

Little Learners (LL) program

2023 Summary Report - Terms 1 & 2



External Report – September 2023

Introduction

Established in 2020 with the aim of reducing barriers to participation in early education and for improving the development and learning of Greater Shepparton's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children, the Little Learners program¹ provides bilingual support to refugee and asylum-seeking children (and their families) to participate in pre-kindergarten education. The program was developed in response to the high rates of developmentally vulnerable kindergarten children in Greater Shepparton, many from CALD backgrounds, and a gap in bilingual support services to assist CALD families to access and engage in early education. The Greater Shepparton Foundation's focus on early education is in line with the Victorian Department of Education and Training's [Shepparton Education Plan 2021](#)¹.

This report provides an account of CALD children and their parents'/carers' engagement in Terms 1 and 2 of the 2023 Little Learners third pilot year program. The report follows on from the 2022 End of Year report which used a pre-post methodology to track participant outcomes across the course of the year², and the 2021 End of Year report which focused on the program's implementation and immediate outcomes³. This is the last report in a series of three 'standalone' reports highlighting the program's outcomes and the facilitators and challenges encountered in piloting the program.

Overview

The benefits of early childhood education are well [documented](#) with research showing increases in children's cognitive, emotional and social development, along with long-term academic outcomes^{4,5}. In 2020 41% of four-year-old children participating in Greater Shepparton kindergarten programs were developmentally vulnerable due to family, economic, social and community factors. Thirty-one percent of these children were from CALD backgrounds⁶. Furthermore, 3% of children commencing school in Greater Shepparton in 2021 were not proficient in English⁷.

In addition to language barriers, refugee and asylum-seeker children often experience significant displacement and trauma, increasing vulnerability and impeding cognitive and psychosocial development⁸⁻¹⁰. Challenges associated with acculturation and the lack of available resources (e.g., bilingual support) further undermine families' (and by association children's) confidence and coping in their country of settlement¹¹. In addition to supporting and promoting children's learning and school readiness, early education services provide opportunities for child/family socialisation and knowledge of and access to preventive services¹². Building the trust and rapport of CALD families and the provision of bilingual interpreters is vital to the successful engagement of CALD children in early education and related services¹³. Addressing barriers such as awareness of pre-kindergarten program services through providing information in main community languages and working with local community services supporting CALD families, trained bilingual workers can significantly influence CALD families access, engagement, and inclusion in kindergarten services¹⁴.

In recognition of the importance of early education, especially for vulnerable children, the Victorian government has prioritised a range of early education initiatives. The Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) program, in which the Little Learners program was originally embedded, provides two years of up to 15 hours per week of free or low-cost kindergarten to vulnerable children to reduce the effects of disadvantage on their long-term outcomes. Funding for the program was first made available in 2008 for eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and in 2009 for children known to or referred from Child Protection. In 2021 the program was extended to eligible refugee and asylum-seeking children¹⁵. In 2022 children across Victoria could access at least five hours per week of a funded pre-kindergarten education and in 2023 *Free Kinder* became available for all 3- (5 hours per week) and 4-year-old (15 hours per week) Victorian children¹⁶.

¹ The program's original name was: Little Learners - Early Start Kinder (ESK). In 2020, in response to a change in delivery modality during COVID-19, the program was informally referred to as 'Kinder in a Bag'.

The Little Learners Program

The Little Learners program is one of several Greater Shepparton placed-based early education initiatives aimed at improving developmental outcomes for vulnerable local children. The defining feature of the program is its provision of bilingual support workers to assist CALD children's (and their parents'/carers') engagement in pre-kindergarten education. The bilingual support workers serve as a critical bridge to improving communication between the child and the educators; the educators and the families; and between non-English speaking and English-speaking children. An additional intended outcome of these relationships is to improve parents'/carers' knowledge of the education system, making for an easier transition to school.

