

PARENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH STRONGSTART BC IN FOUR COMMUNITIES IN
BRITISH COLUMBIA

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ABSTRACT

Parents' Experiences with StrongStart BC in Four Communities in British Columbia
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The literature has shown that early childhood programs are widely accepted as an intervention that is effective at improving outcomes for families. The current study explores parents' experiences within a school-based family resource program initiative, StrongStart BC. This qualitative study draws on ecological systems and sociocultural theoretical perspective to examine parents' perceptions of familial outcomes and program characteristics, in order to identify which characteristics are fundamental for successful outcomes. Thematic analysis was used to analyse focus group data gathered from four program sites as part of a larger study evaluating the effectiveness of StrongStart BC across British Columbia. Results indicate that successful familial outcomes from participation in family resource programs are influenced by a complex interplay of factors related to accessibility and pedagogical characteristics, with accessibility standing out as a fundamentally important consideration. Drawing on the broadly defined concept of accessibility, implications for school-based family resource programs are discussed and recommendations for practice, policy and future research are presented.

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my lovely children, Dawoud and Malaiqa who often come to my side and asked with anticipation, “Mom, is this your last assignment?” I will now have more time to give you the attention you desire and truly deserve. Your unconditional love means the world to me. I love you.

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Parents' Experiences with StrongStart BC in Four Communities in British Columbia

Introduction

In Canada a range of early childhood services are available for children and families. These services have different mandates. Family resource programs (FRPs) are one such early childhood service that seek to provide direct support for both children and adults (Berman, 2004). While FRPs are available across Canada, provincial and municipal jurisdictions have different rationales for funding and establishing them. FRPs can be viewed by governments as community-based organizations working with families and their children to reduce the compromises of disadvantaged environments, to enhance family strengths, build family capacities and to promote healthy development of children (Silver, Berman & Wilson, 2005).

Young (2002) explains how FRPs as early intervention programs can support young children:

Early child development programs that comprehensively address children's basic needs – health, nutrition, and emotional, and intellectual development – foster development of capable and productive adults. Early interventions can alter the lifetime trajectories of children who are born poor or deprived of the opportunities of growth and development available to those more fortunate” (Young, 2002, p.1).

Provincial and municipal jurisdictions also differ in where they locate FRPs. In British Columbia most FRPs, such as SSBC programs are located in publicly funded schools. SSBC programs are the focus of this research project. They are viewed as an asset by communities and their presence in a school is designed to strengthen ways for parents to support their children's development, learning and school readiness through facilitators modelling adult-child interaction strategies for parents (HELP, 2007). The programs also provide families with information about other community child and family services, and opportunities for families to build social capital – that is to make valuable connections with others in the community (BCME, 2016).

Additionally, the SSBC program initiative consists of several program sites that are integrated

with nutrition programs, counselling programs, parent education programs recreation agencies, and also funded and governed by one provincial ministry, resulting in coordinated intervention and support effort (HELP, 2007).

In Ontario, FRPs are in a variety of silo sites but the government in a recent policy initiative seeks to locate them in schools following the recommendation of the 2009 report, *With Our Best Future in Mind*. In this report Charles Pascal outlined his vision for a seamless and integrated support system for families and their children, through which full-day kindergarten became a reality. He also outlined his vision for FRPs. He stated they should be in or connected to schools, and provide a “one stop opportunity” for families to access a range of services (Pascal, 2009, p.20). Pascal (2009) claimed that schools can play a greater role in realizing the vision of seamless and integrated support system for families: making services more accessible to families, and ultimately ensuring a greater proportion of children entering school with optimal health and development, ready to be successful in kindergarten. Therefore, researching SSBC programs would be a way to substantiate this claim. This research is pressing since Ontario has recently committed to transforming its existing fragmented child and family programs into “a system of responsive, high-quality, accessible and increasingly integrated early years programs and services” (OME, 2016b, p.2). In line with this commitment, the goal is to consolidate all community early childhood services into a single, accessible comprehensive program delivery platform. Since the commitment, many FRP service providers have also shown a growing interest in service integration (OME, 2016a).

The importance of building access to programs to support child and family outcomes is widely accepted. What is less emphasized is quality that is which program characteristics support successful familial outcomes. Britto, Yoshikawa & Boller (2011) and Phair (2016) contended

that there needs to be a greater emphasis on quality of FRP provision, because when programs of low quality are provided, they are unlikely to generate the child and family outcomes. As a result of Ontario's current context, what needs to be better understood is which program characteristics are important for FRPs that are integrated within school communities. In other words, which program characteristics work within an integrated school-based setting to support both family needs and children's development? This study's findings may suggest and affirm child and family outcomes and program characteristics that parents and caregivers see as being most valuable for achieving these outcomes. It is important to identify the unique contribution and strengths of school-based FRPs in order to inform systems level of decision making by governments, as there is limited means to demonstrate the impact of increased expenditure of these programs on child and family outcomes. The findings also may be used for programming purposes or for guidance in creating solutions to overcome the identified barriers and challenges faced by study's FRP participants.

Research purpose

Research shows that taking into account stakeholders' perspectives, including those of parents, is important in ensuring that early childhood programs, including FRPs reflect high quality (OECD, 2015). Previous research on FRPs have confirmed that participant narratives are rich in descriptions of the outcomes realized for themselves, their children, and their community (Silver et al., 2005). Based on these findings, this Master's research paper seeks to understand the contribution of SSBC, a school-based, free FRP initiative from the perspectives of participating parents and caregivers. Its purpose is not to compare school-based and non-school-based parents' experiences of FRPs. Parents and caregivers were asked about the program strengths in order to identify what is working well for families and children. Building on existing

strengths is fundamental to moving forward to achieve universal access to child and family services that produce successful outcomes.

SSBC programs provide an opportunity to assess the impact of government investments in FRPs that are school-based, in terms of child and parent outcomes. The data from this project is part of a larger study exploring the experiences of parents, SSBC staff, administrators, such as school principals and early years' leaders, kindergarten/primary school teachers, and community partners, such as early years' service providers, in ten different public school districts in British Columbia. The main study gathered perspectives of all SSBC stakeholders in order to understand the value of these programs for families. An examination of SSBC programs will provide a better understanding and articulate the impact of school-based FRPs on children and parents.

This specific qualitative oriented project analyzes new data from four school districts in British Columbia, two schools in the Metro/Coast region, a school in the Greater Victoria region and a school in the Vancouver Island region. The study was designed with the intent of understanding parents and caregivers' perceptions of outcomes for themselves and their children from participation in a school-based FRP, and the program characteristics they perceive as being necessary to generate child and family outcomes identified. At some of the sites, other caregivers, such as grandparents participated in the focus groups. However, for the purpose of this report the term parent will be used to identify participants attending the programs.

Research questions

According to Mason (2002), the main virtue of expressing the research questions is to (a) focus on the essence of what it is we want to explore; and (b) create the backbone of the research design. The following research questions formed the backbone of my inquiry:

1. What do parents see as key outcomes of participation in a school-based family resource program for themselves and their children?
2. From the perspective of parents, what program characteristics are fundamental to generate outcomes identified?

Context of the research

To understand fully the experiences of school-based FRP participants and to contextualize the following literature review, it is important to understand the program these parents participate in. The following section provides a brief snapshot of the context of the school-based FRP initiative under investigation.

Brief background of StrongStart British Columbia (SSBC) programs

The term FRP includes all community-based family support programs, such as drop-in programs and parent education programs. “Family resource programs offer a model of early learning and care embedded within environments that offer multiple services that are universally accessible and responsive to the needs and aspirations of families” (Silver et al., 2005, p.1). They include a wide range of services that are designed to provide parents support, knowledge, and resources to pursue states of well-being for themselves and their children (Trivette & Dunst, 2009). These programs embrace empowerment and community building practices where practitioners see themselves as facilitators rather than experts, and clients are seen as participants rather than recipients. In a family-focused environment, there aims to be a non-hierarchical and participatory approach to family support for participants and their families (Silver et al., 2005). FRPs generally include drop-in programs that promote children’s readiness to learn, and provide formal and informal parent support activities, serve as a hub for the flow of resources, and have a

family-centered orientation (Di Santo et al., 2013). There are over 2,000 FRPs in thousands of communities across Canada, reaching over 400,000 families every year (FRP Canada, 2016).

The SSBC initiative is a prominent FRP in British Columbia. They are part of an array of school-based, free early childhood programs for children and their parents funded by the province that focus on early years. Many FRP goals are aimed at providing support for the whole family. Even though SSBC programs are considered to be FRPs, the literature and SSBC policies (BCME, 2016; HELP, 2007, 2008) identifies the program as having a stronger focus on promoting children's development over promoting the well-being of the whole family unit. As of 2015, there are over 326 SSBC programs operating in schools across the province. The programs were rolled out in the fall of 2006. SSBC programs are intended to support the development of preschool aged children who are not in childcare (HELP, 2007), but may be home with their parents. The program is planned with understanding that children learn through play (BCME, 2016). It is proposed that both parents and children will benefit from participating in the program. Program intentions are to offer parents new ideas and skills that they can transfer to the home environment (HELP, 2008). SSBC programs are the only universally available FRPs in Canada that operate within a mandated framework with specific program criteria, curriculum and quality enhancement requirements.

The SSBC programs are universal in the aspect that all families are welcome to attend. However, the programs are also targeted in their placement, with the intent of equalizing opportunities for children who are statistically at-risk because of environmental factors, such as poverty, a negative home environment and low maternal education that can negatively impact their opportunity to become a capable and productive adult (HELP, 2008). The choice of most program sites was based on the Early Development Instrument (EDI) results with a focus on

children with the greatest vulnerability. The EDI provides population data about all kindergarten-age children in a community. EDI data can be considered in the context of numerous socio-economic and demographic factors (Guhn, Janus & Hertzman, 2007).

As a result of vulnerability being determined by EDI results, in most regions the program site was either in a low socio-economic areas of the community, an area with a large immigration population, or an area enrolling a high percentage of Aboriginal students (HELP, 2007). Many FRPs are commonly used to support families with low income (Prins & Schafft, 2009). It is important to note, that vulnerable families are found in all social classes; vulnerability is the result of numerous factors beyond socio-economic conditions (HELP, 2008). Although, program locations were determined with the goal of supporting the most vulnerable families of a community (HELP, 2007), it is also important to note that parental education would be beneficial to families from broad range of backgrounds (Saunders, 2010).

Parents who are responsible for children under age five during the day are able to attend the program. Parents attend with their children and programs are open for approximately three hours each morning and/or afternoon. Parents are also required to stay with children throughout the program. The program is open throughout the school year. It is closed on statutory holidays and school district professional development days. All programs close for one morning each month for staff meetings. Each site has one staff member, a certified and licensed Early Childhood Education facilitator, whose responsibility is to establish activity centres, and model ways to use the resources and strategies for adult-child interactions and child-child interactions. The program structure is the same at each site with circle time - structured group time, physical activity (outside or in the school gymnasium), learning centres – puzzles, blocks, crafts, drama, etc., and snack, although each site offers varied early learning opportunities to improve

children's development. There are usually over 200 children registered at each site's program, whilst the maximum program capacity is approximately 40 individuals. Due to the drop-in nature of the program, on an average day the number of participants could vary from 20 to 50 children and adults. While parents are not usually turned away, some sites can get very busy and overcrowded, resulting in parents being turned away from the program because it had reached its maximum capacity (HELP, 2008).

The larger project - StrongStart BC (SSBC) Evaluation 2017 Project focused on SSBC programs because of the British Columbia Ministry of Education's interest in identifying the effectiveness of these programs. However, the reasons I selected SSBC programs for this study differs from the larger project's reasons. SSBC programs were selected for this study because less is known about the contributions of school-based FRPs. As previously mentioned, even though SSBC program goals are aligned with supporting children's school readiness (BCME, 2016) because the British Columbia Ministry of Education identifies the program as a FRP it is important to examine parent perspectives of how their whole family benefits from the program, and which program characteristics they see as being necessary to achieve successful familial outcomes.

Theoretical framework

In qualitative research, it is critical for a researcher to be transparent about their conceptual and theoretical frameworks, as the role of the researcher is not one as an objective, detached individual (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). FRPs as a programming strategy to improve the health, development and educational outcomes of young children have become increasingly popular. Many FRPs focus on the needs of families, rather than solely on the educational needs of children (FRP Canada, 2016). Therefore, this research study is grounded in a theoretical

framework that combines Vygotsky's social constructivist approach (1978) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979, 1986) that is, it combines assumptions about the importance of place and context with an analysis of the ways in which interactions with others shapes meaning and experience for families. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory model of early childhood development (1979, 1986) highlights child-rearing as a joint venture between families, early childhood programs, and the communities surrounding the child (OECD, 2006). Similarly, Vygotsky's sociocultural developmental theory (1978) emphasizes that children benefit socially and cognitively from interactions with senior members of society.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) argues that children develop within interrelated contextual systems created by their family and society, and the bi-directional influences of the child and the environmental systems shape the development of the child (Onchwari, Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008). This means that forces within and outside the family shape the course of both the individual and family's development (Dunst, 1995). Since systems typically influence each other, perceptions of the people within the system also influence the environment. For example, when families' perceive their involvement in their children's learning as valuable, it could influence service providers to create program environments that encourage parent engagement. Bronfenbrenner depicts his theory in a circular diagram, where the child is set in the middle and a set of four concentric circles surround the child. The cultural and environmental context of the four concentric circles, with each layer nested within the next, divides the child's world into experienced environments that exert influence on their development. According to Bronfenbrenner, a child's well-being and development is contingent upon the situational factors of all four layers.

The layer closest to the child, referred to as the Microsystem, is the setting with which the child has daily, immediate contact. This layer closest to the child, and the bi-directional, reciprocal interactions characterized in this layer are the strongest and have the greatest influence on the child. Families reside within the microsystem, stipulating the importance and implications of the quality of the connections between the child and the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). The next layer is referred to as the Mesosystem, and the child's early childhood setting is within this layer. The mesosystem is characterized by the interactions, connections, and influences, it has with the microsystem. The relationship between these two systems, shapes their behaviours. This means that when children participate in early childhood programs, the relationship between the program staff and participating families, shapes the child's home and early childhood environment. When meaningful relationships exist between staff and families, staff are able to provide families with appropriate programs and services to support their children's development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights that without family involvement, child developmental supports are likely to be unsuccessful, and what few outcomes are achieved are likely to disappear once the child supports are discontinued. The ecological model posits that various interrelated spheres of influence impact children's developmental trajectories, and suggests that cooperative relations and shared goals between families and early childhood staff positively influence children's outcomes.

The next two layers, which are the Exosystem and Macrosystem, consists of broader-based social contexts, such as the city and the country the child lives in. The exosystem characterizes the cultural and environmental context beyond the child's immediate experience, that can yet still have an influence on their immediate world. The interaction and the indirect influence of the exosystem with the microsystem can have a significant impact on the

development of the child. For example, the child and family policies in the city which the child lives in, influencing the interactions between early childhood program staff and family members, and influencing the child and family services within the child's community. The final layer is the macrosystem, consisting of broader society's attitudes, values, ideologies and customs. The child's identity within their family context would be formed as a result of the influences by this system. As a result of characteristics of one system influences others systems, and the individual at the centre, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) also suggests the need for quality of life to be supported across all layers. A lack of continuity of quality between systems may impact the child's development negatively (Darling, 2007; Liu, 2015).

Vygotsky's sociocultural development theory (1978) is also used as a theoretical framework for understanding the importance of early childhood programs supporting parents. Sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of more-capable others, such as parents and early childhood program staff supporting children's development and learning and gives them, especially parents a central role in supporting children's growth. Families provide the social, cultural, and emotional supports that children need to function successfully in society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). The emphasis Vygotsky (1978) places on senior members within the child's community is crucial as he believed everything a child learns is through interactions with "knowledgeable partners". Vygotsky's theory can be applicable for parents too as Weissbourd (1994) states that parenting is a developmental task that involves the adaptation of parents to their new role. Thus parents too can benefit when they are provided with additional skills, information, and ideas about child development from "knowledgeable partners" during their development of parenting skills. This suggests that early childhood programs not only have a responsibility to provide supports for children, but that they can also provide parents

with supports. Therefore, early childhood programs that support parents in their parenting role are more likely to be successful in supporting children's development in both, the short and long term.

