terms that the physical environment of that field became more accessible and familiar to the parents.

When considered in this light, the findings suggest the group was strengthened through the relationships formed. The significant role the playgroup fulfilled was affirmed by the Prep teachers who saw that it served as an introduction to the school and an important step as children transitioned to school. Families associated with the school for a number of years commented on the strong sense of community and connectedness in the school, which they attributed to the family-oriented focus of its many Pacific Island families. The work of Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) attested to the importance of such community connectedness, when families considered the school as part of the community and the school itself provided a welcome for them. Bourdieu (1986) posited that such connections were useful as individuals changed and broadened their personal forms of capital, and the types of knowledge they acquired would enable them to perform in the schooling environment. Parents' perceptions of *Playtime* show a sense of learning about the school from other members of the group, giving them a sense of community and belonging, factors reflected in Bourdieu's notion of building the types of capital needed to function successfully in the field they were about to enter.

Conclusion

Playtime was established by Pleasantville to extend the school community, and as one mother noted, the support and relationships it provided saw it become a community within itself. Experienced parents shared information with newcomers, helping them to build the knowledge they needed, increasing the types of capital required to operate successfully in the school environment. Beginning parents reported satisfaction in learning about everyday matters, saying they felt "already part of things" because of their experiences in the playgroup, and they faced the transition to school with increased confidence.

At Williamstown, *Preppy Time* offered participants a pre-Prep program as an entry point to the school community, where they could build relationships with other families and familiarise themselves with the school environment and staff members. Children were accustomed to school routines and introduced to elements of the curriculum as they participated in activities led by the convenor or the teaching staff whose classes they visited. Through the programs offered, both schools enabled the participating families to increase the types of capital needed through the knowledge gained and the relationships formed to enable them to successfully operate in the educational field.

Examination of data using Bourdieu's key concepts of habitus, capital and field revealed participant perceptions of the ways they gained through elements of the programs. An understanding of how the personal habitus (overall background or life experience) impacted the ways such perceptions were formed offers an understanding of why community members may view programs differently and that their approach to engaging in school initiatives stems from that basic difference. That understanding will further increase the knowledge and familiarity the schools have of their local community. By knowing the basis for different perceptions, schools can take steps to address the

needs they identify so they can increase the types of social and cultural capital (personal skills and resources) each community member possesses. Bourdieu's concepts enable understanding of the influence and impact of these factors, which allows schools to implement programs that avoid any notion of deficit but that build on the strengths of its community, an approach shown to be received positively by parents.

The depth of understanding that Bourdieuian concepts bring to the findings of this study, conducted in a culturally diverse, low-SES area, reveals that schools can be alerted to the many influences within their communities that may impact on how families respond to their engagement strategies, and why such an awareness can ensure that their planned engagement will succeed. In this way the study adds to the research field by extending the knowledge gained from findings, as it moves beyond reporting how parents and staff perceived experiences in programs could benefit families, to revealing the reasons why their ideas may differ and how such difference can be addressed.

By using Bourdieuian concepts, future research that examines school engagement programs in other types of SES areas will further add to the knowledge of how schools can best engage families of their communities and how they can address any impediments encountered.

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