The program's objectives include:

1. providing bilingual support services to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families to enhance participation in early education
2. supporting CALD parents/carers to feel more confident and culturally safe to engage in early education
3. increasing the number of CALD children enrolling in 3-year-old kindergarten in targeted areas
4. improving the well-being, including the mental health and community connectivity, of participating CALD children and their parents/carers
5. enhancing teachers and education support staff cultural awareness and integration and development of CALD students in kindergarten
6. supporting the bilingual support team to work effectively in an education and kindergarten environment, and
7. promoting the importance of bilingualism in early education.

In 2020, in response to state-wide and Greater Shepparton COVID-19 lockdowns and restricted access to kindergartens, the Little Learners program was reconceptualised to accommodate at home learning through the provision of education resources (e.g., educational toys, games, videos) and bilingual support. In 2021, with the resumption of face-to-face kindergarten education, 19 CALD children (and their parent/carers) across two south Shepparton kindergartens accessed 5 hours of pre-kinder bilingual support per week. A review of the 2021 program highlighted that while financial support to access early education was appreciated by families it was the support in navigating the complexities of the education systems and support with their child engaging in the program that was considered most beneficial. Key among the feedback received was the challenges families faced in enrolling children into kindergarten. In 2022 with the support of the Greater Shepparton Council, the bilingual support workers and participating kindergartens, CALD specific enrolment sessions were introduced, streamlining enrolment processes and reducing family distress and disengagement from the program. Additionally, the Little Learners program was extended to three kindergartens.

Program Partners: Uniting (Victoria, Tasmania) Ltd, Greater Shepparton City Council's Best Start Early Learning Years Partnership, and Greater Shepparton Foundation.

Program Funders: Ross Trust, Besen Family Foundation, and the Greater Shepparton Foundation

Purpose and Significance

This report summarises the findings from a review of the 2023 Terms 1 and 2 Little Learners program engagement data. The review focuses on the program's ongoing feasibility and impact. A mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative (e.g., council records, surveys) and qualitative data (e.g., interviews, Most Significant Change stories) was used to inform the findings of this review. Few studies have explored the impact of bilingual workers in assisting refugee and asylum-seeking children's engagement in early education and impact on transition to school. The findings from this study provide insight into the facilitators and barriers of providing pre-school bilingual support enabling similar kindergarten centres to consider the possibility of adopting a comparable program.

Data Collection

The review of the 2023 (Terms 1 and 2) Little Learners program comprised of three interlinked components:

1. kindergarten enrolment, attendance and retention records
2. a parent retrospective post-then-pre survey of children's well-being and parents' capacity and confidence to engage with early education, and
3. Most Significant Change stories.

Findings

1. Enrolment and Attendance Records

In Term 1 and 2 of 2023, 33 sessions, equating to 165 hours of bilingual support across two kindergartens was provided to the 21 children enrolled in the Little Learners program and their parents/carers. The number of CALD children enrolled in three-year-old kindergarten across the participating education centres has increased significantly since 2018. Contributing factors include the introduction of free and fee-reduced three-year-old kindergarten for children from families with complex needs as well as the provision of bilingual support workers via the Little Learners program. Concentrated enrolments for Colliver and Leslie Gribble kindergartens saw the number of participating 3-year-old Little Learners supported kindergartens in 2023 return to two with Arthur Mawson running the four-year old program in which CALD children are enrolled.

Table 1. Number of CALD 3-year-old children enrolled by year across participating kindergartens

	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
Arthur Mawson Children's Centre	-	6	-	-	9	8
Colliver Road Kindergarten	8	8	7	5	3	2
Leslie Gribble Children's Centre	13	9	12	-	-	-
Total	21	23	19	5	11	10

Ethical requirements protecting the anonymity of small cohorts prohibits the publication of the total number of CALD children eligible to participate in the 2023 Little Learner program in Shepparton South. Data provided by partner organisations however suggests the number of CALD children enrolled in the participating kindergartens represents a substantial proportion of the cohort of Shepparton South three-year-old CALD children.

As with previous years, variability in attendance and retention was evident across the two terms. Of the 21 children enrolled in Term 1, 18 participated in the program across both terms (i.e., three children did not participate in the program in Term 2).