These two theories are most often cited as forming the conceptual underpinning of FRPs. Together, both are intimately intertwined and each theory will offer a particular vantage point for understanding and reorienting FRP policies and practices. These theories will serve as a foundation for specifying the key characteristics of school-based FRPs.

Conceptual framework

The personal experiences and values that I bring to the research study will shape the lens through which I approach all stages of this study. FRPs are a model of family support that resonates well with me. I have a personal connection to the program as a parent who participated in FRPs with my children, and also as a program staff who facilitated FRPs, both in Ontario. My background and personal experiences as a young immigrant parent who actively participated in FRPs, to gain parenting skills and support, until my children began kindergarten, my experiences as a program facilitator supporting families in the development of their children, and my current experience volunteering as a research assistant for the *SSBC Evaluation 2017 Project* greatly informed my choice of research topic and played an important role throughout the research process. As a former participant and staff member, I believe FRPs have the ability to provide exemplary support for families in the development of their children while building capacities. Due to their association with other community organizations, FRPs can provide families with opportunities not available in other early learning programs, such as referring families to other organizations and collaborating with those staff to ensure that the family's needs are met across services. Unfortunately, even with such great potential, I have personally witnessed FRPs falling

short of meeting families' goals due to the program's characteristics. Motivation to conduct further research in the area comes from my desire to identify what key characteristics make a FRP into an exemplary program that is able to provide families with the necessary support in order to help them achieve their goals.

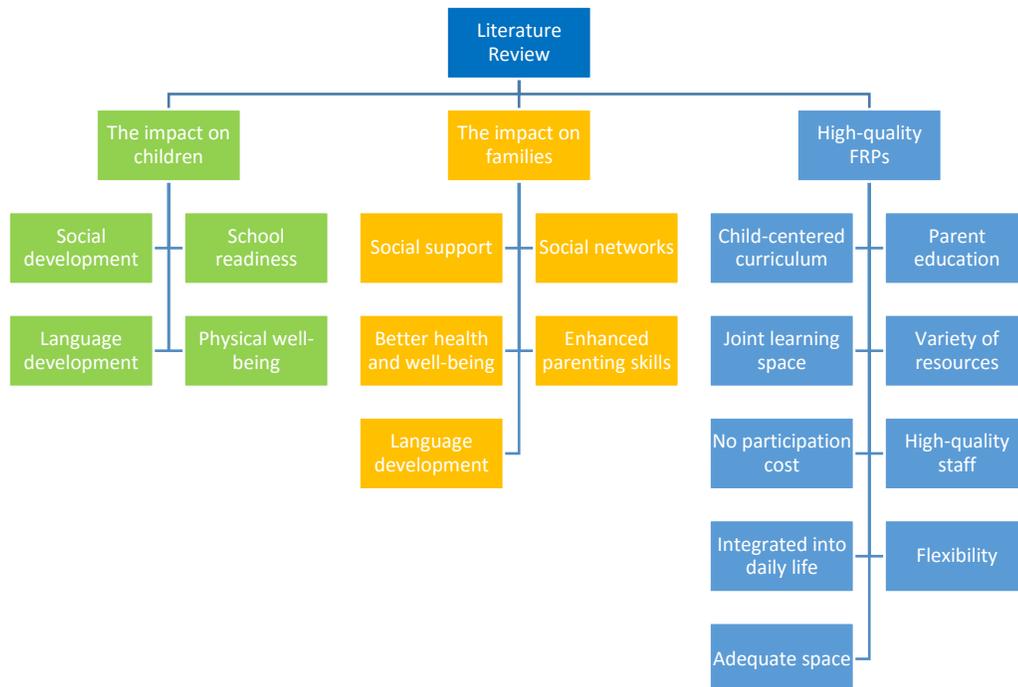
The researcher's perspective situates work in quite particular ways, as it draws from personal values, which drive the research project (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Similarly, Reason (1988) states that experience and values serve not as biases, but rather serve to add further insight into the research purpose when properly acknowledged. The perspective as a program participant and facilitator I bring to the project can potentially help me understand the participants' responses and the context of being a participant in a FRP; however, this perspective could also bias the ways in which I interpret the data. It is also noteworthy that as an individual who is now studying school-based FRPs in British Columbia from parents' perspectives, but has experienced non-school-based FRPs as a program recipient and service provider in Ontario, what I identify as important themes and patterns may be different from the study participants.

The following section consists of a critical literature review on the outcomes – benefits in families and children's development from program participation in FRPs, and the program characteristics necessary to meet these outcomes within programs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The research priority is to identify *how different types of interventions, specifically FRPs, influence outcomes for families*. The purpose of this review is to examine the relevant literature, such as policy documents, program evaluation reports and academic literature with a focus on evaluations of services through participant experiences similar to FRPs. It will highlight the benefits for parents and their children from participation in FRPs, as well as examine studies on program elements necessary to achieve successful outcomes. I will identify gaps in the available literature in order to provide a clear direction for my research, which will prove to be of both academic and social interest.

The following chapter reviews literature relevant to this study in the following areas with the purpose of identifying the benefits to families from participating in FRPs and some guiding program characteristics that support successful familial outcomes: (a) The impact of FRP participation on children, (b) The impact of FRP participation on families, and (c) Characteristics of FRPs. Below is an overview of the findings from the literature:



The impact of family resource program participation on children

Across disciplines a common conclusion is emerging that early childhood matters and that investment in the early years reaps especially high dividends. Scientific evidence shows that early childhood programs, such as FRPs, promote optimal health and development, such as sound physical and mental growth, school performance, and minimize the negative and destructive consequences of high levels of risk in the environment (Britto, Engle & Super, 2012; Karoly, Killburn & Cannon, 2005; Pascal, 2009; Prins & Schafft, 2009; Timmons, 2008). This finding fits with other findings in the literature - FRPs support children's well-being through working with families to enhance strengths, to build capacities and to promote healthy development (Dunst, 1995).

Studies that have evaluated FRPs based on views of participating parents, have found that children benefit from regular, frequent and continual participation in effective family-centred programs with parents and other children (HELP, 2007, 2008; PHAC, 2009; Silver et al., 2005; Underwood & Killoran, 2012; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). As a result of the wide range of positive child outcomes, these programs are also very highly valued by participants. Participants were able to identify positive learning outcomes in their children, as well as changes in their home activities with children. HELP's (2007, 2008) study on 12 SSBC programs, school-based FRPs, reported that program attending parents attributed positive changes in their children to the program. Parents, for example, mentioned that the socialization opportunities provided by the program, helped children's social development (e.g. children gained confidence to interact with other children, they learned to share, take turns and make friends). This evidence supports the importance of FRP participation on children's social developmental trajectories.

Research on other school-based FRPs has also shown that exposure to these programs can improve child outcomes. The Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLC) in Toronto, are FRPs that are similar to SSBC in British Columbia. The PFLC programs too are school-based and include a strong early learning focus. The evaluation of this program also notes that children's participation in the program supports school readiness, literacy and social development (Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Similarly, Silver et al.'s (2005) studied a sample of 220 parents attending FRPs across Canada, and they too found that parents linked their FRP experience to a number of beneficial outcomes for their children, such as school readiness and the development of pro-socials skills (e.g. children building friendships with other children, and relationships with FRP staff members). Berman (2004) conducted a review on Canadian and American studies that evaluated FRPs. The review also found that children who attended FRPs compared to peers who did not attend FRPs had better improved developmental outcomes.

The evaluation of Best Start programs which is an integrated model of child and family services, also maintains the above findings that early childhood programs similar to FRPs improve child development outcomes. The evaluation involved families from three different Best Start sites across Ontario. Although the Best Start program evaluation consisted of a wide range of child and family programs and services, for the purpose of this review only the findings of FRPs will be discussed. The study found improved development among children, including social development (e.g. children gained social skills and self-confidence), language development (e.g. strengthened literacy skills), and preparation for school (e.g. helps children with separation from parents and decreases anxiety) as outcomes of their participation in the program (Underwood & Killoran, 2012). The PHAC (2009) evaluated the Community Action Program for Children, which is a FRP initiative that supports families who are from a number of

different high-risk groups. They too associated social development (e.g. social knowledge, competence, and emotional development), and language development (e.g. improved linguistic development, enhance vocabulary, improved listening skills and increased enjoyment of books) outcomes in children to program participation. Additionally, they also found health benefits, such as physical well-being and overall healthy development, and cognitive benefits, such as improved problem-solving ability, in children from attending the program.

Collectively, the literature in this review reported the benefits for children from participating in FRPs. The research evidence gleaned from studying FRPs present findings on a wide range of positive developmental and learning outcomes for children.

The impact of family resource program participation on families

This section will discuss research and evaluations conducted on FRPs with a focus on outcomes for families. The objective of an early childhood program to work with parents or the family as a whole, is often understood as only a means to promoting healthy child development. FRPs are frequently believed to have a preventative effect by supporting families to provide stable environments for children's development, and a direct effect by influencing child outcomes (Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). When in fact a review of FRPs shows that parents and other caregivers also benefit from participation in their children's programs (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP, 2007, 2008; Silver et al., 2005; Timmons, 2008; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Benefits for parents from program participation include: social support, increased social networks, enhanced parenting skills, language development, and overall better health and well-being. FRPs have the potential to positively influence the whole family unit's future, not just the children's. However, some researchers have found that more parents agreed that their children's needs were met compared to their families' needs being met through the FRP (Summers et al.,

2007; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Similarly, Underwood (2010) and Underwood & Killoran (2012) also found that even though family outcomes are as important individual child development, child outcomes were the most common outcomes described by families, and participants typically have high satisfaction with child-level outcomes, and lower satisfaction with the capacity of the program to meet the needs of their family.

Research evidence suggests strong associations between levels of parental and social support to a range of parenting effects from positive to negative qualities in parenting, including healthy parent-child interactions, better maternal psychological wellbeing, better child outcomes, parental self-efficacy and feelings of isolation (Di Santo et al., 2013; Corter & Arimura, 2006; FRP Canada, 2011; Silver et al., 2005; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Social support is an important factor for understanding parents' adaptation to stress. Availability of adequate social support has often been shown to reduce parenting stress and the adverse impact of stressors on parenting behavior (Corter & Arimura, 2006). FRP practices are based on these findings, because they recognize the possible long-term negative impact of familial stress on the family unit, particularly those which involve young children, and attempt to reduce these stresses through the provision of familial support (FRP Canada, 2011). This guiding principle of FRPs, that represents a philosophy about working effectively with families, is evident in Silver et al.'s (2005) study findings, where participating parents described FRPs consisting of a positive environment, where they could speak up and were not judged, but supported. FRPs' providing a supportive environment finding is consistent with findings from a later study as well (Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015), with this study contributing to the reliability that the non-judgemental and supportive atmosphere of FRPs allow for the individual needs of parents' to be met.

FRP Canada (2011) examined over 7000 program participant responses about their experiences at FRPs. Even through their large sample, a prominent theme that became evident was that participants felt welcome and accepted within their FRPs. Similarly, Ontario Early Years Centre (OEYC) participants also expressed high satisfaction with the parenting supports that they had personally gained from participating in the program (Di Santo et al., 2013). Respondents described having a community of supports as being critical to their well-being (Underwood & Killoran, 2012). Overall from the evaluations of a variety of FRPs (Di Santo et al., 2013; FRP Canada, 2011; HELP, 2007, 2008; Silver et al., 2005; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015), parents felt that the programs had supported them and their children, and had extremely high rates of satisfaction with the programs. These findings indicate that FRPs are meeting the needs of those families participating in the program, and that social support is an outcome of their participation. It is noteworthy that families were most satisfied with programs that supported their family as whole, compared to programs that are more specialized with supports only for children (Di Santo et al., 2013; Underwood & Killoran, 2012). This could be a result of specialized programs creating additional barriers to participation for families, such as issues related to childcare for their other children that are not in the specialized program.

Many FRP participants described their own isolation at home as a motivating factor to start attending the program (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP, 2008). HELP (2008) identified that over 50% of parents started to attend SSBC was to meet and socialize with other people. Similarly, Di Santo et al. (2013) also identified that one of the main reasons families participated in OEYC programs was to have opportunities to interact and socialize with other adults in their community. Parents placed considerable importance on their own relationships and supports that they obtained through the FRP (Underwood & Killoran, 2012). The opportunities provided by

FRPs to meet new people, make friends, share parenting stories and learn from each other, and to build community connections were considered program strengths by the respondents.

Overall, the social capital gained by the family, such as the relationship of the family with the staff, and the family's relationship with other families was one of the most frequently cited outcomes for families. For example, one participant said, "I came for the children but ended up benefitting with relationships," (Underwood & Killoran, 2012, p.401). Parents continued to attend FRPs even after their children were older than the program target age, because of the social networks they had established there. However, this differs from Graham's (2011) findings on early childhood programs in rural communities, where drop in programs were reported not supporting parents' social interaction. School-based FRPs have strong potentials to connect families with schools and other families, while community-based FRPs connect families with other community programs/services and other families (HELP, 2008; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Social support and social networks have powerful health and well-being outcomes for families (Silver et al., 2005). In addition to FRPs reducing isolation and supporting the social integration of families, as mentioned previously, they also provide them with knowledge about other school and community services.

Parenting is developmental phenomenon, and all parents have strengths and the capacity to become more competent, given the proper kinds of supportive experiences (Weissbourd, 1994). During the parenting developmental process, parents' skills, knowledge and insights develop in concert with their children's development (Saunders, 2007). FRPs are founded upon this ideology (FRP Canada, 2016). Parents linked their FRP experience to a number of beneficial outcomes for themselves, such as enhanced parenting skills, decreased levels of stress, and more positive interactions at home. For many parents initially their focus was on their children's

learning experiences, but as they gained familiarity with the program, more parents saw the program as an important resource for their own learning (Doyle & Zhang, 2011). This finding can be connected back to Di Santo et al.'s (2013) study, where parents initially thought the FRP would only meet the needs of children, and then found their needs, such as social and educational supports were also being met.

Through the participants' responses, it is evident that parental learning is not only associated with positive parent outcomes but child outcomes as well. Participants saw the program as a place to learn how to educate their children. They gave examples on learning about activity ideas that could be used in the home environment, and how their learnings had positively changed activities at home with their children (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP, 2007, 2008). The importance of home experiences is also highlighted by Tamis-LeMonda and Rodriguez (2008). They state that "Children's experiences at home are critical to early language and learning," (p.4). These studies make it apparent that parental education can impact the whole family unit's outcomes.

Even though over 75% of participants from a variety of FRPs across Canada identified their primary language spoken at home as being English (FRP Canada, 2011), a recurring benefit participants mentioned in the FRP evaluations reviewed here, is the opportunity to learn English. Parents associated the program environment being "good" for English language acquisition (Silver et al., 2005). Similarly, Di Santo et al. (2013) reported the language opportunities provided by the program, was considered a program strength by participants. This finding is maintained by HELP (2008), who found that new immigrants, refugees and other second-language minorities, especially valued the opportunities provided through the program to improve their English skills.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed suggests that families participating in FRPs benefit greatly from the program. Research suggests that early childhood programs engaging parents can be an effective strategy to support familial well-being.

Characteristics of family resource programs

Early childhood programs (including FRPs) are widely accepted as an strategy that is effective at improving outcomes for families and their young children (Britto et al., 2011; Darling, 2007; Irwin, Siddiqi & Hertzman, 2007; Liu, 2015; Phair, 2016). Britto et al. (2012) identified four components of early childhood programs that produce successful familial outcomes. The first component identified, they provide direct learning services to children and support families, is consistent with the recent review of characteristics of FRPs. The literature review shows the importance of FRPs consisting of a child-centred curriculum and pedagogical approach.

