The ripple effect: Examining the impact on parents of an Abecedarian early child care intervention in an urban social housing development

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Abstract
The Abecedarian Approach is an internationally recognised early childhood intervention program that has shown long-term positive outcomes for children living in low SES communities. However, there are few studies examining the broader influence of such interventions for young children on the lives of their parents. This article describes the findings of a qualitative study exploring the perceptions and experiences of parents whose children attend an Abecedarian early intervention program located in an urban social housing complex. Eighteen parents whose children had attended the program for a minimum of one year were interviewed. The main themes that emerged were: strengthened relationships between parents and program staff, as well as between parents themselves, particularly supported through the home visitor; increased awareness among parents about early development and of their role in supporting child development; and opportunities for parents’ personal growth. The findings suggest that high quality early child intervention programs, such as the Abecedarian Approach, can positively impact the lives of parents.

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Introduction
Research on the social determinants of health highlight that children living in poverty experience a variety of inequities of opportunity (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008; Edwards and Bromfield, 2010; Finocchario, 2016; Mikkonen and Raphael, 2010). Strategies to specifically address inequities that affect children’s development include targeted early childhood initiatives and programs (Elango et al., 2016). Longitudinal research demonstrates that several high quality early childhood education and care intervention programs implemented in low SES neighbourhoods, notably the Abecedarian Project and the Perry Preschool Project, produce positive, long-term effects on children’s cognitive development, social development, educational attainment, employment, and health (Campbell et al., 2012; Schweinhart et al., 2005).

Family-centred approaches in early child care programs and interventions recognise the importance of collaborating with and directly involving parents in supporting their children’s development (Hamilton et al., 2003). Parental engagement in early child care intervention programs has been shown to increase their effectiveness (Chang et al., 2009; Landry et al., 2017; Unger et al., 2004). Including home visits as a part of centre-based intervention programs is one strategy to support caregiver engagement (Grindal et al., 2016). In their meta-analysis of early childhood education programs that included parenting education, Grindal, et al. (2016), found that regular home visits (one or two per month) along with active learning opportunities for parents, ‘. . .were associated with substantially larger positive impacts of preschool programs on children’s cognitive performance’ (p. 246).

For the most part, research on the impact of early child care programs has focused on child outcomes, particularly related to children’s readiness to learn when entering formal schooling, and ways to engage parents in their child’s development. Less attention has been given to assessing parental accounts of how early child care intervention programs impact parents’ own lives and their sense of well-being. Our study aimed to explore the impact on parents of having a child(ren) in the Abecedarian early intervention program at Lord Selkirk Park Child Care Centre (LSPCCC) located in an inner city social housing complex.

Abecedarian approach implemented at Lord Selkirk Park Child Care Centre
The Lord Selkirk Park housing development is located in Winnipeg, a mid-size Canadian city with a diverse population. Lord Selkirk Park is the largest social housing complex in the city, consisting of 178 townhouse units and 126 single apartments. Although welcomed when it was first opened in 1967, ‘. . .as in other North American public housing complexes, conditions deteriorated in Lord Selkirk Park. It became housing of last resort for the poorest of the poor and for those whose lives were most troubled’ (Silver, 2016: 226).

Studies indicate that neighbourhood characteristics can influence development in the early years (Minh et al., 2017). Indeed, data from the Early Development Instrument (EDI) for the area indicate that children in the Lord Selkirk Park community were not as well prepared for kindergarten entry as children in other areas of the city (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2018; Janus et al., 2007; Santos et al., 2012).
In the 1990s, Lord Selkirk Park was scarcely populated with many housing units boarded up. There was a substantial gang presence and many residents reported feeling unsafe in the community. In 2005, the North End Community Renewal Corporation, a local development corporation, received funding from the Manitoba government to lead community consultations and work towards reducing crime and violence in the housing complex (Silver, 2006). A major renovation of the housing units in 2012 was funded by the provincial government, and based on further community consultations, created the opportunity to fund and integrate the community’s request for an early child care centre and family resource centre in the heart of the housing complex. To foster better child outcomes in the area, the Manitoba government, based on its review of evidence-based early child development interventions, funded the centre to integrate the Abecedarian Approach, provide programming reflective of the population in the complex (80% Indigenous, small growing newcomer population), and funding to rigorously evaluate the initiative.

