



Better beginnings: Making a difference through long-term participatory research engagement



Edith Cowan University

In 2005, Professor Caroline Barratt-Pugh met with Sue North and Nola Allen, two librarians from the State Library of WA (SLWA) who outlined an extraordinary proposal: to pilot a universal family literacy program for families with a new baby.

Aimed at addressing national literacy concerns by supporting parents/carers to develop their children's early language and literacy skills and foster a love of

reading, this was the beginning of a 16-year research partnership between Edith Cowan University (ECU) and SLWA, funded via a tri-partite alliance between the Government of Western Australia (including Royalties for Regions), Western Australian local governments and Rio Tinto. This partnership led to the development of a suite of *Better Beginnings* family literacy programs, culminating in 2021 with the SMS text-based literacy program *Kindytxt*.

The multi-faceted nature of research engagement

The success of *Better Beginnings* evolved through ongoing research partnerships between ECU academics

and SLWA, education, health, and other public services who cooperated in delivering the programs to families. We used a participatory model of research into the delivery, content and outcomes of *Better Beginnings* ensuring all stakeholders were involved in the design, implementation and recommendations of the evaluation. We were particularly mindful of the importance of using culturally responsive research approaches to ensure that Indigenous ways of being, doing and knowing were included. Our collaborative research led to four new state-wide, high impact and context-specific *Better Beginnings* programs across diverse communities. As the

COVID pandemic emerged, we built on the long-term and highly productive nature of these partnerships to develop and trial *Kindytxt*, receiving further funding from national and local philanthropic organisations, delivered and jointly evaluated by librarians and educators through *Better Beginnings*.

Outcomes of research engagement

Outcomes include: providing an evidence-base that sustains public/private sector funding and to date has enabled *Better Beginnings* reading packs to be delivered to more than 940,000 families with pre-school children across WA; creating innovative inter-sector partnerships between public libraries, schools, health services and community organisations to deliver and evaluate *Better Beginnings*; and finally, more than 800 parents/carers have registered for and received *Kindytxt*, thus extending their access to literacy resources and practices, and linking them to their children's kindergarten educators and local librarians. Overall, our research suggests that, in conjunction with other initiatives, the *Better Beginnings* programs have supported early literacy and contributed to the strengthening of family relationships, school-home transitions, early learning and policy decisions.

Learning from research engagement

We have learnt the importance of:

- » **Partnerships** between cross-sector policy makers, practitioners, and researchers, as well as funding, governance, and leadership bodies to facilitate programs that are responsive to community needs, sustainable and underpinned by participatory models of evaluation.
- » **Recognition** of the multidimensional nature and complexity of partnership research requiring the ability to accommodate multiple perspectives and recognise differing agendas and constraints.
- » **Time** to get to know partners and their contexts, and involving and informing and participants in each stage to create mutual respect and trust between program stakeholders and researchers.
- » **Outcomes based research to** inform policy and practice in ways that promote equity and justice for the communities we serve.



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