The overall attendance rate across both terms for active participants was 71% (Colliver 61%; Leslie Gribble 77%). As with previous years there was notable decline in attendance rates for Term 2 2023 which saw the average attendance rate for Term 1 (74%) decline to 67%, the same percentage as for Term 2 in 2022. An upsurge in COVID cases and the flu across Greater Shepparton and parents'/careers' fear of children contracting related illnesses were the primary reasons for the lower-than-average attendance.

While attendance data can be a useful metric for measuring a program's success, it has proven unreliable with the impact of natural disasters (e.g., COVID-19 and the Greater Shepparton 2022 floods) and changing life circumstances (e.g., relocation, overseas travel following the illness/death of a loved one).

2. Parent Surveys

Following the resignation of two Uniting staff who oversaw the collection of the Little Learners program data (including support with translation) and an organisational restructure, collection of Term 1 survey data did not occur. Rather, the 2022 survey was modified to include a retrospective post-pre methodology whereby respondents at a single time point (during an interview in the Term 2 school holidays) rated how they currently felt on items of interest to this report with how they felt at the start of the year. Only items which were likely to demonstrate change across the two terms utilised this methodology.

The online form service, Snapforms, was used to collate the data with a survey weblink shared via email. Bilingual support workers were available to address questions requiring clarification and to support data collection. Seventeen parents of children enrolled at the start of the year provided feedback representing an 81% participation rate.

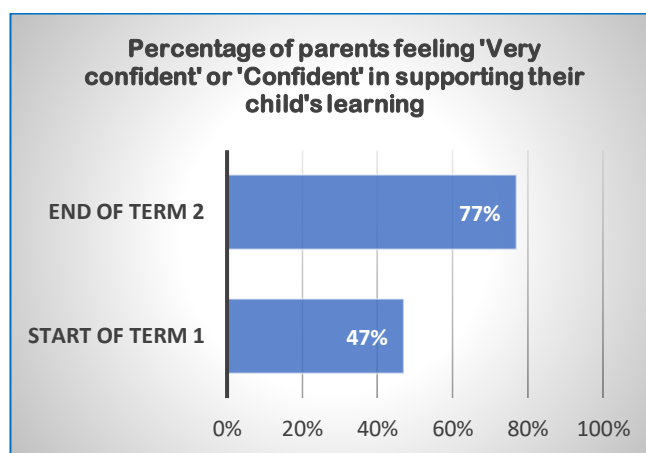
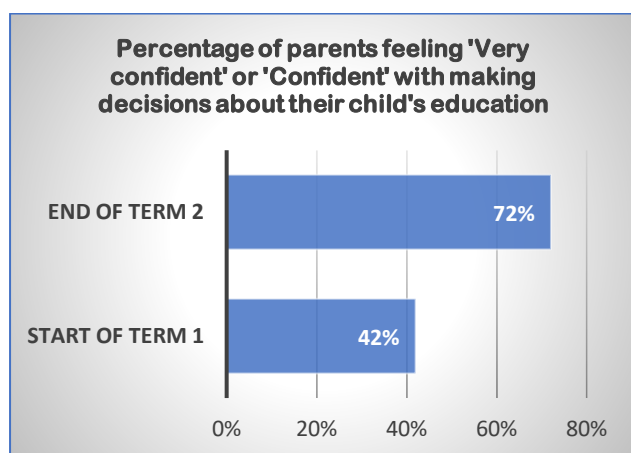
2.1.1 Importance of Bilingual Support Workers

All respondents identified bilingual support as being 'Important' or 'Very important' for:

- their decision to enrol their child at the chosen kindergarten
- assisting with their child's kindergarten enrolment and orientation process
- the parent's interactions at kindergarten
- the child's development, and for
- their child's well-being and safety.

2.1.2 Parent and Child Confidence

Parents' confidence (i.e., feeling 'Confident' or 'Very confident') with supporting their child's education increased significantly over the course of the two terms with parents reporting a 30% increase in their confidence to make decisions about their child's education along with a 30% increase in confidence to support their child's learning.