The Abecedarian Approach is an internationally recognised early childhood intervention for children from birth to age five. It focuses on supporting language and literacy development in the context of responsive, play-based interactions between individual children and their caregivers. (Ramey et al., 2012). The empirical evidence for the Abecedarian Approach shows strong program benefits to children experiencing socio-economic inequities in the earliest years of life (Ramey and Ramey, 1998), better literacy and math achievement throughout the school years (Campbell et al., 2002), increased university graduation (Campbell et al., 2012), and better adult health (Campbell et al., 2014).

In 2012, LSPCCC opened and the Manitoba Abecedarian Project, based on the original Abecedarian program, including the home visitor position, began from the outset (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2012). The centre has spaces for 47 children (15 school age, 9 infants and 23 preschool children) and is located in the heart of the housing development, where it is easily accessed by parents. The Lord Selkirk Park Family Resource Centre, adjacent to the child care centre, is open to all residents and seen as an important part of the community.

Methodology

For this study, an interpretative phenomenological approach (Smith et al., 2009) was used to describe and gain insight into parents’ perceptions and experiences of having a child in the Manitoba Abecedarian Project. In this research, the term parent is used to denote child(ren)’s primary adult caregiver (e.g. parent, grandparent, guardian, other relative or foster parent).

Sample

Parents were invited to participate in the study if they had one or more children between the ages of one and five years who had attended the centre for a minimum of 1 year. Parents of children that had aged out of the program (i.e. were older than age five) but had attended the program within the last year were also invited to participate. Eighteen parents (out of a total of 26 parents) participated in the study.

Method

The recruitment and data collection occurred between January and March 2017. Data were collected via individual semi-structured interviews conducted by a Research Assistant (RA) trained in qualitative research methods. The RA, an Indigenous woman who lived in the community as a child, conducted all of the interviews for consistency and to reduce any real or perceived barriers
between researchers and the majority of participants. During the recruitment phase, the RA spent time visiting the Centre, meeting parents, providing information and answering questions regarding the study and setting up interview dates.

All interviews were conducted with an interview guide and Vidaview Life Story Board® (LSB) and ranged from 45 to 75 minutes in length. The LSB is a visual elicitation tool that uses a magnetic play board, cards and symbol markers that enable the interviewee to create a pictorial representation of their responses (people, events, places, feelings). The LSB facilitates engagement in a conversational exploration of lived experience in a respectful way across diverse cultures and communication styles. ‘In a process of co-construction’ with the interviewer (Chongo et al., 2018) participants map out relevant aspects in the form of a ‘lifescape’ (Mignone et al., 2019; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2018). In this study, however, the LSB was used in a slightly different manner in that it was used as a tool for reflection on the narrative content in response to the interviewer’s questions. Typically, a half hour interview was followed by a half hour of mapping out a visual summary of their responses onto the LSB. This allowed an opportunity for participants to reflect and further elaborate on their answers. Participants chose how to represent their conversation on the board using the cards and symbols and the RA assisted them in placing items on the board. If participants chose, a digital photo of their individual stories was taken and shared with them.

Following the LSB semi-structured interviews, participants were invited to participate in a subsequent video-recorded interview for knowledge mobilisation purposes. Of the 18 parents originally interviewed, four volunteered to participate in supplementary interviews. These interviews were conducted by one of the principal investigators between Oct and Dec, 2017. All 22 interviews (original and supplementary) were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service and then audio-checked to ensure accuracy.

