Supporting Refugees Participating in the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters in Regional Australia

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Abstract: The uncertainty of transition to school for refugee children can be alleviated through early childhood programs that cater to children, families, and communities. This paper reports findings from a Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), where free, home-based early childhood learning occurs during the critical period of the child's transition to full-time school. The project aimed to support Ezidi parent's capacity to prepare their children for Australian school contexts and to build a sense of belonging among Ezidi children in their new community in regional New South Wales (NSW), Australia. This qualitative study was based on a case study informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory. Data were analyzed for themes using NVivo software. Findings indicated the HIPPY program supported Ezidi children's transition to school. Challenges such as parents' English language proficiency and limited knowledge about the program resulted in the parents not being fully involved.
Keywords: Transition to school, Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), Refugee families, Ezidi, Regional town

Australian children start formal schooling at five years of age and is administered by the Australian Government Department of Education (Australian Government of Education [AGDE], 2024). Australia's system for regulating early learning before starting school is managed by The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA, 2024). There is a plethora of early learning services available for children before attending school, including long day care, family daycare, preschool, or kindergarten. These are administered by ACECQA under the National Quality Framework (NQF), aimed to improve education and care (ACECQA, 2024). A range of non-government organizations support services are available for vulnerable families or families at risk. These include The Benevolent Society, Mission Australia, Barnardo's, The Smith Family, and The Brotherhood of St Laurence.

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Transition to primary school is a significant time in the lives of children and families and is acknowledged by a wide body of research and policies (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Huser et al., 2016; Kaplan et al., 2022; Krakouer, 2016; Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2011). A positive transition is central to developing children's confidence and a predictor for later academic outcomes (Pan et al., 2019). To ensure cultural practices are maintained and upheld requires effective continuity of learning between home, center-based programs for young children, primary school, and the involvement of various stakeholders (Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2011). Transition to school has many complexities and involves proactive communication about the concerns of children and parents and a collaborative effort between families, schools, and communities (Kaplan et al., 2022).

The Menzies study in Australia indicates the need for policies and practices to support transition programs for preschool children into formal schooling (Silburn et al., 2018). The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) is one program that assists children and families in the transition to a school setting in many countries. The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a social justice organization that works to end poverty in Australia and administers the federally funded HIPPY program throughout Australia in 100 at-risk communities (HIPPY Australia, 2022). Refugees are among those vulnerable communities. To illustrate, Australia granted about 18000 Refugee and Humanitarian visas in 2023 (Refugee Council of Australia, 2024).

In this study, HIPPY was implemented by a Family Support organization with many families, including some Ezidi families living in a regional refugee settlement location. Thousands of Ezidis, a religious minority from Western Asia, were resettled in Australia as part of the Humanitarian Settlement Program in 2017 and 2018 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The study aimed to explore the effectiveness of the HIPPY program for Ezidi families who enrolled in the program in 2023. The objectives were to investigate the changes in the families' capacity to assist their children's learning as children transition to the school system and to capture the families' perceptions of progress in the children's learning and well-being as a result of participating in the program.

Literature review

Transition to School

Positive experiences when transitioning to school are critical in developing strong foundational skills for future success and the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Council of Australian Governments, 2019) supports effective strategies to ensure children have the skills and knowledge for beginning school. There are many differences between prior-to-school settings and formal schooling, including pedagogical practices, philosophies, governance, and structural conditions (Bennett, 2013). The metaphor of a bridge is used to navigate the continuity and connections between settings to span the gap during this rite of passage (Huser et al., 2016). Adopting a unified approach across the early years, including primary schools, parents, and inter-institutional learning communities, can improve children's overall experiences, educational achievement, and well-being (Van Laere et al., 2019). Transition to school is emphasized in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to support all children's learning and indicates more provision is required for some children and families (AGDE, 2022). The EYLF also refers to drawing upon a child's funds of knowledge. This is referred to by Moll et al. (1992) as drawing on the strengths and resources historically and culturally accumulated from life experience. Recognizing and building upon the cultural practices, knowledge, and skills of children and families will assist in developing connections, trust, and a sense of belonging (AGDE, 2022).