HELP (2008) found that out of the 12 SSBC FRPs they evaluated, the programs with the greatest child-development gains provided the most direct programming for children. Out of their sample of over 400 participants attending the program, approximately 60% of them stated that the reason they had started to attend the program was because it provided opportunities for enriched play-based learning experiences for their child. While 98% of participants agreed that play activities were of greatest importance (HELP, 2008). Parents attending Best Start programs had a different perspective on play, they did not want their children to engage in only play activities, they also wanted their children to have a chance to learn academic subjects (Underwood & Killoran, 2012). Some parents in Di Santo et al.'s (2013) study too expressed that they wanted the FRP to consist more of formal learning, such as children practicing to write their names. This could be a result of parents' school-readiness focus. Respondents also frequently

shared that the reason they participated in the program was to prepare children for school, such as helping children to learn routines (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP 2008; Underwood & Killoran, 2012).

Doyle & Zhang (2011) also noted that parents were more motivated to attend early childhood programs for the direct educational and social experiences it afforded their children, over learning goals for themselves. Similarly, Di Santo et al.'s (2013) parents also had high satisfaction ratings when FRPs provided opportunities for children to play and learn in safe, stimulating environment. FRPs consisting of curriculum and pedagogy that is child-centred was also maintained through FRP evaluations that used the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R). These evaluations found that programs that scored at the good and excellent quality levels offered a range of materials that supported children's learning and development (Di Santo et al., 2013).

Although children benefit most from child-focused programming, family-focused interventions should not be dismissed as not targeting children's development as well. Many researchers now believe that parent involvement is critical for children's optimal development (Doherty, 2007; Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Pascal, 2009; Phair, 2016), and that parents also benefit from participation in their children's programs (HELP, 2007, 2008; Silver et al., 2005; Timmon, 2008). Doherty (2007) noted that a positive influence on children's development is best achieved when targeting children directly with child-focused programs, and also involving parents in the process of supporting children's development. Similarly, Doyle & Zhang (2011) also suggest that programs involving parents can result in positive effects on children's language and literacy development. Parent involvement was again emphasized in the Pascal (2009) report, as being a primary focus of high quality early childhood programs. Providing learning services to families –

the essentiality of parent education, is also reflected in the guiding principles of FRPs (Dunst, 1995).

The importance of a joint learning space and an opportunity for parent education was also reflected through the participants' voices. Many participants considered the opportunity to learn with their child important. Circle time was considered as one of the most important activities, as it actively engaged children and parents together (HELP, 2008). Respondents felt it was important for them to have a space where they could spend time with their children, without the pressure and stress related to everyday household chores (Di Santo et al., 2013). They described playing with their children without home distractions as being a worthwhile opportunity (HELP, 2008). Parents also valued the educational support provided to them through the program, and reported on benefits provided by access to parenting resources (Silver et al., 2005). Based on research, it can be suggested that parent engagement - the extent to which FRPs can engage parents' support for their children's learning, is a key characteristic of a successful FRP (Phair, 2016). Program environments that allow for shared learning between children and parents leads to positive outcomes for families as a whole by strengthening parent engagement in children's learning (Silver et al., 2005). Therefore, it can be concluded that FRPs that offer both parent and child engagement, result in them being most successful in promoting positive developmental gains for the whole family.

Another component of early childhood programs identified by Britto et al. (2012), they target younger and disadvantaged children, is also consistent with the literature. As previously mentioned, disadvantaged families often experience exclusion due to lack of financial resources, and FRPs are often strategically placed in specific neighborhoods to support these vulnerable families. Participants noted that they are motivated to attend early childhood programs when they

are free (Di Santo et al., 2013; Doyle & Zhang, 2011; HELP, 2008; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Doyle & Zhang's (2011) participants stated that not having to incur expenses associated with attending programs, is a motivation for attending them. Similarly, over 50% of respondents stated that the reason they had started to attend SSBC because it was free, and that they would not be able to attend if they had to pay (HELP, 2008). As one parent stated, "You made it easy for me to come." (Doyle & Zhang, 2011, p.226). Additionally, some parents initially assumed that there were program fees associated with FRPs, and avoided them because of lack of finances (Di Santo et al., 2013).

Another main reason participants stated as being a motivating factor for them to start attending a FRP was having opportunities to a variety resources, such as different toys, equipment and activities, that they could not offer in their own home (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP, 2008). 91% of parents agreed that availability of new toys and materials, that they could not afford to have at home, was an important priority for them to start attending SSBC (HELP, 2008). One-third of parents also mentioned the availability of activities that were too messy for doing at home, as another reason for coming to the program. Parents valued the enriched learning experiences and resources, including the outdoor and gymnasium time provided by the program. Tamis-LeMonda and Rodriguez (2008) found an association between learning resources and child outcomes. They reported that "Parents with more resources are better able to provide positive learning experiences for their young children." (p.4), ultimately better supporting their children's development. This evidence is reflected in the guiding principles of FRPs, where a basic premise of the program is that participants benefit from an array of supports and resources (Dunst, 1995). The importance of having access to variety of resources was again reflected in the FRP recommendations suggested by parents. 20% of parents wanted more

activities or for activities to be changed more frequently (HELP, 2008). Parents also wanted newer toys and equipment (Di Santo et al., 2013). Therefore, practices that involve the provision and mobilization of a broad range of resources should be considered a key characteristic of FRPs.

Saunders (2007) stated that program characteristics most likely to affect family outcomes are quality of staff, the atmosphere of a centre, and trust between participants and practitioners. Correspondingly, participant high satisfaction ratings are also found to be associated to staff characteristics and the welcoming atmosphere of the program (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP, 2008; Silver et al., 2005; Underwood & Killoran, 2012; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). OEYC program participants commented that they initially felt anxious about attending the program, wondering if their family would be accepted and included into the group. As they gained familiarity with the centre, the friendly nature of the staff and the welcoming atmosphere were two reasons that kept them coming (Di Santo et al., 2013). Respondents said they valued the program's accepting, non-judgemental and friendly atmosphere. They were also satisfied with the way staff treated them (Silver et al., 2005). These findings are maintained in Underwood & Trent-Katz's (2015) study, where parents articulated the welcoming atmosphere, which they attributed to staff and other participants, as one of the strengths associated with the program.

HELP's (2008) participants also agreed that that the facilitator was a highlight of the program, and was most commonly identified as a program strength. One parent said, "We both absolutely love the StrongStart program and our teacher," (p.27). Although majority of the SSBC participants valued the facilitator, some made suggestions for improvement. It was suggested that facilitators being more understanding of parents' friendships and also being more intuitive when making comments. Based on the high value parents place upon the facilitator's personal

characteristics, such as remembering details about families and responding to their individual needs, it can be considered a fundamental characteristic of FRPs.

Accessibility was identified in the literature as an important attribute of successful FRPs. Within this literature review, ‘accessibility’ refers to program location. Accessibility is closely connected with the characteristics of the program. Research studies have shown that when early childhood services for families and their young children are integrated – making complex, silo services more accessible by integrating them into a single location/hub, they are more effective (BSPEL, 2007; HELP, 2007; OME, 2016a, b; Pascal, 2009). Additionally, these studies recommend that early childhood programs are integrated with community functioning, family life, health, nutrition, and local educational systems (Britto et al., 2012). This means that learning opportunities should be integrated into daily life and be easily accessible by families (Kennedy, 2008). As stated previously, Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLC) programs are located within public schools. Participants stated that the program’s location was a strength, as it provided convenience of participation along with the connection to other services (Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Similarly, participants in Ontario’s Best Start demonstration sites also agreed that having all programs and services in one convenient location is helpful (Underwood & Killoran, 2012). School locations and involvement can provide a supportive infrastructure, encourage family involvement and promote collaboration with other school and early childhood programs and services. When programs are accessible, it results in parents being better supported in their parenting roles and being in a better position to be supportive of their children’s development (Dunst, 1995). Therefore, FRPs should provide families with ease of accessibility to their programs and services.

A guiding principle of FRPs is that they should remain flexible with their programming, location and goals (Dunst, 1995). The significance of FRPs remaining flexible is reflected in both, the literature and through the participants' voices. HELP (2008) noted that participants wanted more program flexibility, such as changes in and additional program hours (e.g. afternoons and summer programs). Out of a sample of 119 parents that had stopped attending SSBC, over 20% of parents stated that their reasons for no longer attending the program was related to timing conflicts with the program hours and their schedule. Similarly, parents attending FRPs in Ontario also expressed wanting greater program flexibility, such as wanting more (e.g. afternoon, evening and weekend programs compared to the morning only programs that are offered) and longer program hours (Di Santo et al., 2013; Underwood & Killoran, 2012; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). The ability to be flexible is related to tailoring program practices to the special circumstances of participants (Dunst, 1995). Parents value the drop in, flexible nature of FRPs, where they could come at times that suited their schedule. That means, families are able to join the program anytime during program hours. They also suggested providing programming that fit with their schedule, such as, evening and weekend programs so that working families could participate in (Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015; Underwood & Killoran, 2012). This means that FRPs must be flexible/responsive to families in terms of both scheduling and types of supports provided. Therefore, flexibility is a defining characteristic of FRPs.

Evaluations of FRPs noted that limited space and over-crowding are an issue at some programs. This issue is reflected in participant perceptions of structural characteristics, where participants wanted increased centre/physical space (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP, 2008; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Although a few participants attending PFLC programs

preferred the smaller space, as they thought of it as being intimate (Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Some parents noted that the biggest barrier to their participation in the program was the program's capacity. Respondents shared that getting turned away is particularly distressing for themselves and their children. Aside from limited program space preventing higher numbers of families participating, it also negatively impacts the families that are in the program. One of main purposes of FRPs is to model skills for parents. Unfortunately, modelling is almost impossible for staff in an overcrowded room (HELP, 2008). Therefore, a key characteristic of FRPs is their capability to efficiently involve higher numbers of families in their programs. Although, often structural characteristics are beyond the control of the program.

Research indicates a wide range of positive outcomes for children who attend quality early childhood programs, and also notes that it is program quality that appears to have the most pervasive consequences for child-level outcomes (Britto et al., 2011). FRP participating parents also identified program quality as the reason they attended the programs. Satisfaction with the program quality also leads families to keep going to the program (Underwood & Killoran, 2012). Collectively, the program characteristics described in this section constitute the program practices and structural components that contribute to the attainment of successfully promoting positive developmental gains for the whole family. The particular program characteristics mentioned here are not necessarily the only characteristics that are consistent with successful outcomes, but they are ones most often found in literature related to FRPs. The manner in which these characteristics become implemented will and should differ in relation to the program's context.

Gaps in the research

Canada has a strong history of FRPs but there is little research exploring what works, how it works, and for whom. Even though FRPs have a rich history of providing community-based supports for parents and children, investment in these programs is sparse because research evidence is lacking. As I reviewed this literature, I identified gaps in the published research. There is limited research on the efficacy of schools offering FRPs - how FRPs work to support families within school communities (HELP, 2007, 2008; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015 are exceptions). The aforementioned studies are further limited in their context as there are even fewer studies on the perceptions of parents about their experiences of FRPs are from British Columbia (HELP, 2007, 2008 are exceptions).

It is noteworthy that amongst the limited research that explores the effectiveness FRPs, the majority of the studies are funded by the respective organizations responsible for its operations (Di Santo et al., 2013; FRP Canada, 2011; HELP, 2007, 2008; McCuaig et al., 2017; Underwood & Killoran, 2012; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). The findings of research that are funded by their responsible organizations need to be approached with caution because as a result of the source of research funding, findings could potentially be skewed in favor of the program. The rationale underlying this suspicion regarding the influence of funding is fairly straightforward. Organizations responsible for programs want to increase their operations funding by showing that they are of invaluable service to communities. Hence it would be in their best interest to support research that favors their organization goals. This perspective further limits the availability of authentic research on the efficacy of how FRPs work to support families within school communities. With governments promising to invest in improved family support

programs, there should also be a commitment to unbiased researching of the effects of school-based FRPs. There needs to be evidence to support investments wisely.

Much of the evidence about FRPs is on client satisfaction. Therefore, with the transformation of Ontario's early childhood programs into child and family centres, it would be beneficial for policy makers and service and provide to study perceptions of clients – parents, regarding their experiences in an integrated program within a Canadian context, even though not within the same provincial context. Understanding the impact and conditions of integrated FRPs in other Canadian jurisdictions, can be beneficial to the government of Ontario when planning integrated child and family centers across the province. It is anticipated the study will highlight the effective conditions/practices of school-based FRPs, and provide recommendations for promoting positive developmental gains for the whole family within programs.

Literature exploring many different topics related to early childhood programs points to a need for research examining parent experiences of FRPs in each unique context. This research seeks to understand one specific model of service delivery, school-based FRPs from the perspective of parents, in doing so to investigate parents' perceptions of key outcomes of program participation, and program characteristics that supports these outcomes. This research provides an opportunity to assess the outcomes/impact of early childhood investments. As noted above, few studies investigate FRPs in Canada, and even fewer explore parent's perceptions of their experiences in school-based FRPs (HELP, 2007, 2008; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015, are exceptions). This review of the literature further affirms the relevance and significance of my expressed purpose of study and my research questions of: What do parents see as key outcomes of participation in a school-based FRP for themselves and their children? From the perspective of

parents, what program characteristics are fundamental to generate outcomes identified? The following section will discuss how the current study will be conducted.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Approach

The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of parents participating in SSBC programs in four communities in British Columbia. To reiterate, the research questions are as follows:

- What do parents see as key outcomes of participation in a school-based family resource program for themselves and their children?
- From the perspective of parents, what program characteristics are fundamental to generate outcomes identified?

The research questions were addressed through analysis of focus group data collected for a larger project assessing the effectiveness of SSBC programs. Creswell (2014) suggests that qualitative methodology is appropriate for an inquiry into questions asking what people think and how things work. Therefore, with the key research questions in mind, I have chosen a qualitative approach, specifically the method of Portraiture, by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) and thematic analysis as being most appropriate for this project. The rationale for choosing a portraiture method is that such an approach provides a way of “creating a retelling of a participant's story and focus group dialogue” (Silver et al., 2005, p.2). As an approach of qualitative research, portraiture seeks “to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions – their authority, knowledge, and wisdom” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p.xv).

It allows for rich descriptions about participant’s experiences and includes an important focus on social and cultural context (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997). The social context of each participant’s experiences is situated within an environment of school-based FRPs. This

approach reflects the choice of theoretical framework informing this study as it also places an emphasis on context, and ecological environment as importance to this research.

“The everyday experiences of participating in FRPs reveal cascading levels of engagement, leading to multiple outcomes of value and significance” (Silver et al., 2005, p.1). Like Silver et al.’s (2005) research, this study seeks to (re)present the participants’ experiences and through their experiences, understand the essence of school-based FRPs. Additionally, Creswell (2014) claims that the qualitative approach is effective for “inquiry areas” in which little research has been done. As previously mentioned, while the topic of parent perceptions of FRPs has been researched, it has not been done so as frequently within a school-based context. With a portraiture approach, the individual opinions and experiences of the school-based FRP participating parents will be explored in more depth. This will allow for a more detailed and nuanced study.

Even though the larger project’s goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of SSBC programs, that is not the purpose of this particular study. Similar to Silver et al. (2005), the purpose of this study to create a “space for reflection, for sharing participant stories of everyday experiences” and “for reflecting on the multiple meanings attributed to these experiences” (p.2). Participants’ experiences provide a "reflective lens", which both suggests and affirms the familial outcomes of participating in the program (that is, the value that school-based FRPs held for these participants) and program characteristics most valued by participants. Therefore, the thematic analysis model was chosen. Thematic analysis is described as a systematic way of “seeing” something in the data and then “seeing it as something” through a process of coding and interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998, p.1). This method was chosen as the specific analysis strategy for this research because of its flexibility and capacity to summarize key interpretations of the data and create rich

descriptions of the experiences of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It allowed for a combination of inductive and deductive coding that grounded the analysis in the participants' experiences while focusing specifically on responses related to school-based context. Inductive codes were formed through reading the data openly without a focus on the research question and letting go of any preconceived notions, in order to gain an understanding of the participant's experiences. On the other hand, deductive codes were created through preconceptions based on previous literature and the specifics of the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

StrongStart BC (SSBC) Evaluation 2017 Project methodology

As previously mentioned, the data for this study were collected as part of the *SSBC Evaluation 2017 Project*, a larger project to assess the effectiveness of SSBC programs, and identify whether the program continues to meet the British Columbia's goals to expose preschool aged children to language rich environments and play-based early learning experiences to promote the skills, knowledge and dispositions to support their success in school. The project was funded by the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Provincial Office of the Early Years. Data collection was supplemented with 10 case studies selected from the 326 SSBC sites, with consideration of rural and urban areas, low to moderate socioeconomic status communities, and Aboriginal/First Nations participation.

