

## *Let's Count: Success and expansion*

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This symposium reports on recent developments for *Let's Count*, the preschool mathematics program implemented across Australia since 2010 by The Smith Family, a national, independent children's charity helping disadvantaged Australians to get the most out of their education, so they can create better futures for themselves. *Let's Count* is an early mathematics program that has been designed to assist educators in early childhood contexts to work in partnership with parents and other family members to promote positive mathematical experiences for young children (3-5 years). The program aims to foster opportunities for children to engage with the mathematics encountered as part of their everyday lives, talk about it, document it, and explore it in ways that are fun and relevant to them. The success of *Let's Count* has been reported many times at MERGA conferences, including the Beth Southwell Practical Implications Award paper in 2016.

The papers presented in the symposium will build on the success of *Let's Count* by considering a number of recent initiatives in delivery and scaling up of the project in order to make it available to a more extensive set of participants across Australia and internationally. Based on a series of program evaluations, the three papers in the symposium will consider delivery methods beyond the usual face-to-face workshop presentations to early childhood educators and will anticipate future developments as *Let's Count* undergoes a program revision during 2020-2021.

The proposed symposium program is as follows.  
Introduction to *Let's Count* (Bob Perry) – 5 minutes

**Paper 1:** Ann Gervasoni & Anne Roche *Let's Count* in an online environment

**Paper 2:** Amy MacDonald & Paige Lee *Let's Count* in early childhood teacher education

**Paper 3:** Sue Dockett & Bob Perry *Let's Count* and community professionals

Discussant – Wendy Field, Head, Programs and Policy, The Smith Family - 10 minutes

Questions and Discussion

The symposium will be chaired by Bob Perry and there will be ample time for discussion and questions.

# *Let's Count* and community professionals

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The *Let's Count* Community Professional Pilot 2019 took place in six sites across three states (New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia). The aim of the pilot program was to implement the *Let's Count* face-to-face program for the first time with a group of people who work with young children and their families but who are not trained early years educators working within early childhood education and care centres. This paper reports on the evaluation of the pilot program with specific emphasis on expanding the reach of *Let's Count* whilst maintaining its integrity and outcomes.

The authors were commissioned by The Smith Family to undertake an evaluation of the *Let's Count* Community Professional Pilot 2019. The aim of the evaluation was to ascertain the effectiveness of face-to-face implementation of the *Let's Count* program in mixed groups of early years trained, centre-based educators and other community professionals. Data were generated using surveys before and after the training sessions and telephone conversations after each of these sessions. Seventy-nine participants and six facilitators or program coordinators were involved in at least one aspect of the evaluation.

## Background

Since 2010, the *Let's Count* program in mathematics has supported centre-based early childhood educators using a face-to-face professional learning model in geographical sites across Australia consisting of two workshop days with approximately 4-6 weeks between the workshops. In 2019, The Smith Family specifically targeted these community professionals when mixed groups of early childhood educators and such community professionals undertook face-to-face *Let's Count* program sessions together and engaged in the between-sessions requirements of the program in their own workplaces. The *Let's Count* program and its impact on early childhood educators, young children and their families has been well documented (Gervasoni & Perry, 2017; Gervasoni et al., 2016; Perry et al., 2016; Perry & MacDonald, 2015). This paper reports on the evaluation of the *Let's Count* Community Professionals Pilot 2019. The research questions for the evaluation are listed in the Results section of the paper.

## Methodology

The Community Professionals Pilot 2019 was undertaken in six sites across three states (two sites in each of NSW, Queensland and South Australia). The evaluation used multiple methods involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Both authors were present for the first session of each group in order to meet participants and undertake preliminary surveys and background discussion with all participants, *Let's Count* facilitators and Program Coordinators willing to be involved in the evaluation. As well, participants were asked if they would undertake the follow-up activities in the evaluation – two telephone conversations – one between the two program sessions and one approximately three weeks after the second session - and post-Session 2 online surveys. No child data were generated in this evaluation.

The numbers of participants in the Community Professionals Pilot 2019 and the evaluation are provided in Table 1. The community professionals came from many different backgrounds and endeavours including education (other than early childhood); social work; library and information science; business administration; aged care; sports coaching; sociolinguistics; music therapy; and law. There were paid and volunteer workers from libraries, playgroups, HIPPY (Hippy Australia, n.d.) and other community support groups.

Table 1  
*Participation in data generation*

| Participant Type             |                             | Data Generation Approach |             |                |                |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|
| Early Childhood Educator (E) | Community Professional (CP) | Survey 1                 | Survey 2    | Conversation 1 | Conversation 2 |
| 44                           | 35                          | 44 E, 33 CP              | 12 E, 13 CP | 14 E, 11 CP    | 7 E, 7 CP      |

## Results and Discussion

Only a summary of the results can be provided here. This is done by answering each of the research questions, with a particular emphasis on the responses of the community professionals.