Starting school is a major adjustment for children and families and community-supported programs can enhance the transition process. Studies conducted by Dockett et al. (2011) report that sustained benefits are achieved when programs focus on children and families, provide continuity of support, and are integrated with collaboration across health, education, and welfare services. Family participation in these organizations has the potential to build social capital by extending their knowledge base about the local school and developing positive relationships (McLean et al., 2018). Rosier and McDonald (2011) suggest that there are four key groups that traditionally struggle with the transition to school: financially disadvantaged families, Indigenous families, families with children who have a disability, and culturally and linguistically diverse families (CALD).

Refugee Families

The literature on refugee education is sparse, and there is limited information about how refugee communities understand and react to services for children before starting school (Keary et al., 2022). In many refugee studies, the success of settlement is based on employment or economic self-sufficiency (Lichtenstein & Puma, 2018). The benefits of employment for parents consequently translate into better outcomes for children (Gregory et al., 2016). Newly arrived refugees face a vast number of challenges especially culturally and linguistically. In fact, refugees have different experiences and reflections, which depend on not only their cultural background and ethnicity but also structures such as gender, religion, and age (Keary et al., 2022). The Brotherhood of St Laurence (2019) identified the significant barriers to families of CALD backgrounds when navigating access to early childhood programs:

- Difficulty navigating the early years sector
- Actual and perceived barriers to eligibility
- Language barriers
- Cultural barriers
- Experience of torture and trauma
- Long waiting lists especially in growth corridors
- Disability
- Social isolation
- A fear of authority, particularly government organizations
- Fear of judgement and fear of child protection
- Negative/no experience of schooling in their country of origin
- Families may not value the Australian approach to early years education
- Actual and perceived out-of-pocket costs
- Transport
- Multiple priorities during settlement
- Living in crisis and housing transience

While support services are often provided for some of these challenges, it is more difficult for one particular organization to address the many diverse problems experienced by families. A coordinated approach across several agencies is necessary but not always available or accessible to vulnerable families. Refugee families have diverse backgrounds and experiences and differ from migrants in that they are seeking asylum outside of their country due to persecution or violence (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2019). Poverty is well known to have a major impact on refugee families and children, as it restricts the means to provide essential resources and learning opportunities (Dockett et al., 2011).

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) describes developmentally vulnerable children as experiencing a number of physical, social, emotional, language, cognitive and/or

communication challenges that interfere with their daily lives (Australian Government, 2016). Analysis of the AEDI reveals that 23% of Australian children in their first year of full-time school have been assessed as developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the five school readiness developmental measures of the AEDI and that there are higher proportions of children who are developmentally vulnerable living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged communities (Australian Government, 2016).

Family circumstances and everyday life events can affect how children experience the transition to school (Dockett et al., 2012). Attendance in early childhood programs before starting school supports transition to school and strongly correlates to positive results for later learning and achievement in primary school (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). The first 1000 days of a child's life are the most formative for early childhood education and lay the foundations for the future (Moore et al., 2017). Investment to reduce the gaps of poverty and social exclusion is more cost-effective in the early years than in programs later in life (Karoly, 2001).

The Ezidi, who claim to be one of the world's oldest religions, have been persecuted for centuries and recently labeled as infidels by Islamic extremists (ISIS) (Oliaei, 2021). This minority group is found primarily in northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, the Caucuses region, and parts of Iran. Most speak Kurmanji or northern Kurdish. Today, only around 800,000 of these Kurdish-speaking people survive in the Middle East (Arslan, 2019). ISIS invaded their homelands in Iraq and Syria in 2014 and forced them to choose between death and forcible conversion to Islam (Oliaei, 2021). ISIS terrorists killed at least 3,100 Ezidi, kidnapped more than 6,000 women and children, and subsequently sold them into sexual slavery (Soufran Centre, 2020). More than 4000 Ezidi have resettled in Australia, most of them are located in regional areas of NSW and Queensland (Settlement Service International, 2019). A recent study conducted in Australia has identified challenges to rural resettlement (Ziersch et al., 2020). These include securing employment, discrimination, and social isolation because of language barriers. These challenges can affect resettlement outcomes, including health and well-being, though relatively little research has examined these links (Ziersch et al., 2020).