The project employed a consecutive mixed methods approach, using surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and document analysis. Focus groups were chosen as the main method of data collection for the current study because they can capture a group perspective of those that experience the phenomena (Patton, 1987, as cited in Bernard & Ryan, 2010). While individuals will have unique personal reasons for their actions, the focus group allows individuals to come together and consider the experiences of others and to collectively tell

a story about their community (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). This method does not elicit individual perspectives. The focus group setting allowed parents to discuss the benefits of participation and remind each other of the program elements that may have influenced their outcomes. I was able to use this group interaction dynamic to better understand participation outcomes, where participants may have collectively experienced a wider range of benefits from program participation.

Recruitment

Participants were notified of the *SSBC Evaluation 2017 Project* and its purpose through advertisements (flyers and posters) handed out by staff at their SSBC program site. The research team provided focus group invitational flyers for distribution and posting highlighting its contact information. Participants self-selected and registered in advance for the groups either via email to the research team or through their facilitator. In addition, participants who were at the programs on the day of the focus groups were invited to participate. Those who could not attend the groups were offered the option of individual phone interviews. These are not included in the current analysis due to the study's small scale nature. Participants were given a children's book as compensation for participation.

Sample

The data set for the *SSBC Evaluation 2017 Project* comprised 10 parent focus groups. The current analysis only uses data collected from 4 of the 5 first round of focus groups out of the total 10 that will be collected through two rounds of focus groups for the larger project. This is due to the second round of focus groups being done in the fall of 2016, which would be after the established completion date of this study, and one of the focus groups from the first round not being audio recorded and only consisting of researcher notes. The participants were parents,

grandparents and caregivers, who use SSBC programs. Parent focus groups were well attended with an average of 8 participants at each site. There were 35 participants in total in the focus groups across the four SSBC sites – 19 from the Metro/Coast region, 8 from the Greater Victoria region and 8 from the Vancouver Island region. In order to help ensure the confidentiality of the families and staff in this research project, throughout the discussion of findings and following sections, all names have been replaced by pseudonyms. The focus groups began with participants identifying their demographic information via a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D for sample demographic information form). Some respondents did not answer all questions so participant demographic characteristics may be skewed. Below is the demographic information of the participants from four focus groups used for this study. Detailed demographic information on study sample is included to bring “alive” the voices and perspectives of the participants for the reader.

- 45% of the children were 3 years old. 77% of attendees were either 3 years of age or under.
- 27 of the participants identified as parents, 7 identified as grandparents and 1 identified as a caregiver.
- 68% of children lived in two-parent households.
- Most families have been attending the program between 1 to 3 years. 82% have been attending the program for at least 1 year.

- ¹18% of respondents identified their household incomes as below the 2011 low-income cutoff for a family of four (\$41,000). 28% of respondents identified their household incomes as being between \$60,000-\$80,000.
- All respondents had completed formal schooling. 80% had post-secondary credentials. Additionally, 41% of reported obtaining a degree or higher as their highest education level.

Procedure

The current study was designed similarly to various literature (Di Santo et al., 2012; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015; Underwood & Killoran, 2012) cited within the paper. Underwood & Trent-Katz (2015) used a similar method of presenting focus group participants with open-ended questions, in regard to their experiences of school-based FRPs in Toronto. Five focus groups were conducted over within the course of one-week in the spring of 2016. They took place at each of the selected SSBC program sites in a space provided by the school. Most of the focus groups were facilitated by a member of the research team. Each focus group lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, and were held during program hours, or immediately following. This time length is shorter compared to past research where parent focus ranged from an hour in length to about 2 hours (Underwood & Killoran, 2012; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). All four focus groups were conducted completely in English, and were audio recorded with permission and transcribed for clarification and analysis. Consent to participate was obtained from all study participants (see Appendix C for sample consent forms). Child care and snacks

¹ The current study collected data of household income in before-taxes dollars whilst all Statistics Canada (2015) income figures are in after-taxes dollars. The low-income cutoff is a measure developed by Statistics Canada which measures income alone. It is not a measure of poverty but is used here as a proxy.

were provided, and participants were given a children's book as compensation for participation. When translators were required, the school had agreed to provide them. However, in one group a member of the research team translated. Participants were asked twelve questions. Parent focus group questions are provided in Appendix B. Again, this is similar to Underwood & Trent-Katz's (2015) methodology, in which they prepared a few key questions to encourage the sharing of rich data. The focus group process began with asking participants to identify their demographic information via a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D).

Data Analysis

Analysis occurred in two phases. The first phase included transcription of the audio data and becoming familiar with it. Although transcription is time consuming, transcribing word for word, provides a further level of familiarization and analysis that is challenging to obtain from researcher notes. Once I had transcribed the focus groups, the ideas generated in the discussions were noted and highlighted in the transcripts. The data set was read over carefully multiple times and, when necessary, ideas were clarified by cross-checking with researcher notes and audio recordings of the focus groups.

This iterative clarification and familiarization process occurred throughout the entire analysis, with back and forth navigation between audio recordings, researcher notes and transcripts to understand the context of the data. This process of familiarization was critically important for me the researcher, as I was not involved in the data collection process. Literature debates around the reuse of qualitative data have tended to focus on 'context', and whether data can ever be appropriately used when secondary researchers lack the contextual understanding of the original project (Hammersley, 2010). This disconnect between data collection and analysis was mediated using additional information sources, such as getting oriented to the *SSBC*

Evaluation 2017 Project by reading documentation on it, and maintaining a connection with the research team from the project, by volunteering as a research assistant for it.

Following re-familiarization, a method of organizing the responses was used. During this phase the data were organized by coding and analyzed using a process of thematic analysis. Within a qualitative approach, researchers “build their patterns, categories and themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2014, p.186). The process of generating codes is the first attempt to condense and organize the mass of data into core themes. A code is the most basic segment of the raw data that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998). As previously mentioned, initial codes were assigned for the data set, and consisted of a combination of inductive codes that emerged from the data itself and deductive codes that emerged from previous literature and from approaching the data with specific research questions in mind (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In qualitative research, a researcher “must draw from everywhere – other theories, one’s own and others’ insights, and empirical insights” (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p.28). Therefore, deductive codes were created by interlacing the literature review, research questions, theoretical and conceptual framework with the data set. The study’s deductive codes focused on labeling the data in meaningful ways that related to the participants’ school-based FRP experiences.

The literature suggests that after coding the entire data set, the next step in thematic analysis is searching for and identifying themes, and collating all relevant codes and data extracts within the identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, this study explored the specific outcomes for families from program participation and program characteristics deemed most important for successful outcomes. While the entire data set was initially coded, only themes

related to program outcomes and characteristics were further identified. The process to identify themes began by sorting codes into themes. Each theme was assigned a color and relevant sections of the data set were manually marked using the thematic colours. The thematic coding process involves the researcher identifying ideas and revising themes as new codes are considered in an iterative process (Boyatzis, 1998). Transcripts were reviewed multiple times, and themes were adjusted and collapsed by establishing connections among codes. Through this process, key themes from within the discussion were identified. Drawing from the themes and the relationships among codes, drafts of the analysed themes were created, and further refined.

In addition to the thematic coding done during this phase, I analyzed the themes identified in each focus group by reviewing their thematic categories and identifying themes common to multiple focus groups. This served to ensure consistency and determine reliability across focus groups. When thematic concepts were identified in three of the focus groups, the coding was deemed to have reached theoretical saturation, and these themes were identified as core themes. Theoretical saturation is defined as the point at which no new information is gained from the addition of new data (Williams & Morrow, 2009). There is a sense of repetition and redundancy in the data and it often felt as if the same program participation benefits and program components were being told multiple times; therefore, the fourth focus group was not transcribed. Instead the audio recording was listened over carefully multiple times, focusing on new information. When listening to the perspectives of participants from the fourth focus group, no new information was heard. Therefore, confirming that data saturation had been reached. Three themes were identified for further analysis and discussion. These themes were then carefully reviewed for internal homogeneity (data within the themes fit together meaningfully)

and external heterogeneity (clear distinctions between themes) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Sub-themes and connections between themes were also identified:

(a) The benefit of program participation for children

Social development

School readiness

Language development

(b) The benefit of program participation for parents

Social interaction for parents

Parental education

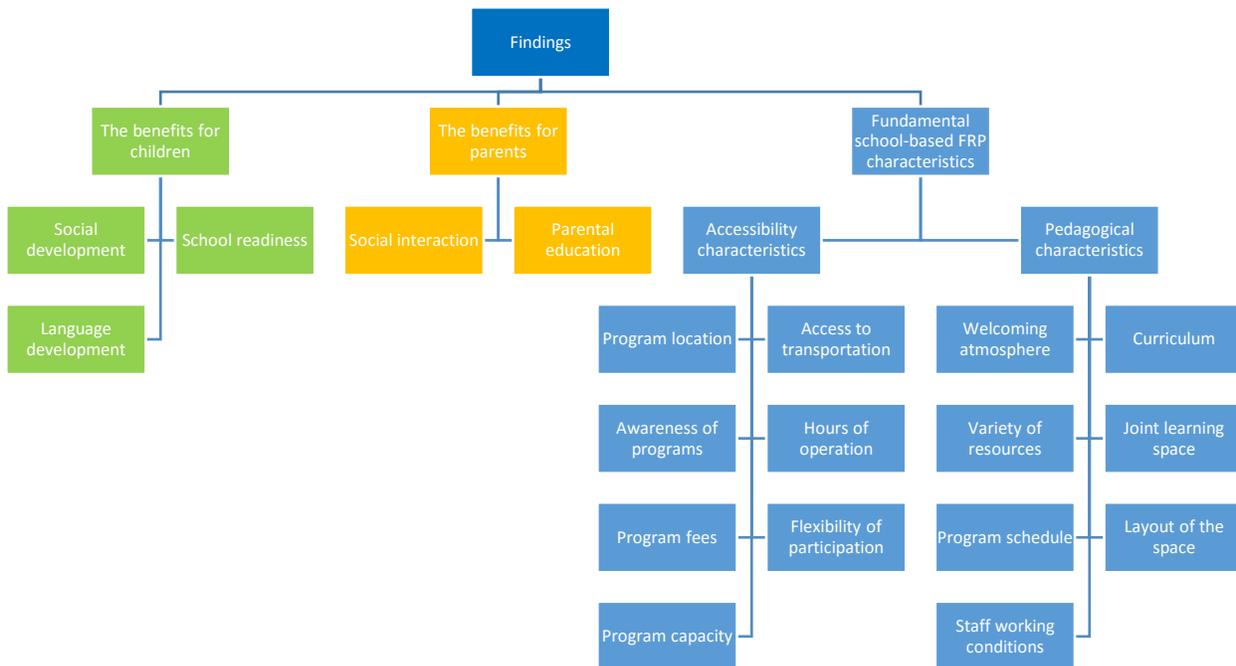
(c) Fundamental school-based family resource program characteristics

Accessibility characteristics

Pedagogical characteristics

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this research was to identify the benefits of SSBC program participation for children’s development and for family members from the perspective of parents, and to specifically investigate what aspects of the program parents attributed to being necessary for generating the key outcomes identified. As described in the previous chapter, the following findings are based on four focus groups with 35 participants conducted by the *SSBC Evaluation 2017 Project* research team. Without exception, every focus group discussed benefits in relation to their perceptions of program participation. Three major themes emerged from the focus groups: (a) the benefits of program participation for children (b) the benefits of program participation for parents, and (c) fundamental characteristics of school-based FRP characteristics. The first two themes address the research question pertaining to parents’ understanding of key outcomes from program participation, and the third theme addresses the research question about how these outcomes are achieved in SSBC programs. Below is an overview of the findings:



The benefits of program participation for children

Participants identified a range of skills their children learned from attending SSBC programs, such as “Fine motor skills, like cutting and gluing. She is really good at cutting pieces of paper into tiny little pieces. When she first started, just trying to figure out how scissors worked were tough...she has learned a lot coming to the StrongStart for sure”, “She has got the neatest printing now”, and “They used to be very picky eating...here at snack you have to eat what is given...they are not picky anymore”. One parent also mentioned learning “problem solving” as the most important skill their child(ren) has learnt. She said, “If there is an issue, she [staff] will get right down to the issue, what are we doing, what do we need to do, how can we handle it, what’s your idea? She gets them thinking past I want that or whatever it is”.

Social development

Parents discussed many varied developmental outcomes for their children from participating in SSBC programs; however, social interaction with other children and adults were especially relevant for majority of the sample. When describing the benefits for their children, parents mentioned “The big one is the socializing; the socialization for the kids.”, “Being able to interact with other children her age,” and “The social aspect of having a regular place to bring kids that age.” One mother said,

My older son has Autism, and we brought him here...and the social aspect was so important to him because he has a lot of anxiety as well. Bringing him for small group time, little bits of time, we got to extend it over time when he got more familiar with it. It was fantastic for his social.

Parents articulated an explicit link between opportunities to socialize with others in SSBC programs and satisfaction with the program. When speaking of opportunities for children to socialize, parents made connections with a lack of opportunities for children to interact with others outside of the program. The opportunities that SSBC programs offered for social

interaction were identified as being important in mediating this shortage: “She didn’t like to share toys because at home she is alone. Here she learns how to share the toys,” “If a kid didn’t have siblings, it is good for learning empathy, sharing and stuff with younger kids,” “If you are an only child, then you are being exposed to others.”

Interaction with children of different ages and from different cultures were also discussed as being especially important to some families for: “understanding the other kids’ behaviors”, “confidence dealing with older kids”, learning “from seeing tons of things and get a taste of them”. Parents said,

For my son it has really been learning how to negotiate with other kids...it is him having to learn, you can’t talk to an 18 month old and ask them not to take the toy, but you also can’t grab it back out of their hands. He is learning how to positively negotiate.

The fact that you are going to have different ages around you...you are learning that when you are younger, the older ones are going to look out for you...as you go up the ladder, it will be vice versa, so maybe now you will watch out for the younger ones.

I see a lot of people coming from other languages and cultures and I enjoy that, and enjoy my kids getting to meet people from everywhere; all kinds of Canadians.

Coming to StrongStart, has been one of the biggest exposures to a beautifully diverse community...there are things that kids have seen at ages 3 and 4, that I haven’t seen in till my early 20s...everything from food to language exposure, to the differences in various cultures that you would have otherwise just lumped together for lack of knowledge. It’s just ignorance that is being addressed at such a young age.

The majority of parents mentioned how their children were gaining “independence” and confidence from social interactions with others “to be brave among people”, learning to open up and feel “comfortable with other adults and children”, and “learning to ask for help on their own”. They also mentioned their children “learning how to play together”, “sharing”, “building relationships” and “making friendships” through these social interactions.

School readiness

Focus group participants described two important constructs as evidence of children's outcomes: the individual development that participants saw in their children, and their degree of preparation for school. The majority of the respondents articulated that they were very aware of and happy with how the curriculum in the SSBC programs supported their children's transition to the formal school system: "It is an intro into the school system", "It's a really, really good stepping stone from this program to kindergarten", "It is good for the kids, especially kids who are going to school. The kids get some familiarity with it...they have already been doing this even if it is not in this kindergarten", and "Makes the transition so easy. Kindergarten teachers must love it because it takes that pressure off". Parents said,

Thinking of her trying to go into a kindergarten class and be able to be a part of group...I didn't think she would do that. She had to have me and she shied away...but having that experience in Cailey's [staff's] group, she totally changed; she was able to be a part and share in circle time type things.