The analysis of the interview transcripts involved several steps in the process of organising data and identifying themes. First, team members (JK, AST, TW and JM) thoroughly reviewed all interview transcripts individually, coding meaningful passages, (i.e. passages describing parents’ relationships with their child(ren) and/or program staff, changes in their own lives, etcetera); this process allowed each team member to independently identify patterns and preliminary categories. Subsequent analysis of the data as a group process, allowed the team to share insights, explore different perspectives on the data, identify commonly chosen extracts and agree on categories to use in organising the data. For example, the category of ‘Child’ developed from grouping coded extracts related to their children such as ‘independence’, ‘problem-solving’, ‘manners’, ‘pride’ and ‘maturity’. The category ‘Abecedarian’ included coded extracts related to the Abecedarian Approach and components such as ‘Conversational Reading’ and ‘LearningGames®’ as well as ‘child care program’. Data were entered into NVivo Pro 11 qualitative data analysis software to organise and collate the data. Team members individually reviewed the collated data again, and did a second round of coding to refine categories, ensure data extracts had not been missed, and to verify that the extracts were coded correctly. A meeting was held to identify potential candidate themes and sub-themes for example; the categories of ‘Child’ and ‘Abecedarian’ became part of the theme on increased parental awareness of early development as well as their role in supporting their child’s development. Sub-themes included focusing on parents pride in their children’s development and abilities, supporting child’s language and literacy, and increased understanding of the Abecedarian Approach and how to implement in the home.

After candidate themes were identified, a session for study participants was held in the Family Resource Centre to share ‘what we heard from parents’. Individual posters for each of the three themes labelled; ‘Relationships’, ‘Children’s Development’, and ‘Impact on Parents’, were posted in the room and provided initial summaries of key messages in each theme. The RA and two research team members attended the session. The RA welcomed parents and introduced the format
for the session. Note pads and pens were available and parents recorded comments and stuck these next to the posters and/or shared feedback with a team member. Sixteen of the parents participating in the study attended, along with four staff.

As stated earlier, studies on the impact of child care tend to focus on child outcomes and do not necessarily explore the impact on parent’s own lives, in this case, specifically the impact on Indigenous and newcomer parents living in poverty. The research team brought diverse backgrounds and experiences to the exploration of these parent perspectives. The RA identifies as an Indigenous woman and had a connection to the Lord Selkirk Park community as a child. She has lived in a rural Indigenous community as well as in Winnipeg. One key team member also had years of experience with other early childhood programs that typically serve Indigenous and newcomer populations. Other research team members have worked for many years with Indigenous and newcomer individuals and families (nationally and internationally) and were aware of, and have been sensitised to, some of the histories and oppressions that have affected study participant’s lives. At all stages of the study, from the planning to the dissemination of findings, the team was aware of the power differentials at play and took them into consideration in all decisions that were made. The involvement of study participants in the interpretation of findings was one instance of how we sought to address this reality.

Findings

The primary goal of this study was to explore the influence on parents of having their children in the Abecedarian program at LSPCCC. Eighteen parents participated in the study and the demographic characteristics of participants are summarised in Table 1.

The analysis of the data revealed three broad themes: (1) Strengthened relationships; (2) Increased awareness among parents about child development and of their role in supporting child development; and (3) Opportunities for parents’ personal growth.

Theme 1. Strengthened relationships

The interviews revealed a clear pattern of improved relationships between parents and staff, and among parents themselves. This was evidenced by the increased trust towards child care centre personnel, the relationships built with home visitors, and the reduction of isolation among some families and parents due to enhanced community relations.

Trusting relationships with child care centre staff supports parents. The Abecedarian Approach at LSPCCC focuses on building relationships, both between the children and their caregivers, and the caregivers and parents. In the Centre, each child is paired with a primary caregiver to build trust, ensure consistent care, and have a consistent staff person to turn to, strengthening the relationship between the parent and caregiver.

Most parents reported strengthened relationships with program staff at the Centre. The lived experiences of several of the parents participating in the study suggested unease and mistrust towards authority figures, be they within social services, health care, school or child care settings. As such, the development of trusting relationships between parents and staff was an important finding. However, the major thread of this sub-theme appeared to be that because children were comfortable and enjoyed being in the Abecedarian program, parents in turn became increasingly comfortable. The importance that parents place on the positive experience of their children in the program was often repeated, with statements such as ‘My kids are very comfortable with the
daycare staff. I like that.’ (Parent 6, age 30–39) or ‘Putting them in that program is like a – it’s like a family. They feel comfortable. . .’ (Parent 1, age 30–39). These comments corroborate that children’s positive experiences are a key aspect of parents learning to trust the program and staff.