Pre-settlement Ezidi children lacked appropriate play environments as they had to play underground quietly to survive ISIS persecution (Yale Macmillan Centre, 2019). Play is an essential part of children's learning and development; thus, it is important for these refugee children to be able to participate in play at home (Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2017). However, Fleer (2021) argues that in some family's play does not happen naturally; instead, it is a cultural construction actively constructed by families. Elkonin (2005) proposed that play resulted from family practices centered on the work of the family and community practices necessary for survival. This view contributes to Vygotsky's historically and culturally constructed theory of play. Fleer (2009) discusses how play is not necessarily the 'child's work' but takes Vygotsky's view as play being the leading activity of children's development. Veresov and Barrs (2016) challenge us to move beyond a universal Western pedagogical approach to the construct of play to one where culture and context are central to how play is perceived and valued. The authors consider the Ezidi family's history and contextual situation as imperative for this research paper.

There is an urgent need to support the learning of Ezidi children, assist in their transition to school as well as social engagement with a wider local community (Keary et. al., 2022). Saunders et al. (2017) suggested that support and investment will assist the well-being of refugee families. One such organization that supports EZIDI children is the HIPPY program.

HIPPY Program

There is a plethora of organizations in Australia that offer programs for children's learning and development administered by the National Quality Framework, including center-

based long day care, family daycare, preschool, and kindergarten (AGDE, 2023). However, not all programs cater to both children and families especially disadvantaged families and refugees. The HIPPY program is unique because it integrates with other child and family support services or schools. It also targets communities that experience various forms of social disadvantage (Liddell et al., 2011). It is an international program administered in Australia by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and is funded by the government. Professionally trained tutors visit families in their homes, facilitating a play-based program to promote children's literacy, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

HIPPY encourages parents and carers to be their child's first teacher by role-playing the parent-child activities with a home tutor with children aged 3-5. HIPPY is based on an intervention model to provide integrated parenting support as part of an early learning program for marginalized families (Connolly & Mallett, 2020). It aims to improve child outcomes to assist in the transition to school (Liddell et al., 2011). The HIPPY program is aligned with the EYLF (ADGE, 2022), Australian National Curriculum (AGDE, 2023), and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024). HIPPY is designed to support families by offering activity packs, story books, a 1-hour weekly tutor, and community gatherings (HIPPY Australia, 2023).

HIPPY seeks to address some of the negative impacts of disadvantage on children's early school success and future life chances (Liddell et al., 2011). The results of a two-year, longitudinal, quasi-experimental research project involving a comparison group drawn from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and HIPPY families found substantial encouraging results. Benefits of the HIPPY program found enhancements across a number of developmental domains, social connectedness and inclusion (Liddell et al., 2011). Most importantly, the most noteworthy statistical results included:

- The gap observed in HIPPY children's early numeracy and early literacy skills at the beginning of the program, compared with the Australian norm, had closed by the end of the program.
- HIPPY children had fewer problems with their peers—which is one of the five measures of the child's socio-emotional adjustment.
- For parents who completed more of the program rather than less of the program, their child displayed higher levels of pro-social behavior—a second measure of the child's social and emotional adjustment (Liddell et al., 2011, p. ix).

Research Questions

This research investigates the effectiveness of the HIPPY program for the local Ezidi parents and their children. The research questions included:

1. How does the HIPPY program assist parents as they support children's learning and transition to school?
2. What is the impact of the program on parents' perceptions of their children's learning and well-being?
3. How do the family support workers and community translators foster inclusive support during home visits within the program?
4. Does the provision of culturally appropriate children's books and toys improve parents' perceptions of the program?
5. Does the creation of children's books with local content improve parents' feelings of belonging and engagement with the local community?