Cailey [staff] setup things for the older students to get to know kindergarten teachers and the classrooms. It was all familiar to her by the time she started.

Most participants mentioned the SSBC program being an important step in preparing children for kindergarten. The individual skills associated with "school" behaviors were described as important for school preparation. They stated that the children were taught the school rules and how to behave in a group. Parents provided a range of perspectives on learning "school" behaviors: "It's a good program for kids to have an intro into that type of setup and routines", "Having the facilitator kind of enforce the rule, the kids learn...you can't run in the halls, you can't chuck stuff, or use the super loud outside voice", "Cleaning up after oneself", and "This is her first time in a group setting...being able to interact in a group setting is the biggest thing for my kids". One parent said, "She [staff] sets it very much up for pre-K.

Kindergarten have that too, they come in the morning and they the table tops. So it's kind of the same thing here".

Most respondents mentioned that the location of the programs in schools was advantageous getting children prepared to participate in school. Participants noted a range of perspectives on having the program in a school setting: allowed their children to gain "Familiarity of being here and being integrated with the other students and the other ages", "Confidence with the school. My son will just walk down the hall with the huge kids towering over him", and get "Introduced to the school early...so when he came in for kindergarten, it was a really nice transition". A parent of three children who have been through the SSBC program said, "I definitely would think that having StrongStart here in the school helps the older kids when they get into kindergarten". Other parents said,

The one other thing I really like about StrongStart...they have a kindergarten class come in and play in the room with StrongStart kids...they would get used to seeing the kindergarten kids, what they were doing, how they coped problems, and listening to a teacher talk to the kids. I found it really beneficial when getting the understanding of how a classroom worked and how it would be when they started kindergarten.

For me it's wonderful that it [the SSBC program] is in the school that my kids are going to...Still benefits kids going to a different school but to get to know your school and try to learn that school its huge.

They all had such a smooth transition because they are familiar with the school, they are familiar with some of the staff that work here, they know where the washroom, the office, the library is...the StrongStart program it made the transition really smooth.

Language development

A few participants articulated that they valued the opportunity for their children to improve their language skills: "Her language is a lot clearer than my oldest", "It's a good chance for my little one to exposure English. At home we don't really speak English", and "That's the

way my daughter learned English”. Respondents also used words/phrases, such as “learn the language”, “new song they learn” and “neatest printing”. Parents said,

It’s really cool to hear my kids...trying new words with some of their friends that don’t speak English as well. They are taking it upon themselves to practice their own languages at home because it is something that they picked up from here.

Even Twinkle twinkle little stars, she [staff] is singing in every language. She goes around the room and gets everybody to sing some part of it.

The benefits of program participation for parents

Parents discussed that they participated in SSBC programs for a number of reasons, which included benefits for both children and their family members or adults who attended with them. The focus on social development and preparation for school for children were consistent across all focus groups and were also the most prevalent outcomes described by respondents. However, participants in all focus groups also described the supports that they had personally gained from participating in SSBC programs. The emerging themes included social interaction for parents, including making friends and community connections, and parent education, including support for parenting, providing activity ideas that could be used at home and learning English. Example statements of the benefits for parents that emerged from the focus groups include:

Coming to StrongStart helped me kind of relax as a parent because it is no secret, I have a short fuse. And now I can just sit back and relax, okay this is a normal stage for my child, I don’t have to be so uptight.

This community is where we got our family dentist, where I got suggestions for sending my kid to preschool...you get evidence from someone that you kind of have some trust in instead of some random suggestion.

Social interaction for parents

In addition to SSBC providing a space for children to interact with other children, parents also discussed opportunities available for parents to socialize with other parents. Many

respondents expressed that participating in the SSBC program was “a way to meet other people” and make friends. They mentioned many positive experiences around relationship-building. They articulated that they valued the opportunities for parents to form strong bonds with other adults. One parent said “We go there for like a week and we know all the parents”. Another mother shared:

Well I am an immigrant. I came not knowing language...I came to StrongStart knowing about the program for my oldest daughter. Amelia [staff] was like my best friend. The only person I knew because I couldn't really speak English. So it was really bad but she always smiled and said it's okay.

It's nice too because sometimes a mom will come in and you can just on her face, or dad, see on their face the frustration. You can feel comfortable and just be like – go make your coffee and redirect the child. This gives the other parent a chance to regroup and the child can regroup – it's a better day for everybody.

Many participants also mentioned feeling supported to describe their experiences with the program, which they explained as being critical to their well-being. Both the staff and other parents provided them with support. Parents shared that “Just being able to talk to people because sometimes your kids are really difficult to be with. You can talk to another adult who says it's okay” and “StrongStart we can share our feeling to others, like mommy to mommy, mommy to Trish [staff]. So that helps”. Respondents were able to share their concerns, fears and frustrations within the program. For example, parents reported:

If you are having a rough day or if your kid is having a rough day, come here and you have somebody to talk to, even the teacher or another parent. I think that helps, whether it changes my parenting style or gives me a break. It is different than going to a park...allows me to interact with other people. So maybe it makes me less stressed that social interaction for myself.

I had depression...It started from postpartum and then I didn't really get much help. But since I moved here, this was closes, and she [pointing to another focus group participant] and we have been friends long time...also all the other moms are helping for my always crying little one and they always say it's okay. And they were encouraging me and it helped me so much, and I am not taking the pills anymore.

I had postpartum depressions really bad with the kids...StrongStart saved me, really truly. It was a place to go and sit and feel human. I just sat and cried, or sat and talked with one other parent. It was really helpful. Beyond helpful, it really saved me in so many ways.

Many participants expressed that they had felt isolated and noted the benefits of interacting with others who are currently experiencing or who have previously experienced a similar situation. Learning that other parents also faced these same challenges made it easier to deal with. Parents shared “So you are not alone and you can see when your kid hits or throws or whatever, there is another kid that does it and inside you are like high-fiving – yay it’s not just my kid” and “It’s wonderful to see other parents going through similar struggles or similar things, and being able to relate to other parents and other kids”. Participants further explained:

My son raised his kids, so I started bringing the other granddaughter to kindergarten a few years back. Initially it was just me and the older granddaughter. And for me to get back into situation like this it’s a little bit harder. But there are lots of grandparents bringing their grandchildren, so it was a really neat way to connect...it’s truly family oriented.

Just knowing that everybody else is going through the same challenges, that you are not isolated...I am going to get through this. You look forwards – okay, see your child turned out pretty good, so I feel the same...we are going to get through this. Just seeing other people for sure.

Gives you a perspective when you see other kids that are the same age as your kids, even people dealing with them. But also even kids that are a little bit older than your kids, you can kind of see what’s coming. It stops you from focusing completely just your kid – oh my gosh, we are having this huge problem, I don’t know what’s going on, how do we deal with this. You can just look at the big picture – oh okay, actually this is going to pass, we will get through it.

Respondents specifically noted the important role that SSBC programs play in facilitating adult interaction within their communities. They mentioned that they appreciate the social relationships and linkages with other adults and children in the community. Parents said it “encourages community”, “It is a nice community feel...it was lovely to come here and have other moms help with my toddler while I could just sit and rest with my newborn”, “The

networking is amazing. People are more willing to help you because they know you, they are familiar with you” and “There is a nice network of other mothers and parents, people that they have met that supported them through good and bad days”. Parents reported:

Widens our community...we got four kids and all of our kids have been through this program at some point throughout the years. It makes your community be that much larger. You see everybody else, whether you are grocery shopping or at the river, walking downtown. You know where they are from, you know that now. The kids also know, they recognize and feel safer.

Because of StrongStart I actually learnt a lot...not even just the culture but the cool stuff going on around town. Somebody always knows something that is happening. You find out a lot more about things in your community that you may not have necessarily heard about or been advertised.

Parental education

Participants spoke about SSBC programs engaging parents in the context of parent-child activities and parent education. The very nature of SSBC programs being “drop-in” programs means that a parent, including grandparents and paid caregivers will always be physically present with their children. Ongoing parental education occurred through observing SSBC staff who modeled parenting behaviors and through direct consultations with staff. For example, parents shared about their learning from staff:

I have learnt a lot from Cailey [staff]. Like working on school things with a child instead of just solving it for them, letting them figure it out, helping them figure, guiding them through it and helping them come to a solution. That’s been huge I think; retraining my brain.

Ms. Amelia is always there to ask questions, she is amazing. For three years I have asked her so many stuff...she is always there to ask questions – this is how it is...it was just so good. She was always there to help.

All the StrongStart teachers have got an education that we don’t necessarily have and they have got different ideas to bring to the table, tools to work with and they can help us with those.

Many respondents expressed that they relished the chance to share parenting stories and to learn from each other as well. Informal ongoing parental education on “what to do, what not to do” occurred through observing others’ parenting behaviors. One parent shared “Even just watching other parents’ styles you learn – oh that tactic worked for kids maybe I can try it out. You learn a lot”. Another parent reported “It lets me see different ways different people deal with their kids...being able to see how other people interact with their kids. Or asking Amelia [staff]”. Sharing parenting stories with others were seen by parents as being very important in assisting them with their parental education. One mother further explained:

Cailey [staff] is amazing at networking. If something happened with my older son and there is a younger person there that is in the same situation, she would say, would you mind sharing what happened with this parent and there might be something there that would be helpful. That part is quite lovely too because not only are you feeling empowered to that you worked through that situation, but now you are going to lend what you learnt to another parent, so that’s kind of really nice.

One parent mentioned that participating in the program provided her with new ideas and activities to implement in the home environment: “The concrete one for me is it’s given me ideas to do more art and crafts at home. Just having the inspiration – what can we do, what kind of things we can put together”. Another parent articulated that she valued the opportunity to improve her language skills and to learn about the culture:

For the parent, it’s a really great opportunity to learn more English and learn the new culture - so how Canadian school holiday trip because we have different way. I am not supposed to yell in front of people. Learning every day.

Based on the discussion on language skills, a parent suggested:

I sometimes wish we had brochures in different languages for like basic expressions. I like to communicate with some of the grandparents. I feel like I need to google stuff, if I just want to say good morning to them...I wish there were basic conversations.

The fact that participants could identify tangible outcomes from their family’s participation in SSBC programs was important to them. It convinced them that the programs

were worth participating in, a critical factor keeping them engaged in the programs. Parent said “We learn a lot even not just for kids. Parents they share their culture, words, languages, expressions. It’s so much fun” and “I am glad that we have this opportunity to be able to do this. We are so lucky that we live in a country that we would be able to do something like this for our children”.

Fundamental school-based family resource program characteristics

Without an exception, every focus group discussed two broad themes in relation to their perceptions of fundamental program characteristics: the accessibility and pedagogical characteristics of programs. Respondents indicated that these characteristics were associated with successful parent and child outcomes.

Accessibility characteristics

Focus groups identified characteristics related to program accessibility as being important characteristics of effective SSBC programs. ‘Accessibility’ refers to physical qualities, such as program location and access to transportation, as well as awareness of programs via advertising and personal networks. Accessibility was also identified by parents to the characteristics of the program associated with its responsiveness to family needs, such as program hours and cost, as well as flexibility and available spaces in programs. All of these characteristics were identified by participants as reasons that acted as barriers to their participation or as reasons that supported continued participation in programs.

Program location. Accessibility appeared to be primarily associated with location, operating hours and capacity of programs. Several parents discussed that having the SSBC program in the same school as their older children were attending made it easier for them to participate in the program with their younger children. Parents shared “my daughter goes to

school here. That makes it easier” and “other kids attending the school in the morning. So drop them there and then here”. Parents also noted that if their older children did not go to school then they would not take the younger children to the program “if my kid doesn’t come to school, I won’t take my son”. One parent explained the convenience of having the program located in the same school because she could participate in the program after dropping off her other child(ren):

Having our older kids in the school it’s an easy transition to walk it over to the classroom for our younger ones. It’s open when the other kids are going to school at the same time.

Parents who did not have SSBC programs in their home schools commented “this isn’t our home school. I wish it was. I wish we had one in our home school”. One mother further explained the program influencing her child(ren)’s school choice:

We took a cross boundary to get to stay here because our local school doesn’t have it. So it influenced our decision to come to ask for that to stay here...we have to apply in January to try to get a student into this school.

² Majority of the participants articulated that program proximity to home was not an important characteristic since most of them drove to the program. Older kids attending the same school, program hours and staff’s personal characteristics took precedence over proximity to home. Parents said “I have one walking distance from me but my child and myself prefer to come here”, “I used to go [another SSBC program location] at times. It’s closer to my home but my kids go to school here” and “I drive past two StrongStarts to come here”. One mother explained her choice program site:

I have one up the street from us and they do afternoon. It is a crappy time - its kindergarten pickup and naptime for my younger one. I have three kids. I could walk to it where as I drive to come to [current program location]. But we have developed our village here and we are big fans of Trish. So we make a point of coming here frequently.

² Cross boundary is when students whose parents/legal guardians maintain primary residence outside the boundaries of the school they are seeking to attend. This would be a school other than their designated home school (Vancouver School Board, 2016).

Access to transportation. Transportation to the program was not mentioned as an issue for any of the participants. Although, transportation issues to participate on field trips were raised as a barrier to participation in one focus group. One parent shared her experience:

Sometimes we all forget who walk here or go by car. Sometimes we come and everybody has car. And if they go somewhere – to senior house, oh my god we are here because we don't have a car...sometimes three mother or four are here with children and can't go with everybody.

The discussion following the above quote focused on transportation solutions. Parents suggested “I would like to have any school bus for such parents” and “setting up a car pooling system for it”.

Awareness of programs. Other aspects of accessibility were related to awareness of programs. Many respondents said they had heard about SSBC programs from staff at schools and personal networks, such as friends and family. Others had learnt about the programs through the library and through their healthcare providers; “At immunizations. They have pamphlets for playgroups and stuff” and “My general practitioner – doctor, he told me about it”. However, one participant reported that “They should give you pamphlet when you do immunizations or something. I just wish I had known about it earlier with my daughter”. Other parents in the same focus group had concerns with how programs were advertised.

Hours of operation. Focus group participants discussed program hours, flexibility and not having a program fee as being important characteristics. The standard operating hours varies from site to site although all sites included in this study offered programs in the morning (three sites ran programs five days a week in the morning and one site had morning programs Monday to Wednesday, was closed on Thursday and was open the whole day on Friday). Programs typically ran for three hours per day. Some parents said that the program's schedule worked well

with their schedule: “You can come during the school hours when your other children are at school”. However, for most parents scheduling was noted as a significant barrier to their participation. Respondents discussed that they were not able to attend the program due to their schedule and program schedule conflicting with each other. Parents expressed “I don’t work during the day, I work in evening and weekends...if I worked during the day I wouldn’t be able to come” and “We could only come for a short time because she would have to nap”.

Respondents were approximately equally divided in their preferences to morning programs and afternoon programs:

It was an afternoon class [program], so I didn’t go nearly as often because I would drop her off and go home. And then getting back early to pick her up I wouldn’t have done. Being in the morning here anyways I could just go. I prefer morning class. It’s easier to already be here than come back.

We couldn’t come for the first year with [child’s name] because naptimes were in the morning and it just wasn’t possible...if it was in the afternoon it would be good.

Parents suggested that a full day program would meet their families’ needs more so than a half-day program “You could open it up to more hours and more people’s schedules. I think it would only benefit people” and a full day program would allow “Any kids can go in anytime, based on whatever nap schedules”. Parents expressed their appreciation at the one site that had full day programming on Fridays: “It’s kind of nice to have a whole day as well. I’m here all day on Friday” and “The three of us often volunteer a lot of time in the school...so it’s really nice that we have it all day because we can take turns watching small children while we help with the older classes”. Parents talked about how additional program hours would better meet their family’s needs:

I think it would be better to have this course till four or five o’clock in the evening. I want it to be full day because our baby wakes up very later, so we always come late – plus ten. It would be better to have late hours. If we have another plan in the morning, so we can come in the afternoon or later. It will be better.

It's so popular and this program is really well received – really well loved because for many reasons. But if it was open longer, it would take away some of that busyness and it could spread out a little bit more so we could do more time with smaller groups. This could probably be open all day everyday with another support workers and still be full.