The positive experience of the children was also complemented by the direct experience of the parents. For instance, as one interviewee stated,

‘Going through this progress with the daycare, and everything else, it made me be able to talk more. They opened me up to the point where I can just speak about anything and everything with them, because they built that trust with me.’ (Parent 11, age 30–39).

As parents started feeling comfortable they began to believe that the child care centre was a place that they could rely on as a support system. One parent explained: ‘I really appreciated, staff are able to see if I’m under any kind of stress. . .and then they’re just on top of it and they want to

Table 1. Characteristics of study participants.

| Demographic characteristics | Age          | All study participants N (%) |
|-----------------------------|--------------|------------------------------|
|                             | 20–29        | 5 (28)                       |
|                             | 30–39        | 9 (50)                       |
|                             | 40 and over  | 4 (22)                       |
| Gender                      | Female       | 15 (83)                      |
|                             | Male         | 3 (17)                       |
| Family status               | Single-parent| 10 (56)                      |
|                             | Two-parent   | 8 (44)                       |
| No. of children             | 1–2          | 3 (17)                       |
|                             | 3–4          | 9 (50)                       |
|                             | 5–6          | 4 (22)                       |
|                             | 7–8          | 2 (11)                       |

| Program participation       | No. of children attended abecedarian program |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
|                             | 1–2                                         | 7 (39)                      |
|                             | 3–4                                         | 11 (61)                     |

| Neighbourhood characteristics| No. of years living in Lord Selkirk park housing complex |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
|                             | 1–3                                                      | 2 (11)                      |
|                             | 4–6                                                      | 8 (44)                      |
|                             | 7–9                                                      | 4 (22)                      |
|                             | 10 or over                                               | 4 (22)                      |

| Education                   | Highest level of education attained prior to children attending Abecedarian program |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                             | Completed up to Grade 9                                                          | 5 (28)                      |
|                             | Graduated high school                                                            | 5 (28)                      |
|                             | Some college courses                                                             | 3 (17)                      |
|                             | Completed 1-year certificate program                                              | 1 (5)                       |
|                             | Some university courses                                                           | 4 (22)                      |
help. . .’ (Parent 4, age 40 and over). The building of trusting relationships and the sense of increased supports was also expressed in the following comment: ‘You start seeing that they genuinely care and love them. . .when we have troubles or whatever, something happens we could always come and talk. . .we’ve built good relationships here. . .’ (Parent 3, age 40 and over).

Home visitors built trusting relationships. Another aspect of building trusting relationships was related to the family home visitor. The role of family home visitor became incorporated into one of the early childhood educator’s position at the Centre. This helped create a bridge between the child care centre and home, fostering a sense of cooperation and teamwork between centre staff and parents. Parents clearly valued the home visitor: ‘You get to interact with somebody that actually works with the children that’s in the daycare.’ (Parent 16, age 20–29); ‘I like it, just to be able to sit down, and catch up with the kids, like with their progress, and what they’re doing, and any concerns that I have to bring up to them. . .’ (Parent 11, age 30–39).

Some parents talked about how they valued home visitors as a resource for themselves as well as for their children. ‘It’s not only the kids, they come and genuinely care for us too as parents. . .when you have somebody to talk to or a little break. . .it helps’ (Parent 9, age 40 and over). Another parent explained, ‘I can vent. . .I can go to her and just tell her, like, things that are going on in my life.’ (Parent 4, age 40 and over).

Increased trusting relationships with other families and community. The reduction of isolation among some parents was reported as another impact of the program. Families living in close proximity to each other had not necessarily translated into meaningful relationships. The engagement with the Abecedarian Approach, with a mix of parent gatherings, home visitors and positive engagement with the Centre played a role in increasing relationships with other families. This was expressed in several ways by parents. For instance, ‘the daycare also made me feel at home in the community. . .because we meet there with parents. . .and we’ll talk. . .It’s better than when I was here for two years without a daycare. . .I didn’t know nobody.’ (Parent 7, age 30–39). Another parent explained, ‘you start knowing the staff and. . .build friendships. . .it’s like everybody knows everybody. . .before the daycare was here. . .we would see people around here. . .but these kind of things brings people in the community together.’ (Parent 3, age 40 and over).