Additionally, parents' level of comfort in speaking with teachers about their child's development increased from 42% ('Comfortable', 'Very comfortable') to 53% by the end of the second term.

When asked if 'Since the start of the year, with the support of a bilingual worker, has your child's confidence in interacting with their teacher improved?' all respondents replied with the highest rating 'Yes, a lot'. Similarly, the rating 'Yes, a lot' was provided by all respondents to the question 'Since the start of the year, with the support of a bilingual worker, has your child's confidence in interacting with other children improved?'

2.2 Confidence in understanding English

Most respondents indicated that they were either ‘Not at all confident’ (n=3, 18%) or ‘Somewhat confident’ (n=10, 59%) in understanding English.

The potential for parents’ English language proficiency and the kindergarten the child was enrolled in influencing parents’/carers’ survey responses was reviewed. No notable difference was recorded for responses grouped by kindergarten. Notable differences however were evident between parents/carers who reported being ‘Very confident’ or ‘Confident’ in understanding English (23%) and those who were less confident (77%). Parents with limited self-reported English proficiency reported lower levels of confidence in their ability to make decisions about their child’s education, in supporting their child’s learning, and comfort in speaking to teachers about their child’s development. Additionally, parents who reported being less proficient in English were more likely to rate the importance of bilingual support with the kindergarten enrolment and orientation processes, their interactions at kindergarten, and for their child’s development, well-being and safety. It should be noted that the number of participants in this analysis was small and reflects a trend rather than statistical difference.

2.3 Comparison with 2021 and 2022 findings

Three questions tracking changes in parent/child outcomes from the 2021 and 2022 parent survey were included in the design of the 2023 parent survey enabling a comparison of end of Term 2 data with end of year data for the previous two parent cohorts (Tables 2-4). Baseline data for parents’ level of confidence in their ability to make decisions about their child’s education, comfort in speaking with teachers about their child’s development, and confidence in supporting their child’s learning was lower with the 2023 cohort than in 2022. This in part may be accounted for by the significantly lower baseline levels of parents’ confidence (‘Very confident’ / ‘Confident’) in understanding English in 2023 (23%) compared with the 2021 (42%) and 2022 (50%) cohorts.

Table 2. Percentage comparison of the 2021, 2022, and 2023 parent cohorts who reported feeling ‘very confident’/‘confident’ in making decisions about their child’s education at Time 1 and Time 2

	2023 (Terms 1 & 2)	2022 (Start/End of year)	2021 (End of year only)
Parents’ confidence in making decisions about their child’s education	42%	63%	-
	72%	94%	91%
	Difference: 30%	Difference: 31%	Difference: N/A

Table 3. Percentage comparison of the 2021, 2022, and 2023 parent cohorts who reported feeling ‘very comfortable’/‘comfortable’ in speaking with teachers about their child’s development at Time 1 and Time 2

	2023 (Terms 1 & 2)	2022 (Start/End of year)	2021 (End of year only)
Parents’ comfort in speaking with teachers about their child’s development	44%	50%	-
	53%	81%	73%
	Difference:11%	Difference: 31%	Difference: N/A

Table 4. Percentage comparison of the 2021, 2022, and 2023 parent cohorts who reported feeling ‘very confident’/‘confident’ with supporting their child’s learning at Time 1 and Time 2

	2023 (Terms 1 & 2)	2022 (Start/End of year)	2021 (End of year only)
Parents’ confidence with supporting their child’s learning	47%	63%	-
	77%	83%	-
	Difference: 30%	Difference: 20%	-

While the 2023 cohort is yet to match 2021 and 2022 percentage outcome changes across these areas of interest, early indications, based on the positive changes reported from Term 1 to Term 2, suggest this will likely occur. Interestingly, parent’s confidence in supporting their child’s learning is close to matching that reported at the end of 2022, suggesting parents’ confidence in this area

develops more quickly than parents' confidence in communicating with teachers about their child's development.