I think that because her [staff's] program is busy on many days it speaks for itself. People do feel welcome and they do come back, and that's why it would be nice to see a program five days a week – all mornings and continuing Friday all day and maybe even another day all day. Just so that can be spread out a little bit because it gets so busy.

Participants wanted additional program hours including evening, weekend and summer operations: "I would love to come to an after dinner session", "My daughter loves it. In the weekend she asks to come", "Would be nice to have popup StrongStart during the summer. Like once a week or something" and "programs some part of the summer". Summer programming was a popular recommendation by respondents. SSBC programs currently are designed for children aged birth to five. The program's age criteria was a concern for parents during the summer months and they expressed a desire for older children to participate in the program as well: "This issue with during the summer also is that you got your older kids. If it's a popup it's great but accommodating the whole family. I would love to have something summer long but it would have to be for all kids" and "I would attend if it's a family once but I probably would attend for just my younger one".

Based on the findings the majority of the participants were in favor of summer programming. Although one parent had a different perspective towards summer programming. She said "I wouldn't for sure attend. Sometimes it's just too much. It's nice to change things up. Also it's a nice little refresher to continue onto September".

Program fees. As previously mentioned, SSBC programs are often strategically placed in specific neighborhoods to support vulnerable families, such as those experiencing economic exclusion. Hence there is no participation cost to families. Respondents expressed that they

valued the "free" nature of the programs, such as "free food, free snacks for the kids" and "there are no real barrier to coming - no registration. the first time you come in you just walk in". One mother shared her experience of being new to the community and how the SSBC program supported her settled:

When my older son was going to the kindergarten in Korea we have to pay and then doing similar things...when I came here I was worried about my little boy that he is three years old but I don't know what do...after I got StrongStart a little bit more comfortable and he enjoy in this country. We do lots of friends in this StrongStart...also it is free. It was pretty comfortable for me to make to come here.

Flexibility of participation. During the week and during the 3-hour program, families are free to drop-in any day and any time whenever it is convenient for them. Participants commented on these flexibility options that the program offered: "If your child is not having a great day you can arrive there and can leave", "It is a good opportunity because you can come whatever day that works for you" and "I like that its in smaller communities as well...you can hop from one place to another if you move".

Program capacity. In addition to nature of SSBC programs, participants described that some of the structural characteristics were the most significant attributes that acted as barriers to their participation. Programs are operated in school classrooms, and the intimate size of the space with a maximum capacity of approximately 30-40 people often caused overcrowding. Majority of the parents shared their frustrations of having limited program space and getting turned away due to the program being full. Example statements of parents' perceptions of the program capacity include:

Sometimes that would be one of the reasons that we don't come in because if there are already thirty children then we might go do something else.

Sometimes if you think you are going to come late, you don't want come. Because you know it's going to be really busy. So you can't get in. Its either you make the decision to go and get here first thing in the morning or flip the dice.

It can be rough to walk in with a kid and be like – oh well looks like we are heading somewhere else.

I like to be able to tell more people about this program because it is so fabulous but honestly ours is just so packed.

As previously mentioned SSBC programs are strategically placed in neighborhoods based on EDI data, that is they are placed in neighborhoods that are known to have certain demographic characteristics that are predictive of children experiencing difficulty in school. The fact the programs are only available in targeted communities means that they are not many program sites for families to choose from causing further overcrowding of existing programs. As a solution to “take away some of that busyness” parents mentioned a desire for additional locations:

More in more schools...I think if it were in every school I would benefit them even more. I would like to suggest more schools having them. I understand the idea is you are looking at particular areas – at risk kids’ stuff but there are dead zones in [location]. The nearest StrongStart is 20 minutes away.

I think that this program almost always fills up in a certain point in the morning. If there were more StrongStarts maybe it wouldn’t be so crazy. Sometimes where its overwhelming. Sometimes people are like – I can’t handle it. Amelia [staff] tries to cap it and shut the door before that happens but there is people getting turned away. I’ve only ever been here this one year. The year before it was full literally every single day.

When asked for suggestions to improve the program, in addition to the majority of the participants focusing on more and longer programs, they offered suggestions that focused on structural characteristics as well, such as wanting larger physical spaces. Respondents used words/phrases, such as “more space” and “bigger space”.

Pedagogical characteristics

Welcoming atmosphere. The welcoming atmosphere at the SSBC programs were the most commonly cited characteristic that parents mentioned when asked what was working well

in the program. My analysis revealed that ideas associated with the welcoming atmosphere were overwhelmingly related to staff characteristics. The welcoming atmosphere of the programs were a function of staff personal qualities, such as remembering details about children and family members (e.g. “the facilitator she knows everybody by the first name) and responding to the individual needs of families (e.g. “she [staff] is very engaged with the families). In all focus groups parents shared positive comments about the staff: “I got to say the facilitator makes the room for sure. We have been to a few other ones, it’s not the same”, “The facilitation is fantastic – the leadership from Amelia” and “I think this one should be the example of how the program should be and they [staff] have interact with the parents and the kids”. The meaningful relationships of the staff with the families which contributed to the program atmosphere, was the most frequently cited strength of the program. The majority of the parents said that they felt comfortable talking to the staff at the program. A sample of responses include:

I think she does an amazing job of connecting with families that might not otherwise feel they can make it and feel that it is open to them.

She makes it a point to talk to everyone and say hi to everyone. If you don’t speak English – what do you speak, what is your background. She talks to everyone and gets as much information as she can.

If you were away and come back and she just ask them how was your trip. She asks them all the details. To the kids and the parents.

My son was repeatedly pushed over by another child a little bit older. I felt badly for the mom because she felt that she might not be welcome there or something. Cailey gets in right away...just explaining, that’s not okay here, sort of directing we could be doing this instead...she always meets the child where they are... always addresses it in a way that isn’t judgmental.

I think it is cool that as close as she is and as connected she is to all the families in the community, she does make a point of keeping it professional. She does socialize with any of the parents from the StrongStart that she is still working with unless those children have graduated out of the StrongStart program. She is engaged, she is still connected and she obviously cares for their family in the capacity remain in touch. She does a good job

of keeping it professional while she is here, in spite of all the great relationships she has made.

Participants also discussed some of the negative experiences they had experienced at other SSBC locations as a result of the staff's qualities:

Some of them believe they are just there to facilitate the classroom experience. They are there just to be like the safe body representing the room, and make sure nobody jams keys in the socket. Here is the choice, go play.

Some other places that I went to they are more interacted with only the parents, only the kids not on both...if they talk, they just want to talk to the parents.

In addition to staff, the other participants at the program are important in creating the atmosphere as well. Many respondents mentioned that they felt the SSBC program they were currently attending was a safe place where they could ask questions and seek advice in a non-threatening and non-judgmental way. They articulated that they felt comfortable in the program and felt comfortable talking to the staff and other parents. Participants used words/phrases, such as "feels like everyone is welcome", "we love that sense of community", "everything is so special here", "feel safer" and "that strength just keeps coming" to describe their experiences with the program. One mother said, "My younger son used to have a lot of tantrums that was difficult to be in public but here it wasn't a big deal because people didn't stare at me". Parents explicitly stated that their current SSBC program was welcoming whilst some of the other programs they had previously experienced had been unwelcoming or cliquish. Parents shared about the programs they were currently attending "I was coming to the StrongStart less than three months...it was pretty comfortable for me to make to come here" and "You can show up here basically...in your pajamas. Nobody is going to judge you and everybody is just going to be there". Some parents had dramatically different – negative experiences attending programs in other program locations.

Curriculum. The nature of the program’s curriculum was also attributed to the staff’s characteristics. All SSBC programs are staffed by qualified early childhood educators. Parents in one focus groups shared that they valued the staff implementing emergent curriculum programming. Emergent curriculum is a way of planning curriculum that is based on the children's interests. Planning emergent curriculum requires observation, documentation, creative brainstorming, flexibility and patience on the part of the staff (University of Toronto, 2016). Example statements of parents describing the program curriculum include: “Often Cailey will go with the next theme from what kids are talking about. She looks at them and sees what they are interested in and plan activities from things from them” and “She is constantly getting input from the kids. She is always asking them what do you want to do, how can we fix this, what should we try next”.

Parents in another focus group shared that they appreciated the staff implementing curriculum that was inclusive and reflective of the program's families. One parent shared that the staff had initiated a family board: “We have the family one - so each family a family board. There is pictures of the kids and where they are from and its written also in their home languages. That’s cool”. Another parent spoke about a world map project that was done in their program: “People from different countries. She put a map up last year, it’s really cool, everybody put a pin”. Some of the respondents had had negative experiences at other program locations; for example, one parent compared her experience at the previous program to the current one: "I like the older crafts and arts that she prepares every day. She always follows the seasons and that is really helping. I remember the other StrongStart she did not prepare anything like that. Kids just supposed to play with the paper, the toys. That’s why I am so happy to coming here. She had a themes, projects".

Participants were asked *what are you child(ren)'s favorite activities*. Parents shared a variety of activities that they perceived as being their children's favorite activities, such as the drama center including dressing up activities, projects, such as science projects, circle time including reading and singing, and special guests, such as the librarian, dentist, police and fire department. Parents in all focus groups shared that "messy" and "tactile" activities, such as painting, playing kinetic sand and at the water table, and making goop and playdough were one of their children's favorite activities at the program. One parent said "Whenever there is something a little bit messy where they can get their hands in and make something, that is very much they spend a lot of time". Parents appreciated that the program exposed their children to these messy activities: "I like a lot of the messy toys that we get at StrongStart". Parents shared their perspective on messy activities:

At StrongStart you can let them dive really messy things, where you might not do that at home. Certain things like painting or something you might feel more reserved to that. At StrongStart it's easy to clean up and my kids they seem to be more careful at StrongStart for some reason.

One of the things that I really liked is it exposes my kids to stuff that I wouldn't necessarily want in my house. I don't want the goop in my house, or the painting. I don't want a bunch of colored rice into my house, as much as its wonderful, I don't really have to deal with that.

We don't do some of those really messy activities at home either. You want to do? Great let's go to StrongStart.

In addition to the messy activities, participants also said they valued the physical activities, such as gym time and outdoor time done at the program. Parents said "I like the activity level and the involvement of using the outdoor space here...if not weekly, twice a week we are out playing and going for walks. I think that's fantastic" and "Gym time for us is huge". Parents also suggested "I would like to see more outside time available" and "If we had more community visits" as recommendations to improve the program.

Variety of resources. When parents were asked what is working well in the program, one reason centred on the lack of resources in the home environment and the program allowing them to expose their children to a variety of different toys, equipment, and activities. Parents shared: “I like very often the teacher changes toys because at home we have the same things and it is boring for them to play with them”, “What works is that there is something new for the kids...it is not the same toys for like a month, she will bring out new stuff” and “gym time for us is huge. I mean we don’t have any of that stuff at home – boogie boards or whatever, hundred thousand skipping ropes”.

Joint learning space. Respondents also referred to the program structure and curriculum as attributes that they valued in the program. At SSBC programs parents participate with their young children. Being together and learning together with their children, and sharing their children’s early learning experiences was an important program structure characteristic for these parents. The parents in the focus group articulated that they valued having a time and space to interact, play, and learn with their children without the pressure and stress related to everyday household chores. Parents said “Why I chose StrongStart because a lot of programs with little bit older kids, you drop them off, you say goodbye. I want to be part of the process...I still wish to be part of it at this age” and “I like being involved, create and learn, play with them [her own child(ren)] all the other little kids”.

Program schedule. Many of the participants also expressed that the program structure/schedule worked well with their family’s needs and it as a strength of the program. Parents shared, “I think the schedule of it is pretty good – for as how long there is free play in the beginning, circle time, snack. At least for us it feels like it all happens at the right time”, “It’s just great, there is all these play areas of different types of things” and they can pick and choose what

they want to play with”. Another mother further explained her perspective of the program’s structure:

I like there is a balance of structure and free play. When we first come in, it’s kind of like go do your thing but circle time is circle time. Everybody knows this is the time we come sit down, we listen to music, we listen to books. When we do the food prep. It is a nice balance of the structure and free play.

Some other respondents explained that the program structure taught their children “discipline”. For example, one parent said, “There is the play time, there is lights off mean clean up, then it’s snack time”. Other parents, however, said they liked the fact that the program was not too structured and responded to their children’s needs. Parents said,

When they are reading or something then everyone sits...but the rest of the time they can go from one area to another as their interest. They are in control of what they are doing in those times. I think that’s really good for them.

I had my children in a different preschool, but I found this one more effective because it was a little looser. Preschools were pre-regiment and they had this is snack time...whereas here it is a little more open. It’s quite lovely to have snack as open all morning. Everyone knows that when they get hungry better feed them quick.

Layout of the space. The classroom layout was also a significant structural characteristic for participants in one focus group. One father mentioned changing SSBC program locations due him and his younger child disliking the "classroom atmosphere" and there being "a few issues" with "the layout of the space" in the previous program location they were attending even though his older child attended the same school. Other parents expressed that the classroom layout of the current program location was an attribute that was working well in the program: "The flow of the space allows children to go from station to station - and there are discrete stations, easily. It doesn’t feel cluttered. it is a particularly good room here I think" and “having been to [another SSBC location], StrongStart here I like how cohesive it is. There is different tables that have

different things...everything is laid out whereas at [other SSBC location] ...it is not set out as nicely the room...the way that the space is used works really nicely”.

Access to bathroom facilities was mentioned as being problematic at some sites. One parent expressed that she found it most satisfactory that in the current SSBC program site the bathroom was located inside to the classroom:

I think its huge that there is a bathroom inside the class. It is very very helpful...we have been to a couple of others and the bathroom is like way far and like the kids don't make it to the bathroom...the program is designed for people in that age group, so you need to have a bathroom right there.

Staff working conditions. The effectiveness of the program was attributed in part to the working conditions for staff in these programs. Some participants said that the effectiveness of the program was impacted, such as staff not having time to interact with families, to clean/wash toys and designing stations by how the staff members were treated. Comments include: “She didn't have time though. I went to a different place and they look so busy...just maintenance not really involved” and “She just doesn't have the time. She only gets one hour outside when is not teaching. There is only so much she can do”. Parents referred to the importance of staff being treated well by their employer and suggested the following as program improvements: “If the facilitators – Amelia had more hours in their week that were dedicated to things like cleaning and designing the centers and that kind of stuff, I think that could only improve things”, “She needs a raise” and “I think she deserves the recognition”.

Overall, the satisfaction rates for the SSBC programs were high - majority of the respondents stated that the programs were happy with their familial across all four sites. Parents said “These programs are incredible”, “This is such a help and such a positive thing”, “right fit with care providers” and “The Ministry should know we love it. We want more of it”. One respondent shared her parents' perspective of the program:

My parents are really impressed too. My dad will sometimes take my kids when I am not available. And my mom is like I wish there had been stuff like this when my kids were young.

Summary of findings

Three key themes emerged in the process of data analysis that related specifically to the benefits of program participation and characteristics of the program: (a) The benefits of program participation for children, (b) The benefits of program participation for parents, and (c) Characteristics of school-based FRPs. Participants in all focus groups explicitly related these themes to their SSBC program experience. For the families in this study, certain circumstances affected their experiences of and satisfaction with SSBC programs. The following discussion section explores these findings in more depth, drawing connections to the literature for a broader understanding of where this research fits with previous research on FRPs.

Chapter 5: Discussion

As previously mentioned there is a compelling need for studies to evaluate the effectiveness of FRPs integrated within schools and other community organizations. In order to improve less-effective programs and to replicate those which are thriving, it must be known which characteristics are fundamental for successful outcomes. To reiterate the research purpose, it was undertaken was an attempt to identify what parents see as key outcomes from SSBC program participation for children's development and for family members, and to explore which characteristics as interpreted by the participants lead to successful outcomes. Perspectives varied from program site to program site and from participant to participant, however, common themes and areas of emphasis were apparent. Parents shared many stories about their general experiences with SSBC program, but also shared stories that explicitly related to the ecological context of SSBC programs in schools and the role of "more-capable" others in supporting their family's well-being. Results of the thematic analysis confirms the significance of social systems and parental education for parents, children and families. As well, accessibility of programs and effectiveness of programs are fundamental program characteristics for reasons related to the program's school-based location. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory served as a foundation upon which the development and implementation of this research study was built.