Theme 2. Increased awareness among parents about early development and of their role in supporting their child(ren)’s development

The second major theme that emerged was that of increased awareness among parents of their role in supporting or facilitating their child(ren)’s development. This was reflected in how parents recognised and became proud of their children’s increased abilities, their role in fostering development and their increased confidence in implementing Abecedarian strategies.

Parents notice and are proud of their children’s development and abilities. Repeatedly parents talked about the progress they saw in their children’s development. They often observed it in small things, such as the way their children interact with other children, the way they speak and their desire to read. Parents were proud of their children’s progress and identified different areas where they observed progress. For instance: ‘Seeing my child acting so like responsible, so understanding. . .she’s acting so mature. Yeah, that makes me so proud.’ (Parent 7, age 30–39) or ‘I noticed he’s a bit more like aware of things that you wouldn’t expect a child of his age to be.’ (Parent 2, age 20–29). Another parent stated
‘There’s lots of bragging rights... they’re just incredibly intelligent and I do put all that faith towards the games [Abecedarian LearningGames®] that they’re playing and how they’re being spoke to.’ (Parent 8, age 30–39).

Parents also reported noticing progress in terms of creativity and problem solving, for instance: ‘It’s nice to see that they can play games together, make up games, they can problem solve... I really believe that daycare’s a big help with that.’ (Parent 8, age 30–39). Another parent noted, ‘They [staff] let them explore their minds... their imagination, to build up on it, to create things about it, and everything else...’ (Parent 11, age 30–39).

The sense of pride was felt particularly when parents heard positive remarks about their children’s development from others. This was notable when children in the Abecedarian program attended school with other children not involved in the program. For instance, several parents shared comments they had received from teachers reflecting on their children’s developmental progress. For instance, ‘Even the teachers, they say ‘wow, how old is she – she’s so behaved and stuff’, so I do hear it from other people...’ (Parent 18, age 20–29). Another explained, ‘I get so many compliments from school, teachers telling me how far my child is developmentally, like in reading, in understanding...’ (Parent 7, age 30–39).

Several parents felt that implementing Abecedarian strategies not only supported their children’s development but influenced their parent/child relationship: ‘I think we have that extra closeness, me and the kids, because of it.’ (Parent 4, age 40 and over). Another stated, ‘I think it brought us closer to each other, because we’re both learning off of each other.’ (Parent 11, age 30–39).

Parents have an increased understanding of children’s language abilities and how to support them. This second subtheme relates to parents noticing their children’s increased language abilities, as well as noting that communication between themselves and their children had improved. They acknowledged that staff supported scaffolding children’s language development. For instance one parent stated ‘...the difference is in the way that the guardians, parents or caregivers, talk with the kids...it’s teaching me to be more, be able to communicate with them and more...’ (Parent 4, age 40 and over). Another parent mentioned ‘...when they ask questions they’re trying to draw more out of the kid than just the yes or no answer’ (Parent 9, age 40 and over).

Parents noticed how their children expressed themselves ‘better through their emotions, they were able to understand situations that come about’ (Parent 11, age 30–39). Others noticed their increased vocabulary ‘...some of the vocabulary that I never, even me myself I’m not used to putting it in the words, my younger one puts it in the words. It’s so just amazing to hear them talking.’ (Parent 7, age 30–39).

Parents shared that by being more involved in the Abecedarian program, including with the family home visitor, they were taking more of an initiative to read with their children. Parents mentioned that this has led to increased conversational reading [one of the strategies of the Abecedarian Approach] and language skills development in their children. One parent described, ‘I learned about conversation reading, I didn't know how to read to my children. Like [I used to] just take a book and read and read and read, not talking about the book, not talking about the pictures...not talking about asking questions...’ (Parent 7, age 30–39). Another parent mentioned, ‘I never seen them grab so many books before. Like, you know, like, every day was like, ‘Can you read us that? Can you read us that? Can we read this...if you skip a word or skip a page, ‘No, you got to go back.’ (Parent 9, age 40 and over).