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study was shaped by Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological system theory. Both theories view development as influenced by sociocultural factors that surround the child. Vygotsky (1987) emphasized the importance of culture and interaction in the development of cognitive abilities. Bronfenbrenner divides the child's environment into different levels; the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The microsystem comprises the child's immediate environment with whom they interact regularly such as family and childcare services. The mesosystem is the relationship between different social circles of the child as they do not function independently and are interconnected and influence each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Paat, 2013). This study focuses on two different systems, the microsystem (Ezidi families and HIPPY home visitors) and the mesosystem (The linkage process between HIPPY home visitors and the refugee families that influence child's learning). Figure 1 illustrates both the microsystem and mesosystem layers.

Figure 1
The Focus of This Study Draws from Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological System Theory
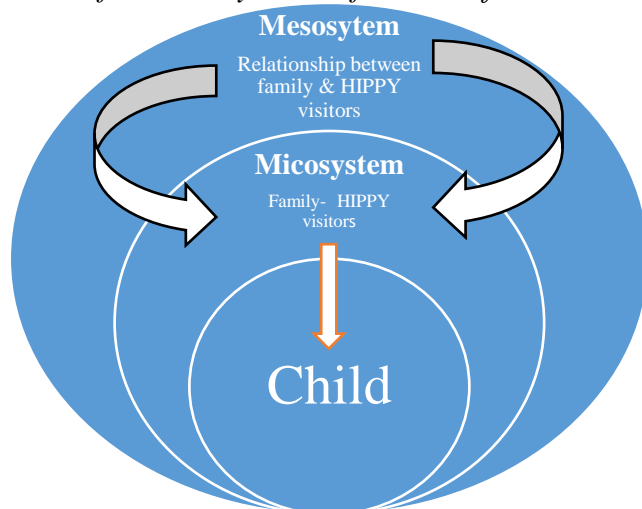
Kreitzer et al. (2022) explained that Bronfenbrenner's approach is increasingly being applied internationally within migration and refugee studies, given that the theory accounts for the diverse social and cultural influences that individuals experience. The ecological approach assisted the researchers in understanding the complexity of environmental factors that the refugee families were experiencing during HIPPY home interaction.

Case Study Methodology

The research employed a case study approach as it was particularly useful for investigating the refugee families attending the HIPPY program. There was a need to develop an in-depth understanding of the context of the cases (Crowe et al., 2011), specifically, how engaged Ezidi parents interact with the program. Case studies have crucial stages: defining the case, selecting the cases, collecting and analyzing the data, interpreting and reporting findings (Crowe et al., 2011). Following the ethical approval (HE22-097) from the University, the researchers were introduced by the local HIPPY program providers to the families during the monthly community gatherings. All families with children enrolled in the HIPPY program in 2023 were invited to participate in the study. The researchers, with the help of community translators, shared the study objectives and information sheet details in both English and Arabic

with the families, the language known by some of the Ezidi community members who lived in Iraq. Five of eight families enrolled in the HIPPY program consented to participate in the research.

The researchers participated in HIPPY community gatherings to get to know the Ezidi families and to establish trust. The involvement extended over several months so that the participants' views would be accurately reflected in the study. At some gatherings, the researchers provided professional learning information to the families about children's sleep, socio-emotional development, and children's learning. They also conducted some fun activities for the children. In addition, getting to know the community helped the researchers design culturally appropriate resources in the Ezidi language for future use. The resources were co-created with community translators and parents to increase the program's effectiveness. Creating the resources was a substantial challenge but was not the focus of the reported paper.