A discussion of how the findings fit with key thematic findings to the literature of early childhood programs is included in this chapter. Following are some of the significant implications and recommendations from the current research that has the possibility to inform the foundation of integrated child and family centers in Ontario. Similarities found between this

SSBC program data set and the findings of previous SSBC program evaluations (HELP, 2007, 2008) are also briefly discussed and recommendations for future research are presented.

Opportunities for social interaction

Parents discussed many child development outcomes, such as school readiness and development of language skills as benefits of participating in SSBC programs. Most importantly an overwhelming number of parents listed social skills as the most important skill their children had learnt for participating in the program. Parents made an explicit link between opportunities to socialize with others and program satisfaction. This connects to the study's theoretical framework, as it proposes that children and families do not exist in isolation, and they are both affected and influenced by their surrounding environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). HELP's research (2007, 2008) on SSBC programs found similar results, with parents reporting increased opportunities to socialize as benefits of program participation. This finding is also consistent with Underwood & Trent-Katz (2015) and Silver et al. (2005) who found that parents' linked their FRP experience to their children's social development.

Opportunities to socialize with other children and adults during free play and group time were also found to be important for children's language development, as well as for their school readiness. While social development is arguably an outcome of FRPs, families in this study made explicit connections between the program being located in schools and the importance of learning "school" behaviors, such as how to work/interact with other children in a group setting, as well as being able to follow directions/rules. This again can be connected to study's theoretical framework, as Vygotsky (1978) states that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. He also focused on the connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences. Meaning by more

capable others collaborating with children, it helps facilitate meaningful construction in children. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) proposes that there is an interdependent relationship between the individual and the environment. This means the environment influences children's development and in turn, children influence their environmental context. Underwood & Trent-Katz's (2015) study on school-based FRPs in Ontario also found that many participants reported that the structure of the program taught children about routines. This finding is also consistent with the SSBC program policy goals - programs are designed to support the success of students when they enter kindergarten (BCME, 2016) and Pascal's (2009) "schools-first" policy - ensure that early childhood programs focus on children's "readiness" for school transition as an outcome. For the parents in this study, the programs helped prepare their children for school and in this preparation social development was more important than academic skills. Although current literature supports the importance of social skills for children's successful transition to school (Britto et al., 2012; Karoly et al., 2005), parents participating in FRPs in Ontario more strongly associated formal learning, such as children learning to write their names to school readiness (Di Santo et al., 2013; Underwood & Killoran, 2012).

Underwood (2010) found that parents who believe their children's needs are being met are more likely to approve of programs. Similarly, Doyle & Zhang (2011) also noted that parents are motivated to attend programs for direction in educational and social experiences for their children. The benefits of participation for children's social development were attributed to caring and professional staff and other participants. In Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979, 1986) the individual is viewed as dynamic and growing, and there is reciprocal interaction between the individual and their environment. Additionally, Vygotsky's sociocultural developmental model (1978) emphasizes co-participation, cooperative learning and joint discovery, such those more-

capable (e.g. staff and other parents) bringing existing knowledge to children by co-constructing it with them. Therefore, the importance of this outcome for children has implications not only for program curriculum, but also for the overall program pedagogy as culture shapes learning and development. Program development and program design are two key areas of focus for staff of FRPs (FRP Canada, 2016). Given the emphasis on practitioners, one recommendation emerging from the study could be that they reflect on their understanding of social development (for British Columbia's context) and academic skills development (for Ontario's context) in relation to children starting school and how children's social and academic skills are fostered in their programs.

Majority of the participants placed considerable importance on their own social relationships and emotional supports that they obtained through SSBC programs compared to the few participants that commented about having access to resources in the programs. This finding contrasts Saunder's (2007) findings where respondents tended to be more satisfied with their family's material well-being and less so with their family's emotional well-being. It is important to note here that participants stated that the purpose of SSBC programs is to support children's school readiness, however, the majority of the them expressed that the program well-supported parents and caregivers as well. Opportunities for social interaction appeared to encourage parents to keep attending the program. One participant said that parents want to continue to SSBC programs even though their children were older than the target age because of the social networks there. This finding differs from Graham's (2011) study findings on families living in rural communities – drop in programs did not support parents' social interaction. For some families, this program was the only opportunity to interact with others. This finding relates to the ecological theory, as the ecological perspective is closely linked to the concept of social capital.

The more embedded the family is across the levels of the ecological system, the greater will be their social capital. The benefits which parents accrue from involvement with social networks, includes support for themselves and their children. Families who are not integrated across levels of the ecological system can be isolated and have trouble functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). Overall, findings indicate that overall SSBC programs are providing parents with various social supports.

Parents' experiences within SSBC programs were heavily influenced by the nature of the relationships they had with staff and other participants. Study participants described supportive relationships with staff and other parents; these relationships are consistent with the types of parent engagement described by literature (Di Santo et al., 2013; FRP Canada, 2011; HELP 2007, 2008; Underwood & Killoran, 2012; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015) as having the greatest impact on student achievement. Parents chose to keep coming back to the program because they felt welcome and experienced a sense of belonging. In cases where the family was new to the community/country, parents reported responsive staff were factor that kept them coming back. These staff were able to bridge the gap between parents and facilitate a sense of belonging within the program for the family. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) defined the mesosystem as comprising of interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates. For a child the relations are among home, school, and neighborhood peer group. Whilst for an adult they are among family, work and social life. The pattern of interrelationships among microsystems for a child or an adult can influence their perceptions and behavior within any of the settings they are presently located. Based on the findings, it appears that there are many aspects of the program that should continue, such as the manner in which staff interact with families, and the welcoming and safe atmosphere that is created by them. The

atmosphere of the program which is attributed to the characteristics of the staff is an important factor in encouraging active and continued participation and engagement. Negative experiences with practitioners resulted in families not returning to those programs. This is consistent with current literature on the role of the staff in FRPs, that is staff personal characteristics has been identified as being critical to the success of FRPs (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP, 2008; Saunders, 2007; Silver et al., 2005; Underwood & Killoran, 2012; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Summers et al. (2011) also identified parent-professional partnerships as critical in parent satisfaction with early childhood programs.

Ontario's (2014) *How Does Learning Happen?* document states that knowledgeable, responsive and reflective educators are prerequisites for quality programming, and as the findings suggest this principle is relevant for school-based FRPs. Currently, a professional early childhood educator plans and delivers the SSBC program working from a play-based pedagogical approach (BCME, 2016), and this is an aspect of the program that is recommended as being continued. Additionally, findings from the Toronto First Duty study states that with strong leadership for the staff it strengthens the learning environment for families (Corter et al., 2009). SSBC program families were satisfied with the program as it supported their family as a whole. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) noted that familial influences are bi-directional - children affect parents just as parents affect children; it is therefore critical to support the whole family. Based on this, similar to HELP's (2008) recommendation on leadership in school systems, it is recommended that Ministry of Education provide staff with ongoing leadership through consultants and professional development opportunities to strengthen their program. Literature indicates that parent involvement is critical for children's optimal development (Doherty, 2007; Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Pascal, 2009; Phair, 2016) and that parents also benefit from participation

in their children's programs (HELP, 2008; Silver et al., 2005; Timmon, 2008). Through curriculum and pedagogical leadership and training the Ministry of Education can ensure that FRP practitioners consider a broad range of outcomes, such as ensuring that practitioners make child development and family support explicit and inter-related goals, and also ensuring that families' needs are met within programs by building on their social networks.

Parental education

Parents perceived a great variety of supports for themselves from program participation. Similar to current literature (Di Santo et al., 2013; Doyle & Zhang, 2011) parents saw the SSBC program as an important resource for their own learning, such as enhancing parenting skills. This finding shows that SSBC programs are meeting one of FRP Canada's (2016) objectives of family support programs—FRPs work to strengthen individuals and families. Even though parents were not asked to explicitly rank the benefits of program participation, it is evident that the study finding is inconsistent with research by Saunders (2007) who found families more often believe they are receiving adequate amounts of services for their child, but tend to believe they are not receiving adequate amounts of services for their family.

For participants, individual outcomes were as important as child development, and child outcomes, such as children's emotional development were inter-related with family outcomes of learning to positively interact with their children. A few parents shared that they had learnt more activities to do at home, whilst the majority shared about learning parenting skills. SSBC program staff fostered an atmosphere which encouraged positive adult-child interaction and this was identified as instrumental in leading successful outcomes. This finding substantiates a sociocultural understanding that an individual's learning and development takes place in historically-situated activities that are mediated by their culture through intersubjective

experiences in which they participate with other members of their community (Vygotsky, 1978). HELP's (2007, 2008) SSBC program study participants also reported about program learning positively impacting their home environment and interactions. Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez (2008) state that three aspects of the home environment promote children's learning: learning activities, parenting quality and learning materials. Additionally, the Pascal report emphasizes parent involvement as a crucial characteristic of early childhood programs (Pascal, 2009). Therefore, FRPs engaging parents can result in positive effects on the whole family's well-being. This is an indication that that the programs should continue to provide learning services for families to support parenting capacity.

Sociocultural views do not see development as predetermined (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, FRP Canada (2016) views parenting as a developmental process in which parents' skills and knowledge and insights develop in concert with their children's development. Additionally, Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that each culture presents its individuals with activities that are deemed valuable for their education and appropriate for their participation. Often these opportunities are tailored in some way to the developmental and capabilities of individuals in tacit or explicit ways. Based on the literature and study findings, supporting parents in their provision of sensitive and responsive engagements, age-appropriate activities and materials that facilitate learning, should begin early in development rather than at the preschool age (which is the target age of SSBC programs although children 0-5 are welcome to participate). It is also important for practitioners to recognize that educational approaches need not involve only formal teaching, but rather focus on experiential learning, modeling and empowerment, such as, SSBC program practitioners creating a safe environment for families to share their experiences thus providing informal parental education. As previously recommended,

through ongoing leadership through government consultants and professional development opportunities staff will be able to learn to develop approaches to strengthen parenting capacity and age appropriate activities. Consultants will be able to support practitioners with overall SSBC goals in the program.

Respondents said that they had greatly benefited from the program, and hoped that the program would be maintained or expanded. Satisfaction with the programs and staff leads parents to continue attending programs. The benefits of participation for parents' education were again attributed to staff. Dunst (1995) and Silver et al. (2005) argued that parents need and want support from FRPs, and that the partnerships between parents and staff is very important in supporting parental empowerment and capabilities. Additionally, Di Santo et al. (2013) states that pro-active inclusion requires that programs are welcoming to all children and families. Partnerships between parents and staff allow staff to attend to the cultural context of the family when working with parents from different backgrounds and consider the broader social context of parenting by attending to the barriers, such as barriers created by poverty and low parental education. Resulting in the implementation of curriculum that is inclusive of all parents. This kind of parent engagement involves a great deal of knowledge and effort on the part of practitioners to ensure that these elements of FRPs are successful. Therefore, similar to McCuaig et al.'s (2017) SSBC program recommendations for staffing, due to the broad range of job responsibilities taken on by FRP program staff, it is also recommended the early childhood education training programs include content on family support, such as modelling for parents to better prepare staff prior to entering the field.

Additionally, with program effectiveness being significantly impacted by staff characteristics, it is important to pay attention to staff working conditions. Undesirable working

conditions and lack of recognition can impact program effectiveness as expressed by study participants. Meaningful relationships can only be built overtime. Hence disagreeable working conditions might result in higher staff turnover. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education both in British Columbia and Ontario annually review staff pay scale, benefits and work environments to ensure that staff are being treated reasonably to compensate for their high-demand work.

Fundamental program characteristics

Satisfaction with the SSBC programs is high, which is a function of quality relationships with staff and other participants, as well as the other program characteristics, such as program location, curriculum and pedagogy. However, the participants had lower satisfaction with certain program characteristics, such as hours of operation and capacity. Accessibility emerged as one of the most relevant program characteristic themes for SSBC parents in this research. Accessibility of the programs, was attributed to a range of program characteristics, such as program cost and flexibility of participation, however, it was significantly attributed to the program location in schools, operating hours and program capacity.

The location of the programs in school was perceived to provide convenience and ease of accessibility. Focus group data suggest higher levels of parent satisfaction at SSBC program sites where their older children were attending the same school compared to sites where their older children's school and the SSBC program site were in different locations. Other school-based FRP research supports this finding and demonstrates that in most cases, parents preferred having the program in same school because they could access the program and be close to their older children attending school (Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). Several participants also said they learned about SSBC programs through school staff. Additionally, SSBC programs attracted

parents who were concerned with preparing/familiarizing their children to school prior to beginning kindergarten. Underwood & Trent-Katz (2015) reports that this is an important function of the school-based FRPs that is not possible with other programs.

Early childhood programs are considered optimal when it has higher levels of integration – an integrated model of service delivery, such as combined early childhood care, education and community services, integrated staffing, common governance and funding (BSPEL, 2007). As previously mentioned, service integration is a key aim of new early childhood social policy in Ontario, with the purpose of creating efficiencies for families (OME, 2013). Based on the literature (Britto et al., 2012; Kennedy, 2008) and the study findings, it is important for early childhood programs to be integrated with daily family life and be easily accessible by families, such as programs being located in public schools. Creating schools as neighborhood centers for families from birth onward is a proven outreach strategy (Britto et al., 2012; Corter et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2008; Pascal, 2009). Studies on the impact of integrated services on the daily lives of parents and their children indicated that service integration is associated with lower levels of parenting hassles and greater satisfaction with the forms of support (Corter et al., 2009). With the new early years policy framework continuing to trend toward integration of early childhood programs and services (OME, 2016b) and a “schools-first” policy that values early childhood programs that are linked with or offered by schools (Pascal, 2009), it is recommended locating family support programs within public schools. The study findings and previous literature (Corter & Arimura, 2006) on the early results on combining parent support and education with early learning and care suggest the benefits of integrating programs – having all early childhood programs and services in one convenient location for families. Having the programs close to home was not as important for these parents. Therefore, building on HELP’s (2008)

recommendations for the program location site, it is best to consult with schools and service providers prior to designating program sites in order to identify the best location for families.

A few parents were content with the weekday morning designated program hours and said that the program's schedule worked well their schedule. However, for the majority program operating hours were insufficient and they were unsatisfied about the program being inflexible to support families' schedules. Similar to HELP's (2008) findings, parents wanted additional program hours, such as full day, weekend and summer programming. Participants explicitly mentioned that full-day programs would better meet their family's needs. This finding is also consistent with the literature (Di Santo et al., 2013; Underwood & Killoran, 2012; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015) – parents wanting longer program hours during the day, programming during the summer and for programming that fit with their schedules. A guiding principle of FRPs is that they should remain flexible with their programming (Dunst, 1995). Building on the importance of flexibility of programming, Corter et al. (2009) emphasizes that limited program hours mitigate against successful program delivery and undermines parent engagement. Program development, such as hours of operation is often relative to the availability of funding. Therefore, it is important for the policy makers and service providers to identify diverse community needs and allocate funding to implement programming hours that have the highest demand, such as identifying if there is a need for varied program hours to accommodate parents that work different shifts and developing programs based on these needs. Corter & Arimura (2006) reported that flexible programs matter because parents are diverse and have diverse needs/schedules for themselves and their children. This recommendation is significant as HELP (2008) identified that one of the main reasons parents stopped attending the program was related to program and personal schedule conflicts.

Majority of the participants recommended that there be programs offered during the summer. SSBC programs are strategically placed in neighborhood schools that are identified as being disadvantaged. The Pascal report documents the advantages of supportive programming and positive parent-school relationships to effective parenting, children's educational success, reducing barriers for disadvantaged communities and building community cohesion (Pascal, 2009). Similarly, Corter et al.'s (2009) reports that year-round programming is effective in reducing achievement gap between children living in advantaged and disadvantaged circumstances. Middle-class families build on their children's literacy skills through summer activities. Children in low-income families do not have the same access and lose skills. As summer learning losses accumulate over the years, disadvantaged students fall further and further behind. Based on the participants' suggestions and literature, it is recommended that FRPs develop programs that continue to engage families and support children's development during school breaks, such as winter, March and summer breaks.