Family home visitors increased parents’ understanding of the Abecedarian Approach and provided emotional support. The family home visitors played a key role in connecting parents to the program,
their learning about the Abecedarian Approach as well as building connections with other parents. One way that some parents valued home visitors was with helping them to understand the LearningGames® in the Abecedarian Approach and to implement them in the home. As one parent explained: ‘They’re all doing different games at different times and she would give us one out of the three games they were learning that week to do as well, at home, with the children. . .So when they’re getting it at daycare then they’re also getting it at home.’ (Parent 8, age 30–39). Another parent stated, ‘I can tell her, you know, I’m kind of struggling with this with the little ones. . .and she’ll give me some suggestions, or other games [Abecedarian LearningGames®] to try with them.’ (Parent 4, age 40 and over). As some of the parents became more interested in understanding and implementing the LearningGames®, they suggested forming a parent group to be led by the home visitor. One parent described, ‘. . .when they came with the parent program with the Abecedarian, then we’d come here every other week and then we would learn more about it too’ (Parent 8, age 30–39). One parent indicated, ‘The only challenge is on my end, with not giving enough time, not giving as much as I’d like to, to implementing the program at home.’ (Parent 4, age 30–39).

There was mention of how the home visitor and the parent group meetings also helped them to connect with the other parents. For instance, ‘. . .if we have any issues. . .I had this going on at home and how do you guys like deal with that? And then they give you suggestions. . .and then we can all do that for one another, that’s awesome.’ (Parent 8, age 30–39).

Several parents described the home visitor as more than an Abecedarian mentor, but like a family friend who provided needed support. One parent explained, ‘. . .all the babies were small and I was really locked in. . .she would bring me a coffee and we just got to sit and talk, not just about games, but just talk about anything that was going on in my life or any supports that I needed or however I was feeling like emotionally’ (Parent 8, age 30–39). Another parent relates, ‘I remember once I was sick in the hospital, and because I have nobody here. . .our home visitor was the one with me in the hospital all this time. That really means a lot to me.’ (Parent 7, age 30–39).

**Theme 3. Opportunities for parents’ personal growth**

This final theme refers to how parents reported having benefitted from having access to high-quality child care in terms of personal growth. Some referred to the benefits of access to high quality child care, in general, while others related their benefits specifically to the Abecedarian Approach.

*Parents had opportunities to pursue education and/or employment.* Typically in Manitoba, families can apply for child care subsidies to help with the costs of child care if parents are either attending school, employed (or for 12 weeks while looking for employment), or seeking care for a child with additional support needs. Many of the parents in Lord Selkirk Park were not eligible to apply for child care subsidies. As explained by one parent ‘I didn’t get the daycare before because I wasn't working. . . I wasn’t going to school. Why? Because I was kept with the children in the house, right?’ (Parent 7, age 30–39).

However, as part of the Manitoba Abecedarian Project eligibility requirements for subsidy were waived by the Government of Manitoba, creating opportunities for many parents who would not typically be eligible, to access high quality child care. The long waiting list for child care spaces was mentioned as a serious barrier that had been partially solved due to the government supporting the program and by guaranteeing spaces for children in the social housing complex. The following quote illustrates the impact of this decision:

‘I had looked for daycare before. I had wanted to go to school. . .and my child. . .was 105 on the waiting list. . .it felt so good [getting a daycare spot]. I had a plan. I didn’t want to just be in the house, taking care
of the children. . .I wanted to get out and do something. . .and get out of welfare. . .so I was like, oh this is a good opportunity. . .my children get daycare, I'll be able to do something else, like. . .go to school and get at least my grade 12 because I didn't have it' (Parent 7, age 30–39).

Some parents noted that seeing so much progress with their children in the Abecedarian Program motivated them to make changes in their own lives. Overall, the sense from parents was that having the children in a child care centre right in their community had opened up different types of opportunities for them. Numerous parents explained how having children at the centre gave them the possibility to go back to school. For instance, ‘So if it wasn't for the daycare, I wouldn't have made it; I'll be home just stuck with the children, take them to school in the morning and bring them back. I wouldn't have gone to school, I wouldn't have been working; I would still be on welfare.' (Parent 7, age 30–39).

In turn, one parent explained the pride her children felt at her graduation. Going back to school also modelled the importance of education for her children. ‘They were so proud of me. . .they all supported me, and they were there for my graduation. . .to me it's not about just graduating. To me it was teaching my children that no matter what age you are it's not too late for you to go back to school.’ (Parent 7, age 30–39). Similarly, another parent expressed, ‘I’d like for my daughter to graduate and I’d like for myself to graduate. I’d like to get like a stable job. . .’ (Parent 6, age 30–39).