According to Liamputtong (2013), interviews are the most effective method for qualitative research to help explain and explore the research subjects' opinions, behaviors, experiences, and phenomena. The interview questions were semi-structured and based on the objectives of the study to explore parents' views and experiences on assisting their children's learning during school transition (Robinson, 2023). The researchers were accompanied by a translator for interviews, as most participants could not speak/understand English. The transparency of translated transcriptions is key to demonstrating sound procedural and ethical decision-making and ensuring quality in research reporting (McKenna, 2022). Therefore, the translated interviews were checked with another translator to ensure accuracy.

For analysis, the text was organized into a Word document format, which became raw data and suitable for NVivo software (Bazeley, 2013). Every individual (person or document) in the study, for the purpose of analysis, constituted a case. The interview transcripts were analyzed thematically, identifying, analyzing, and reporting similar patterns (themes/codes) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both inductive/deductive hybrid thematic approaches were applied (Proudfoot, 2023). When analyzing the interview transcripts, the researchers considered the themes that emerged from the text and the themes from the literature that shaped the interview questions. This combined approach "helps to ensure that the voices of the participants are valued while simultaneously allowing for more theory-led analysis" (Proudfoot, 2023, p. 309). Coding facilitates manipulating data and producing systematic descriptions of the social worlds that the researchers wished to explore (Richards, 2009).

However, once the codes were categorized, the researchers noticed that the emerging themes aligned with the foci of the research questions. Thus, the findings were reported according to the research questions. Given the limited number of participants in the study and the tendency of the participants to give very brief answers, the reported quotes reflected most of the feedback. Repetitive ideas were not included in the paper.

Participants

Most participants (Ps) have a limited understanding of English, and some have not attended schools in Iraq. The families have been in Australia for approximately four years, and the children participating in the study were born in Iraq. All the participants are Ezidi refugee women and live in the same regional town in NSW. Details about the participants follow.
- Participant 1 (P1). Alin speaks Kurmanji to the child and finds it difficult to understand English. She has three children, and the eldest, a boy, has been in the HIPPY program since 2022. He was two years old when he left Iraq.
- Participant 2 (P2). Azian has eight children and attends Technical and Further Education (TAFE, the largest vocational education and training provider in

Australia) for three days per week. The two youngest daughters, aged five and seven, participated in the HIPPY program.

- Participant 3 (P3). Beyan has three children. She has not been to school and has a very limited knowledge of English. The two older children participated in the HIPPY program.
- Participant 4 (P4). Hana has two children. She has not previously attended school and is currently enrolled in a TAFE program to improve her limited knowledge of English. The two children participated in the program.
- Participant 5 (P5). Mina has two children. She understands some English but cannot speak the language. One child participated in the HIPPY program.

Except for Azian (P2), the participants (Ps) had relatively small families with two or three children.

Findings

Data were analyzed, and findings were grouped according to the research questions.

Research Question 1. How Does the HIPPY Program Assist Parents as They Support Children's Learning and Transition to School?

Two points of view were identified in the Ps' responses regarding HIPPY's role in assisting them to support children's learning. The replies reflected the Ps' understanding of what the program offers and their engagement level. On the one hand, Ps mentioned that they appreciated the visits by tutors and community translators. Beyan mentioned that she benefitted from the program saying, "It's very good for me and my language as well." She went on to add, "When they came here and I am listening to them when they're doing activities," "I learned from them," and "It was very useful for me too." Alin mentioned that she took care of her siblings growing up, and yet she found that the HIPPY tutors helped her assist her son when angry. "They told me when my child is scared or angry, things like that," followed by "When they are angry, try to get close to them and take them outside." She followed the advice but had difficulty understanding English, which hindered her ability to engage with the other components of the program.

Conversely, two participants said that the visits were targeted at the child and not at them. Mina stated, "I didn't learn anything, but they were coming to see Azade." She later added, "They just came to visit children, not me. They were more talking to them, not the mom." Similarly, Azian stated, "They came here just for the child, and they taught me nothing," "They were just bringing these things, this stuff is just for the children, not for me." Azian did not sit with the children while the HIPPY visitors attended nor followed up with the children afterward: "To be honest, it is very challenging for me to teach them, and everything is tough here." She justified her feedback by saying that having eight children kept her very busy.