2.4 Qualitative responses

The survey included two open-ended questions exploring the ways in which support from bilingual workers may have improved communications and strengthened parent/carer relationships at kindergarten, as well as an opportunity to provide additional feedback/comments.

2.4.1 *The ways in which bilingual workers' support improved communications and strengthened parents' relationships at kindergarten* varied. The most frequently reported responses highlighted support received with language translation and communication, increased comfort with and confidence in communicating with educators, decreased stress, and improved outcomes for their child:

'...I feel like without her support I couldn't know about 3 years old kinder, if it exist, also even though she informed me about it, I didn't know how to start to enrol my child.'

'Bilingual worker support me a lot at kinder to improve with filling the forms, showing the digital sign-in, enrolment at kinder, communicating with teacher and help my child to make friends there...'

'Through the bilingual worker I feel confident to discuss anything about my child's development. When the bilingual worker is not there, I just leave my child and I ignore the kinder teacher, what they want to say, because I do not understand their conversation.'

'I have noticed a big improvement in my child's development, which is so important.'

'When the bilingual worker is there, I am so relaxed.'

Two respondents used the opportunity to request an increase in bilingual support services.

2.4.2 *Additional comments:* Parents/careers were given an opportunity to provide additional comments. Comments mostly reiterated parents' appreciation and acknowledgment of the program and the bilingual workers, including requests made for additional hours of bilingual support.

'Thanks to all the bilingual workers supporting parents and children.'

'More hours the bilingual worker at kinder for 3 years old because 3 years old need more support in their first language.'

One parent also used the opportunity to highlight CALD parents' concerns with the limited places available at kindergartens engaging the services of bilingual workers:

'In the community many people are confident to enrol their children at those kinder they have bilingual support but unfortunately less spots there and many parents are worried about the spot. As a parent, I request more bilingual worker to other kinders as well.'

3. Most Significant Stories

Ten stories of parents' and bilingual support workers' experience of the Little Learners program were collected in Terms 1 and 2. Six stories were selected for review by a Most Significant Change panel. The stories highlighted the enablers, barriers, and motivation for program enrolment, uptake, and engagement in the 2023 Little Learners program. Some of the key insights are summarised as follows:

3.1 Did bilingual support increase CALD parents' confidence in interacting with teachers and kindergarten processes?

One of the successful elements of bilingual support has been the improvement in CALD parents' understanding of the value of early education and that services in addition to kindergarten exist to support their child's education and well-being.

'Without [Bilingual Support Worker] I would not be able to understand some of the needs that my daughter needs and support available. Some of the examples are, filling out the forms, interpreting, understanding about the kinder rules, and most importantly information about vaccinations and other medical needs that my daughter needs.'
[Parent, Story 5]

The stories also highlighted several examples of increased rapport and trust between parents and educators, along with reduced parental stress, attributed to support provided by bilingual workers.

'My child speaks English. It is her primary communication language, so she doesn't find it as difficult as I do to communicate with the teachers. Because of the language barrier, I always use the bilingual support worker to help me. Having bilingual support makes the communication much more effective...I find most things easy now for kinder. I trust the educators. I think they know what is best for our children's education.' [Parent, Story 2]

'As you know English language is not my first language and it is very challenging for me to communicate with educators. However, with the help of the bilingual worker, I now understand some of the rules and expectations kinder has...Kinder program not only helps my daughter but also it makes me very happy and relieved to see my daughter enjoy her childhood and knowing that she going to have a great time there and looked after there – is the best feeling for me.' [Parent, Story 3]

'I would have to bring someone else from my family to help me – my brother or uncle – because I can't communicate all that I need to by myself. It's very challenging and stressful for me to get my message across without support. With [Bilingual Support Worker] there, I can go to the kinder without stress or worry because she will help me to understand, and I can tell her what I need to say, and she will pass it to the kinder accurately.' [Parent, Story 1]