Parents had opportunities to work on personal challenges. For numerous parents, the time their child(ren) spent at LSPCCC offered them opportunities to work on personal challenges. Parents referenced dealing with a number of personal issues ranging from substance abuse to mental health issues. Having their children in a safe and educational environment allowed them to use that time to work towards improving their situation and to create a more stable home. One parent explained, ‘It gives me my time to work on myself. Like I don’t drink anymore, like I’ve cut a lot of people out of my life because they were bad influences for me. . .like I noticed a big change in myself’ (Parent 6, age 30–39). Another parent mentioned, ‘So daycare is like my respite. So regardless if I have school that day or not, it’s still a day for me to relax. It’s just given me that, that peace of mind.’ (Parent 8, age 30–39). However, this was not a unanimous opinion. One parent stated, ‘what really irks me is the people that have their kids in daycare here, and yet they don't do anything but stay at home all day. . .’ (Parent 13, age 30–39).

In relation to more general self-improvement, other parents stated: ‘Made me a better person, because you’re making my boys a better person’ (Parent 1, age 30–39). One parent explained how moving to the community and having her children in the centre helped her: ‘I like it because. . .before when I moved (to) this place, I don’t speak English very well. . .but when my children come this program, I learn more from daycare, I learn more from my children. . .’ (Parent 10, age 30–39).

Participation in the program seemed to also benefit the parents on an emotional level. One parent indicated, ‘. . .I wouldn’t be able to do anything and I probably wouldn’t have much sanity if I didn’t have daycare, honestly, I wouldn’t’ (Parent 8, age 30–39). Another parent described ‘. . .there’s food in the child care, I don’t have to worry about buying nutritional food to my children and sending them to daycare with – that’s a big relief to me’ (Parent 7, age 30–39). More specifically, another parent mentioned, ‘. . .I know my daughter is taken care of emotionally, spiritually, physically and everything, and my cultural aspects. . .I've benefitted from that. . .’ (Parent 18, age 20–29).
Discussion

This study set out to explore the influence of an Abecedarian early intervention program on the parents. The findings suggested three broad impacts: strengthened relationships; increased awareness among parent about child development and of their role in supporting child development; and opportunities for parents’ personal growth.

The Abecedarian Approach at LSPCCC can be categorised as an important component of a place-based approach to child and family services. As Moore and Fry (2011) explain,

‘A place-based approach addresses the broader problems that impact upon families at the community level (e.g. unsafe physical environments, non-family-friendly transport, limited social connectedness) as well as the barriers to families accessing services. . . ’ (p. 2).

This was also evident in our study, showing the benefit of LSPCCC being in the heart of the housing complex, along with other support services and agencies, helping to build community. When communities support families and focus on their strengths, parents develop a sense of security in their environment and approach new opportunities with optimism. In Lord Selkirk Park, since the beginning of the community revitalisation, families and community members have had an active voice and role in its development. They have been consulted and listened to and have helped guide its renewal. The LSPCCC focuses on the strengths of the parents and supports their capabilities to actively advocate for themselves. Staff listen to and act upon parent input, for example creating a parent group in response to a request and providing another opportunity to build community and social networks.

In terms of strengthened relationships, the study showed a pattern of positive relationships between parents and staff, and among parents themselves. This reduction of isolation among families and parents due to enhanced community relations is of relevance. An Australian study on social capital, social support and parents with young children who receive income support (Winkworth et al., 2010) highlighted the barriers of this population to access social supports. Winkworth et al. (2010) found that many isolated parents did not have the range of informal social networks that parents that are more affluent may have. Our findings corroborate that fostering social capital is an outcome valued by parents. This includes developing relationships between program staff and parents, at the child care centre and during home visits, creating opportunities to foster relationships between parents in the neighbourhood and increasing awareness of other support services in the neighbourhood. Our findings show the importance of how a service or support can be a link to others. LSPCCC was an important link for parents in community – especially with home visitor support, helping to build community, accessing formal and fostering informal social supports.