SSBC programs are able to support families for no cost. The program's free nature was valued by a few participants. This finding contrasts HELP's (2008) findings – over 50% of respondents stated they had started to attend the program because it was free and would not be able to attend it if it was otherwise. It could be speculated that the program cost was not significant for the sample due to the fact that majority of the participants were from medium to high socio-economic status. Again the economic circumstances of the participant sample was inconsistent with HELP's (2008) sample's demographics – 49.5% reported family incomes of less than \$39,999. The current demographics of the program participants have us questioning if the program is serving its target population? (that is, are the vulnerable families in the neighborhood being served?). It is recommended that the program further strengthen its outreach

efforts to reach all families by making the program more attractive to those who are choosing not to attend. Furthermore, the study findings confirm that vulnerability exists in all levels of the economic spectrum and more importantly that families from all socioeconomic backgrounds benefit from FRP participation, this is made evident through the program outcomes shared by families. This finding is consistent with Saunders (2010), who also noted that parental education would be beneficial to families from broad range of backgrounds. FRPs contribute to a strong social infrastructure by recognizing the possible long-term negative impact of limited human and material resources and attempting to reduce this impact through the provision of familial support (FRP Canada, 2016). McCuaig (2012) posits that targeted programs often miss the parents they are intended to support. McCuaig's theory is evident within the findings and is an indication that universal FRPs are more likely to reach the most vulnerable families. Similar to HELP's (2008) recommendation to the Ministry of Education, it is suggested that FRPs be located in all communities across the province, making them a universal program rather than a targeted program.

Participants said that the program's limited capacity was another significant barrier to their participation. Parents were frustrated with the programs often getting overcrowded and them getting turned away due to limited program space. Evaluations of other FRPs as well have noted that limited space and overcrowding is often an issue (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP, 2008; Underwood & Trent-Katz, 2015). The fact that SSBC programs were targeted programs – being only available in a few locations and being not universally available in all schools further contributed to overcrowding. It is recommended that the issue of capacity be examined to determine how this issue could be addressed. It is also recommended that policy makers and service providers consider strategies to involve higher number of families in the programs, such

as longer program hours to spread the busyness as suggested by participants and additional program locations to meet the high demands. Based on McCuaig et al.'s (2017) recommendations for SSBC programs, it is recommended that Ontario create an effective design for its child and family centers with consideration in the assignment of school space and facilities.

The very nature of SSBC programs being “drop-in” programs means that a parents will usually be present with their children. Being together and learning together with their children, and sharing their children’s early learning experiences was an important program characteristic for participants. Literature also states that many FRP participants considered the opportunity to learn *with* their child as being important (Di Santo et al., 2013; HELP, 2008; Silver et al., 2005). Parents valued having a time and space to interact, play and learn with their children away from everyday household chores. Silver et al. (2005) reports that programs that allow for shared learning to flourish leads to positive outcomes for families as a whole. Hence it is recommended that service providers must continue to provide families with programs/space to engage with their children and also to further their understanding of child’s development.

When parents were asked what is working well in the program, one aspect was that the program allowed children to be exposed to a variety of different toys, equipment and activities that were absent in their home environments, in particular exposure to “messy” and physical activities. This finding is consistent with Di Santo et al.’s (2013) and HELP’s (2008) study findings – access to a variety of resources acted as a motivation for parents to attend FRPs. Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez (2008) reports that parents with more resources are better able to provide positive learning experiences for their young children. A basic premise of FRPs is that participants benefit from an array of resources (Dunst, 1995). As mentioned previously, it is

recommended that school-based FRPs consider the assignment of school facilities, such as access to the gymnasium and outdoor space during program design. Adequate funding ought to be made available to allow practitioners to incorporate a broad range of resources into their programs.

Strengths

Literature highlights that in qualitative research issues of validity, or trustworthiness, arise around the conflation between method and interpretation. For the current study, the trustworthiness of the data is derived from the focus group methodology employed by the *SSBC Evaluation 2017 Project* research team. Creswell (2014) states that the different data sources can then be triangulated, adding to the credibility of the analysis. Therefore, data were gathered from audio recordings and researcher notes as well. Member checking was also done during the focus groups through explicit checks by the discussion facilitator. This process lends increased trustworthiness to the data as participants were able to confirm the accuracy of statements. Employing secondary data analysis allowed data from a larger number of participants, which may be hypothesized of being higher quality since it is representative of the population.

While addressing validity of this study, I also drew from the rich data of detailed verbatim transcripts, identifying any discrepant and contradictory data throughout the analysis. I allowed for codes that were not answers to the research questions be heard, even though they were not further identified. The possible differing experiences and opinions of participants were acknowledged, meaning that the focus was not only on the data that fitted nicely together. Exploring conflict enhances the credibility of a qualitative study (Creswell, 2014). The trustworthiness of the analysis can be demonstrated through a clearly articulated and referenced analysis strategy and evidence that enough data exists to support the conclusions (Williams &

Morrow, 2009). Data adequacy is often framed in terms of theoretical saturation, and as mentioned previously, evidence of this can be seen within the study. The three major themes and sub-themes contain data from all focus groups conducted.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research. The SSBC program sites were not randomly selected. Early learning leads selected sites for the research team to interview, potentially biasing results (i.e. selected sites may represent the programs with the best practices). The sample size of 35 participants and characteristics make large scale generalization difficult. However, generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research. Also the sample is likely skewed to participants who like the program and perceive it as being beneficial for their family, given their willingness to participate. However, even if the respondents did provide artificially high satisfaction rating, my findings help clarify some of nuances behind these satisfaction ratings. Additionally, this research was not intended to measure the quality of the programs, but rather how participants perceive the programs.

I believe that the sample was also not representative of the community population, with those with higher education, often English speaking, and more confident over-represented. Every effort was made by the research team to encourage a diverse group of participants, but as noted it is possible that certain populations from the program are under-represented. Families may have been intimidated by the focus group process even though they were offered translation services. The socioeconomic characteristics of the sample were reflective of the community. However, reported results should be treated with caution as 23% of respondents were not the parents of the children who may not have had accurate information about the income.

The lack of transferability of findings is a limitation often linked to the concept of limited generalizability. This study examined the experiences of school-based FRP participating parents within British Columbia's context; therefore, findings cannot be generalized to other parent experiences in other provinces. Caution must be exercised when using the conclusions drawn in this study to inform policy and practice in other programs. The voices of these participants and recommendations can act as a resource for other school-based FRPs; however, these stories are intricately bound up with the specific context of the communities of British Columbia.

As previously mentioned, there are authors who have concerns about secondary analysis (Hammersley, 2010). One area of concern is that qualitative data analysis is 'normally' evaluated by reference to the context in which the data was originally produced and therefore criticize secondary analysis. They suggest that only through a personal involvement in data production, and the reflexive relationship between researcher and researched, can a researcher grasp the relevant context that is required to interpret interview transcripts. The research was conducted as an additional analysis of four SSBC program sites within a larger study of ten SSBC programs which can also result in certain limitations. I, the researcher was not present for data collection and needed to use alternative means to establish context for the research. Hammersley (2010) argues that if all that is available to the researcher are the transcribed transcripts, then what the participant means may be lost. However, within this study this was less of concern as audio recordings of the primary data, along with field notes were made available to me, the secondary analyst. It is important to note that multiple ways of establishing this context was employed, but there is a chance that additional data from the focus groups, such as body language, would have added to the analysis.

An additional limitation of the study was the fact that the data was also not collected with the purpose of identifying program characteristics that are fundamental for successful outcomes. As such, participants were not specifically asked to connect familial outcomes to program characteristics, even though they shared many aspects of the program that was working well, as well areas that needed to be improved. Future research designed specifically to identify program characteristics from the perspective of school-based FRP parents may lead to different conclusions.

Future research

The families represented a wide range of income and parental education level, however, generally, these families represented the middle to high range of the spectrum for both of these factors. Further investigation is needed to determine if the results of this study may be generalized to low-income families. Additionally, continuing on an ecological model, future research should incorporate an examination of community outcomes into the research study as well. Research initiatives designed to directly address high-quality program characteristics of school-based FRPs would add greatly to the literature on early childhood programs. In solely targeting school-based program characteristics, this research could ask specific questions about the program aspects and the associated outcome. In-depth case studies of each site might also identify innovative and successful models for school-based FRPs. Comparative research involving participants from school-based and community-based FRPs would allow for further discovery of similarities and differences.

Future research should track the experiences of families as Ontario's early learning strategy unfolds. In particular, families accessing the school-based child and family centers compared with the experiences of families accessing standalone FRPs. As discussed FRPs have

the potential to change a family's future. Research on FRPs is relevant to policy makers and practitioners who seek to promote positive development and learning of families. There must also be commitment to researching the longitudinal effects of FRPs in Canada. Investment in FRPs will only continue if there is evidence for them. FRPs have the potential to positively influence short-term and long-term familial outcomes by enhancing strengths, building capacities and promoting healthy development (Smythe, 2004).

Conclusion

Successful familial outcomes from participation in school-based FRPs are influenced by a complex interplay of factors related to accessibility and pedagogical characteristics. Accessibility stands out as fundamentally important consideration in school-based programs; however, it is a complex and multi-faceted concept, and involves more than programs being located in schools. Outcomes also appear to be connected to the design of programs and appropriateness of services, and this is as important as accessibility. Threaded through all characteristics is an awareness that personal relationships have a substantial influence on familial outcomes. Balanced alongside these findings is the observation that many of the themes from this specific data set matched the findings of HELP's (2007, 2008) evaluations of SSBC programs. This research study adds to literature an understanding of parents' perceptions of FRPs, specifically an understanding of their own needs with regard to the specific characteristics of the program. Although these findings are specific to the families and communities of this project, considered together with the literature, they support the need for FRPs with all of recommendations embedded in its characteristics and a broader understanding of what it means to have programs that produce successful familial outcomes.

Early childhood programs are widely accepted as an intervention that is effective at improving outcomes for families and their young children (Britto et al., 2011; Darling, 2007; Irwin, Siddiqi & Hertzman, 2007; Liu, 2015; Phair, 2016). Investment in improved familial well-being through investment in FRPs is a reasonable goal and it is recommended that be embraced by politicians and policy makers. British Columbia has already made this investment, now its Ontario's turn. British Columbia has already made this investment, now its Ontario's turn. To reiterate some of the significant findings that emerged from the perspectives of participants in an FRP program that has the possibility for pedagogical implications for Ontario's child and family centers are: providing programming throughout the calendar year, providing families with a space to engage with their children, adequate funding for a variety of resources, involving higher number of families in the programs, programs being staffed by professional early childhood educators, staff being provided with ongoing leadership and professional development opportunities, and the government annually reviewing staff pay scale, benefits and work environments. Specific to service integration it is recommended that child and family centers be integrated with daily family life and be easily accessible by families within all communities, consulting with schools and service providers prior to designating program sites in order to identify the best location for families, and creating an effective center design with consideration in the assignment of space and facilities. As mentioned, the findings of this study suggest ways that policy makers and practitioners can enhance program engagement. These are important considerations if programs are to meet the needs and interests of the families they serve. Implementation of recommendations contained in this study may strengthen the effectiveness of FRPs and further support families.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Recruitment flyer



We want to hear from you!

We are hosting a group discussion about StrongStart BC. We want to hear from families who have used the program

When? Insert date and time

Where? Insert location

Who? Parents / Guardians / Caregivers

You will receive a complimentary children's book.

We will meet as a group for 45 minutes.

Child care will be
provided Lunch will be
served

To participate please contact: emisakbari@gmail.com.

Please register in advance to help us plan food and child care.

Appendix B. Focus group questions

Key Informant / Focus Group Questions

Thank you for your interest in participating in this interview/focus group.

The Ministry of Education is working with a team of researchers from the University of Toronto to evaluate the effectiveness of the StrongStart BC Early Learning centres based on the program's goals and policies.

The study will support the long term planning of StrongStart BC by investigating the program's impact on young children's development and its impact on parents, caregivers, educators, administrators and the community.

All information is collected under the authority of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPPA) Section 26(c). All information collected in this survey will be kept strictly confidential.

Participants, children, and schools will not be identified individually. Your answers are only seen by the researchers and are not shared with the StrongStart BC program, the school, or the Ministry of Education.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may skip questions or stop answering questions at any time. You may cancel your participation at any time and your answers will not be saved or submitted. You may withdraw your participation at any time by contacting the researcher named below.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Kerry McCuaig at kerry.mccuaig@utoronto.ca. If you wish to speak to someone not connected to this study please contact: Joanne Murrell, Ministry of Education at Joanne.Murrell@gov.bc.ca

Sincerely,

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StrongStart BC Early Learning provides rich learning environments designed for early learning development – language, physical, cognitive, social and emotional. The overall learning experience is shared as parents and caregivers attend with their children, and are encouraged to get involved in activities such as telling stories, playing games and serving healthy snacks. Parents/caregivers learn ways to support their children's learning, get information about community programs and services and make valuable connections with others attending the program - From StrongStart BC mandate statement

Your signature indicates that you understand the terms of this study and have agreed to participate.

Name: Please print: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Parent/caregiver questions

1. How did you hear about the StrongStart BC program?
2. How frequently do you attend with your child? Would you like to attend more often?
3. What makes it possible for you to attend? (Hours? Location?) What keeps you from attending?
4. What are your child's favourite activities?
5. Please describe any changes you have seen in your child's development— socially, emotionally, language-related, physically or others.
6. What is the most important skill your child has learned?
7. Has attending the program changed your parenting? How?
8. Has your view of the school changed as a result of participating in StrongStart BC? If so, how?
9. What is working well in the program?
10. What kind of suggestions do you have to improve the program?
11. Do you and your family feel welcomed in the program?
12. Do you see your culture/language reflected in the program?

Appendix C. Consent form

StrongStart BC Parent/Caregiver Focus Group

You are being asked to take part in a focus group to gather feedback from families that have used the StrongStart BC at [INSERT SCHOOL]. The information from families will be collected in a report for this centre and a larger evaluation about StrongStart BC across the province.

Your participation is voluntary and it will take about 45 minutes. You will receive a children's book to thank you for your time.

All the information discussed during the group will be kept confidential. Answers will not be connected with any names in any reports or presentations. The focus group leader will audio-record the focus group for accuracy. No names will be used in any transcripts. The responses provided will be reported all together, and although individual responses may be used as quotations, no one will be personally identified.

If you agree to take part please provide your name, signature and date, below.

Your Full Name: _____

Signature: _____

Today's Date: _____

Appendix D. Demographic information form

Please tell us about your child/children who are currently enrolled with the StrongStart BC centre.

	Age
Child 1	
Child 2	
Child 3	
Child 4	
Child 5	

1. Are you the children's?

- Mother
- Father
- Older sibling
- Grandparent
- Nanny/Caregiver
- Other

2. What is your postal code?

3. How long have you lived in your neighbourhood?

- >6 months
- 6 months – 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 3-5 years
- More than 5 years

4. All families are different and we would like to know about yours.

Please tell us about the home where you live all or most of the time, and who lives there with you

- Couple with child/children
- Single parent with child/children
- Extended family (with parents, children, grandparents, other relatives, friends)
- Grandparents (with child/children)
- Other _____

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Have not completed formal schooling
- Completed secondary/high school
- Completed community college or technical college
- Completed undergraduate university degree
- Completed graduate/advanced university degree
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

6. What is your current household income before taxes from all sources?

- Less than 40,000 per year
- 40,000 to 60,000 per year
- 60,000 to 80,000 per year
- 80,000 to 100,000 per year
- 100,000 to 150,000 per year
- More than 150,000 per year
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. If you have any questions about this survey or about the evaluation please contact Kerry McCuaig (Kerry.mccuaig@utoronto.ca) with the evaluation team.