'I also get support from [Bilingual Support Worker] for example when there are no kinder due to public holiday's or something, [Bilingual Support Worker] communicates to me in my language, so I understand better.' [Parent, Story 4]

3.2 Did bilingual support improve CALD children's well-being including mental health and community connectivity?

As children participating in the Little Learner program are unable to provide direct feedback due to age and linguistic challenges, excerpts from the parent/carer and educator MSC stories are used to provide insight into the role of bilingual support in improving CALD children's well-being and social connectiveness:

'Last week, my daughter didn't want to go to kinder and she didn't want to stay when I took her. She was crying and upset. I didn't know what to do to help her, but, when she saw [Bilingual Support Worker] she changed instantly. [Bilingual Support Worker] encouraged her in her own language, told her that she would be there to play with her and talk to her. She was immediately happier and settled and [Bilingual Support Worker] said she played happily for the rest of the day.' [Parent, Story 1]

'I have noticed a lot of changes since my daughter started kinder. Prior to that, my daughter only spoke in her first language but now she speaks English very clearly - as well as her first language. My daughter was isolated and did not know the concept of sharing and playing with other children and so on. After attending 3-year-old kinder, she started speaking English very well, became social and happy...she is now outspoken, able to express her feelings in English, no longer withdrawn. Kinder helped her to be self-confident.' [Parent, Story 3]

'My daughter has made a lot of progress in so many ways. She has got many friends in kinder, socializes, participating in different activities. She never used to talk in English prior going to kinder but now she speaks English at home and kinder. Now she talks about her days to me and her siblings which is beautiful. It makes me very happy to hear my daughter communicating in English language.' [Parent, Story 4]

'For me the most significant change would be being independent. My daughter lacked on self-confidence, socialising, play with others, sharing, always wanted me to be around and do things for her. However, once she started kinder, she has improved a lot and has developed confidence to do things on her own. She enjoys her independence and making good choices for herself, being able to communicate in English with teachers and other children.' [Parent, Story 5]

4. Summary

The findings in this brief report have highlighted the importance and value of bilingual workers in supporting CALD children and their families' access to and engagement with early education and health services (e.g., vaccinations). The findings of this report mirror those of the 2021 and 2022 evaluation findings validating the program's benefits while highlighting the enablers and barriers experienced by refugee and asylum-seeker families accessing early years education in Greater Shepparton. The findings provide a foundation for which to continue, grow, and advocate for the uptake of the program in other early education centres with CALD children.

5. Focus for the remainder of 2023

- Continue advocacy efforts to the education sector and key organisations in Greater Shepparton for support and expansion of early education bilingual services for CALD children and families.
- Continue community visibility of the Little Learners program by advocating for program efficacy as a whole-of-partnership approach and through showcasing the program via various media channels and event presentations.
- Continue to support kindergarten leadership in integrating bilingual support as an integral part of kindergarten education.
- Finalise funding contracts and opportunities for the continuation and expansion of the Little Learners program for the remainder of 2023 and beyond, and
- Support the translation of knowledge acquired through the program's data collection, evaluation, and story gathering processes to interested organisations overseeing the program's ongoing continuation.

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Availability of data and materials

In accordance with the Privacy Act 1988 the data sets generated and analysed for this evaluation will not be made publicly available.

Contributions

AZ and LO managed the collection of the 2023 Term 1 and 2 survey data and recruitment of interviewees. Kindergarten attendance data was provided by BW. MSC interviews were conducted by AZ. FB, SN and RK provided bilingual support with the collection of survey data and MSC story translation. AZ facilitated the MSC panel session and LL coordinated accompanying data. The report, including data analysis, was collated by EKD. AM assisted with project coordination and feedback on the report along with KS.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The consent process was managed by Uniting - a Little Learners partner organisation. All interviewees and survey respondents were adults.

Contributors' details

AM, EKD, and KS - Greater Shepparton Foundation; AZ, LO, LL, FB, SN, and RK - Uniting, Victoria and Tasmania; BW - Greater Shepparton City Council.