Research Question 2. What is the Impact of the Program on Parents' Perceptions of their Children's Learning and Well-Being?

When asked about the impact of the HIPPY program on children's learning and well-being, Ps responded by highlighting the gains in reading and math that the child achieved. Ps mentioned listening to and reading stories, matching pictures, counting to 20, and the child knowing their own name as favorable outcomes of the program. Beyan commented that: "It was very good to them. They learned to count to 20, and his name. His teacher is our neighbor, and she came to visit us, and she said Munzir is doing well, and when he was in kindergarten,

they loved him because he knew his name." Providing experiences for the children in English can support the transition to the school environment.

Hana concurred: "It was very helpful for Meryem, she learns her letter before starting school" and "Stories are very good, and stories teach her reading and drawing." Mina explained that: "They were coming to see Azade, and they brought books with letters, colors and numbers." Mina elaborated on how learning improved the child's confidence: "Before she couldn't, like, know the numbers are little and even they built her confidence more; before she couldn't connect with other people, but now she's more confident."

Research Question 3. How Do the Family Support Workers and Community Translators Foster Inclusive Support during Home Visits within the Program?

A Family Support Worker (FSW) and a Community Translator visited every couple of weeks from half an hour to one hour. The contributions of the FSW and the community translators were seen favorably. The participants appreciated that the FSW and the community translator coordinated their tasks. Azian felt satisfied: "They were teaching my children, and they were very good at supporting my children." The community translator explained to the mothers in Ezidi that they did not understand what the FSW said. Beyan said, "They asked me to read first in English, and if we don't understand what this means, they explain to us in our language." If, for any reason, the translator could not attend and the mother had limited English, it became difficult to fully engage with the FSW. Hana put it as follows: "The translator is not coming, like, all the time, just sometimes. It's very good for when, like, I understand when they are talking to me, but sometimes I don't, like, can't answer her."

Research Question 4. Does the Provision of Culturally Appropriate Children's Books and Toys Improve Parents' Perceptions of the Program?

Participants appreciated the provision of culturally appropriate children's resources in their own language. However, the HIPPY packs were written in English. Hana mentioned that if the HIPPY packs included Ezidi resources, that would help her be more included in the program. A second participant, Beyan, stated that it would be useful to have HIPPY resources in Kurmanji: "It will be very good to have some activity like, it's, like, it's close to our culture and it's good for our children and to us." However, she did not think that the children wanted cultural resources, "like the parents, they want, but I don't think, like, children wanted," and "If you make, they wouldn't listen to it." The preference to have the material in English was also reiterated by other participants as explained below.

Research Question 5. Does the Creation of Children's Books with Local Content Improve Parents' Feelings of Belonging and Engagement with the Local Community?

Ps were welcoming to the provision of local content and material in the English language. Alin showed a preference for English resources: "I don't know which would be better, but while we are here, we need English language." One participant, Azian, shared that her children spoke English at home: "And all my children learn English, they even if they sit together in the house they don't speak (Kurmanji) with each other, They just speak English and that's not like a big issue for them." Beyan said that exposure to the local content made her "feel that they belong to this community."

In addition to accessing resources in English, Ps were positive about attending the community gatherings often held once per month as part of the HIPPY program. The

community gatherings included a welcome to Country, a guest speaker, games for children, and food. The gatherings provided an opportunity for the families to socialize in a safe environment.

Alin commented "When we take our children to HIPPY, it's a new environment good for them and many children gathering around, good for them." Similarly, Mina said, "Children were very happy, and the children just liked to go there." Hana stated that both she and the children benefitted from the group gatherings: "My English is not good, it's very good and useful and when they have a group gathering, it is very helpful for them"; and "Yeah, she felt confident of like, happy she does like, the other families so are." Hana went further to add that she benefitted from the program by receiving the support of her older daughter, who completed the HIPPY program, stating, "Stories are very good. I was studying at TAFE, and I couldn't read. Meryem (daughter) was with me and telling me how to read it."