### *What were the community professionals' expectations of the program?*

Many of the community professionals who participated in the *Let's Count* Community Professionals Pilot 2019 knew little about what to expect from the program before Session 1. All of the community professionals anticipated that the 'mixed' model would be of benefit to them as they would be learning alongside experienced early childhood educators. Some wondered whether they would be able to 'keep up' with the early childhood educators and some brought long-held reticence about their own abilities both to do mathematics themselves and to facilitate young children's learning of mathematics. There was no indication from the early childhood educators that they experienced any difficulties arising from the presence of the community professionals.

Great networking. Great experience. A big thing was that ideas bounced off each other. (CP)

There were no disadvantages [with the mixed group]. It was great to have different ideas, read about some, and get some ideas not out of long day care such as ways to give different ideas at home. Opportunity to think outside the box and give us new ideas. No problems, only advantages with community professionals group. It opened up my eyes. (E)

It was great to see the different perspectives of the community professionals, especially perspectives on what parents are doing and thinking when the community professionals go to family homes. We can't do that. It was great to see what they're doing – they often don't have a lot of resources, so must use basic things at home. (E)

### *What did the community professionals see as the benefits of engaging with Let's Count to themselves and their organisations?*

Many of the community professionals have not only learned a great deal about facilitating young children's learning of mathematics from their experiences in *Let's Count* but have also used this knowledge in their own contexts. Many of them have different links with the families of the children with whom they interact than early childhood educators typically have, and these strong links have encouraged their use of *Let's Count*. Contexts

such as HIPPIY, playgroups, library-based experiences, music therapy and several volunteering opportunities with children and families who have complex support needs have facilitated interactions around mathematics learning for children and families. Many of the community professionals now see that they can be leaders in their organisations around the establishment of effective practices in mathematics education.

It went really well and was an opportunity for us to grow and expand on what we learnt. It was a great starting point for young people's programs in the library.

*Let's Count* provided opportunities to think about what we could do and what is possible in our environment. It provided space and opportunity to brainstorm and hear about what other places are doing re talking with families about numeracy concepts and to reflect on what we are doing and what we can do as a team.

I will add *Let's Count* to the programs I am already involved in, including neighbourhood networks and refugee and migrant hubs.

### *What do community professionals see as the benefits of engaging with Let's Count to the children and families of their communities?*

Being able to provide children and families who do not access centre-based early childhood education with appropriate, interesting and play-based mathematical experiences was seen as a major benefit of the community professionals' engagement with *Let's Count*. Many of the community professionals who participated in the *Let's Count* Community Professionals Pilot 2019 also enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in group professional development and in the recognition that the group gave them for their own work in the early childhood space.

This is valuable work because the focus is on parent engagement. It is important to influence a number of areas as not all children attend early childhood education centres. *Let's Count* has a place targeting and promoting needs of working with children and families in whatever context.

I liked the diversity of the group, across different learning environments. I enjoyed meeting people and seeing how *Let's Count* really helped across the programs, from very young children to Kindergarten aged 3-5. Learning about how people integrate maths with very young children as well was interesting. It made you think outside the square, more than about your own little environment. You can learn so much from each other. It is important to be aware of other groups and programs in your community.

### *In what ways did the early years trained educators experience the Let's Count program sessions?*

As for the community professionals, early childhood educators participating in the *Let's Count* Community Professionals Pilot 2019 were very satisfied with the 'mixed group' model. They were particularly grateful for the diversity of perspectives which the community professionals brought to the training sessions and for the variety of approaches they adopted in using *Let's Count* in their contexts. Many of the early childhood educators praised the ways in which some community professionals were able to interact with both children and families and wished for the same flexibility in their own settings. Many early childhood educators recognised that the *Let's Count* program was not 'rocket science' and, in some cases, reinforced and extended current practice while others were grateful for the 'reminder' about what was possible.

Different perspectives were an advantage. We are supporting all children, not all of them are at early childhood education centres. A lot of children are at home not attending early childhood education

centres but may go to library, so we can reach more children and families. We all learn from each other and there were some really good ideas. We are here for all children and the whole community.

Did the pilot work? Really well. Some non-educators apologised when presenting, but we thought they brought different perspectives that were very helpful. They made us think about different ways and about how they engage with different contexts, it added a new dimension. It was really good. I would encourage everybody to take the opportunity to do *Let's Count* training.

Librarians do it differently. They have parents there, can share parent information and have games out for parents to try. All groups should be mixed. It is much more beneficial with community professionals than just early childhood educators. All [participants] took something different away from the training.

*Let's Count* is applicable to all working with children and families.

## Conclusion

The 'mixed group' model of the *Let's Count* training program where early childhood educators and community professionals undertake the program together has worked well for all involved. There have been real benefits to early childhood educator participants in that they have seen different ways for interacting with children and families and different ways of facilitating the mathematics development of young children than they would have been exposed to in a more homogenous group of participants. Community professionals have not only learned that mathematics learning can be incorporated into their core work but also that they can do this with minimal disruption to their programs. All participants have indicated that they really valued the opportunities to network with other professionals from across their communities who are also committed to the education and wellbeing of children and families. A number of participants have indicated that they would like to see the community professionals model as the norm in terms of face-to-face *Let's Count* training and this recommendation has been accepted by The Smith Family.

## References

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