The second major impact of the Abecedarian Approach was that of increased awareness among parents about their role in supporting their child’s development. It was noted that parents recognised and expressed pride in their children’s increased abilities and in their own role in fostering their child’s development. The Abecedarian Approach, and specifically the home visitor component, supported parents in implementing LearningGames® in their homes and encouraging positive interactions with their children.

The parents in our study reported that they had benefitted from having access to high quality child care in terms of personal growth. Specifically, they explained how it increased their opportunities to pursue education and/or employment, as well as address personal challenges, such as mental health issues. These findings are consistent with those found in previous studies of the Abecedarian Approach. Ramey et al. (2000) have stated, that the effects of the Abecedarian Project
on children and mothers include ‘. . .greater maternal educational advancement and higher levels of employment particularly for teenage mothers’ (p. 2). Our findings are also corroborated by a study by Brooks-Gunn et al. (2000) that examined the effects of early childhood intervention programs on parental wellbeing. One of the areas of focus in their study was on programs that included a parent component through either home visits or offering other regular forms of education and support. They found positive impacts in programs that assessed maternal employment and education. As well, positive effects related to mothers’ mental health.

The findings from this study highlight the importance and benefits of reducing barriers to accessing high quality child care, particularly for families who experience the complex and multifaceted challenges of poverty. As Winkworth et al. (2010) has mentioned, the lack of child care is a severe constraint on parents to take up employment or study opportunities. As part of the Manitoba Abecedarian Project, subsidy eligibility requirements were waived, offering the opportunity to access child care, and our findings suggested that many parents made the most of it in terms of seeking out additional supports, furthering their education, and (or) securing employment.

Our study made clear several important aspects often overlooked in studies of early child interventions, namely influence on the parents. First, knowing that neighbourhood socio-economic status has a very strong association with family risk (Brownell et al., 2016) it highlighted the importance of ‘policies and programs that either mitiﬁcate the effects of low neighbourhood SES and/or improve SES altogether . . .’(p.13). Second, that, as Bronfenbrenner (2001) describes, there is a bi-directional influence of parent-child relationships/interactions. The narratives of parents in our study strongly suggested the relevance of recognising this reality. Fostering language, communication and literacy, problem-solving in children, etcetera, led to changes in interactions at home. It spurred some parents to want to learn more, be more engaged with children, and increased their understanding of their children’s potential and pride in their accomplishments. Third, the study showed the crucial importance of reducing isolation among parents. LSPCCC helped parents feel connected through parent groups, knowing neighbours, feeling safer, and having relationships with other families. This again relates to the relevance of a place-based approach (Moore and Fry, 2011). Together, having a child enrolled in the Abecedarian program had many positive indirect effects on the parents, which in turn positively influenced their children and family life.

Limitations

Among the limitations of the study there are two that are most prominent. First, the parents that were interviewed were self-selected. Although all parents were invited to participate, only those that wished to participate were interviewed. This raises the possibility that parents that were interviewed were those with more positive experiences of the Abecedarian Approach. Second, although the interviews were conducted by members of the research team that had no involvement with the Abecedarian Approach at LSPCCC and this was explicitly explained to parents, it could still be possible that parents did not always make this distinction. Consequently, we cannot rule out a social desirability bias of some interviews. In terms of strengths, the study was able to conduct in-depth interviews in a trusting environment that facilitated the sharing of parents’ experiences. This enabled rich data of their lived experiences with the Abecedarian Approach at LSPCCC.

Implications: Policy and practice

From a policy point of view, our study has a number of implications. Among them, that barriers to access high quality child care (such as requirements that parents be employed or studying to obtain
subsidy) be addressed, recognizing the potential for early child care to improve the life chances of both the children and their parents. As well, particularly in low SES communities, that home visiting be part of early child care programs as a bridge between families and programs, and to foster social supports. Finally, that early child care programs be grounded in place-based approaches to child and family services especially in low socio-economic areas, for instance in housing developments.

The study provided evidence that high quality early child intervention programs, such as the Abecedarian Approach, can positively impact the lives of parents through supportive, trusting relationships, and can remove a barrier that restricts families from full participation in society.

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