Discussion

Research has indicated the successful implementation of HIPPY programs internationally to assist integration into school communities, especially migrant families and marginalized groups (Gurer, 2019; Payne et al., 2020). Five decades of HIPPY research conducted by Goldstein's (2017) meta-analysis of quantitative impact studies demonstrate significant outcomes for families with similar interventions. However, with small studies such as this one, it is difficult to precisely identify the program's impact. Nevertheless, when considering the importance of culture and interaction in children's development, the aims of the HIPPY program were well aligned with the sociocultural theoretical perspective represented in Figure 1 (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Vygotsky, 1987). The program puts the Ezidi child at the center of the learning, surrounded by family and program providers such as a tutor and a translator (Microsystem). In this study, the children were influenced by the relationship between families and the program providers (Mesosystem). In terms of the HIPPY program for families, the program supports parent-child relationships as it may reduce intergenerational cultural dissonance, in which parents and children grow up in different cultures and experience conflict with one another related to differing values (Enns, 2017; Genc, 2019).

The study results showed that the program impacted children's learning mostly academically, as the parents reported their evaluation of the programs. The parents focused on academic learning, such as reading the alphabet and counting. Likewise, Goldstein's (2017) meta-analysis also demonstrated greater achievements in language and math skills, which had with a more immediate effect directly after the intervention. The Ps in this study prioritized children's academic learning rather than play. Play is the work of the family and community practices necessary for survival (Elkonin, 2005). Play is where culture and context are central to how play is perceived and valued (Vygotsky, 1987). The importance of play for children's learning could be a challenging concept for the Ezidi parents because of trauma experiences (Yale Macmillan Centre, 2019) and additional settlement challenges such as social isolation and language barriers (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2019). A study on refugee families involved in a HIPPY program in Canada reported similar findings when introducing play experiences, even when the purpose of the activity was clearly explained. The mothers indicated that these were new experiences for them, and they resisted being involved in play as it made them feel uncomfortable (Mothers Matter Centre Research and Publications, 2017).

The lack of English ability to read the Activity Packs was evident and impacted the parents' engagement, as the packs included detailed information about the objectives and how parents could contribute to the children's learning. Similarly, in the Canadian program, language barriers were also an issue, adding another layer of challenge for these families and a cause of frustration and, in some instances, demotivation in implementing curriculum experiences (Mothers Matter Centre Research and Publications, 2017). In an Australian study of a HIPPY program, challenges were noted in the consistency of parents' participation with

frequent cancellations and rescheduled appointments that impacted forming connections with families (Graham et al., 2024). Parents' low engagement, specifically two parents' statements on the program that it is not for them but for children, does not adhere to the HIPPY's aim of improving the interaction between parents and children. Other intervention programs delivered a different outcome. The Home-Based Early Childhood Education (HECE) intervention program implemented with Syrian refugees and local Turkish mothers in Turkey showed that the intervention improved mother-child interactions, parenting capacity, and children's learning (Erdemir, 2022). A comparison of the implementation process might shed light on this discrepancy in the findings.

The fact that most of the Ps have not been to school themselves raises a question about what they would focus on when they evaluate the program's contribution to children's transition to school. Payne et al. (2020) discuss the issue of parents' lack of understanding of what preparedness for school looks like and how this would impact their interpretation of what skills and knowledge a child requires before starting school. Due to limited school experience, attitudes towards formal education may be vastly different from what we might expect and may have been a factor in low engagement in the program. A higher rate of engagement was reported in Texas, where families had engaged in HIPPY for two-three years and if they had a child in a kindergarten class in school (Brown & Johnson, 2013). Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2012) also presented in their study that mothers who had been participating in the program longer were more involved in their children's education. Having an increased comprehension and understanding of the expectations of the program and being more informed about the school environment would certainly assist in creating higher involvement in the program activities. Notably, Ps listed academic skills as beneficial outcomes of the program rather than play as that is what they would expect.

The HIPPY Packs include objectives that cover five learning areas: thinking and exploring, communication, creativity, social and emotional, and family and community (HIPPY Australia, 2023). They aim to guide children's learning and transition to school (HIPPY Australia, 2023). In this study, given the limited proficiency in English of the Ezidi participants, they were neither able to read the objectives nor the directions given on most pages of the Activity Packs on how to engage the child. Even if they understood basic English, this did not imply they would be familiar with children's developmental areas. The focus of the HIPPY program is to use English; however, the Canadian experience was the same as it required effort and determination for the tutor to try and translate so that they understand the point of the activities (Mothers Matter Centre Research and Publications, 2017). There seems to be a missed opportunity to help the Ps continue to engage with the child in the absence of tutors and translators. It would be beneficial, as per the principles and practices of effective partnerships of the Early Years Learning Framework, to build on the strengths of the families (AGDE, 2022). Further programs and interventions may be necessary for a greater impact. Goldstein (2017) argues that the HIPPY program is not intended to be a stand-alone intervention but is best worked alongside other programs and interventions.

The feedback of the Ps regarding the provision of Ezidi cultural resources and local English content was insightful. The participants wanted cultural resources but, at the same time, pointed out that they would also like to have English content. They also were not sure the children would be interested in the cultural content. Two interpretations present themselves. Firstly, given that the Ps have not been to school in Iraq and that the Kurmanji language is mostly an oral language, it is possible that the participants could not envisage how resources could be created and provided in Activity Packs to read and share. Secondly, the preference for the English language is understandable as the command of the English language would facilitate the integration in the new community.

However, there is an ongoing debate in early learning circles about whether HIPPY programs should only be in English due to the influence of the first language being connected to bonding and attachment and the ease of families communicating in their first language (Mothers Matter Centre Research and Publications, 2017). When considering funds of knowledge perspective (Moll et al., 1992), it would seem preferable to use both languages to emphasize the historically accumulated strengths of the families and respect for family needs and values.

Limitations

The researchers' presence in the HIPPY community gatherings facilitated communication with the families, the implementation of the interviews and, and the collection of cultural resources. However, there were some limitations to the study, such as investigating the effectiveness of the HIPPY program on a small number of families and specific refugee backgrounds. It is also not possible to assume the longitudinal impact of the program on participating families. The recommendation is to expand the study to include more families from refugees and migrant backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study investigated the perceptions of parents participating in the HIPPY program and the parent's capacity to prepare their children for Australian school contexts and to build a sense of belonging in their new community. Participants concurred that the program benefitted the children but were ambivalent about whether the program specifically benefitted them. It was also found that some participants were eager to use Ezidi cultural resources while others preferred having additional resources in the English language. This is justified, given the limited English proficiency of the participants. An emphasis on the program providers to provide activities in both Ezidi and English would pave the way for parents to better support their children's learning and transition to school.

The study informs early childhood education policies and practices. Firstly, the findings highlight the children's adaptability, acceptance, and responsiveness to new learning. Thus, the provision of quality material is important when introducing children to a new culture. Secondly, the presence of some of the mothers was irregular during the HIPPY visits. To avoid this irregularity, the HIPPY team or any intervention team carrying out activities needs to resolve implementation issues as soon as they arise. Thirdly, although the educational packages included multicultural content, embedding Ezidi cultural resources might have encouraged the mothers to participate and share their heritage during the visits.

Further research could investigate pathways for successfully implementing the program's objectives. For example, additional research could explore how to involve parents in their children's education and make parents feel that their contributions are valuable by engaging with them in person whenever possible. To fully account for parents' beliefs and expectations, it is recommended that future research include one-to-one in-depth interviews with refugees to capture a first-person perspective (Mattelin et al., 2022).

Funding Details

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