

Parent Leadership Training Institute Program Evaluation Report

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Family Inclusion Network
SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND

Parent Leadership Training Institute Program Evaluation Report by Karen Healy, April, 2016.....	1
The Methodology	2
The Participants.....	3
Motivations to Participate in PLTI	6
Characteristics of the Respondents Who Left	7
Findings	8
Community Organising Skills and Activities	8
Community Knowledge and Empowerment	11
Community Level Advocacy	12
Participants' Perceptions of Change	13
Issues and Concerns	15
Similarities and Differences with the US Evaluations.....	16
Conclusions	17

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Parent Leadership Training Institute

Program Evaluation Report by Karen Healy, April, 2017.

The Family Inclusion Network – South East Queensland (FIN SEQ) operating under the auspices of Micah Projects Inc conducted a Parent Leadership training initiative in Brisbane. The pilot operated over a 15 week period between August 28, 2016 and November 30, 2016.

The Parent Leadership Training program is an initiative of the Parent Leadership Training Institute which is based in Connecticut, USA.

“The Parent Leadership Training Institute (hereafter PLTI) enables parents to become leading advocates for children. Parents' opinions are often unheard. They lack advocacy skills, but not the motivation or will to change their children's lives. PLTI teaches parents, who wish to improve the lifelong health, safety and learning of children, how to become practiced change agents for the next generation.”

<http://www.nationalpli.org/>

The PLTI program established in the USA is 20 weeks in length. The pilot offered by FIN was for 15 weeks. The curriculum “offers detailed information on how change occurs in states and neighbourhoods to improve child outcomes.” <http://www.nationalpli.org/>



The Methodology

At the commencement of the program participants were asked to complete a survey (hereafter referred to as the pre-survey) and at the completion of the program, participants were asked to complete a 'post' survey (hereafter referred to as the post-survey). This analysis focuses on a comparison of the pre and post surveys.

Twenty-seven participants completed the pre-survey and twenty-two participants completed the post-survey after the completion of the program. In this first section of this report, we present demographic information about the twenty-seven participants who commenced the program and briefly compare the characteristics of those who left, to those who remained.

The analysis focuses on comparing the responses of participants before and after the completion of the PLTI program. We have excluded from the data analysis the responses of those who did not complete the program. Due to the small non-random data set, our analysis is limited to descriptive statistics and analysis of themes. Information about participants' frequency of community skill use and level of community organising knowledge and skill was collected using Likert scales. At each point where we report on a Likert scale, we indicated how we have weighted the results in our analysis.

The Participants

Twenty-seven participants commenced the PLTI program in August 2016 and twenty two participants completed the program in November of the same year. Five of the participants in the completing cohort identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and six identified as having a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background.

In the initial cohort, the age range was from 20-59 years with the average age being 41 years and median age being 40 years. There were 22 females and 5 males who participated in the program. The relationship status of participants is as follows:

- 4 in domestic partnerships
- 7 are married
- 11 are separated
- 4 are single (never married)
- 1 is widowed.

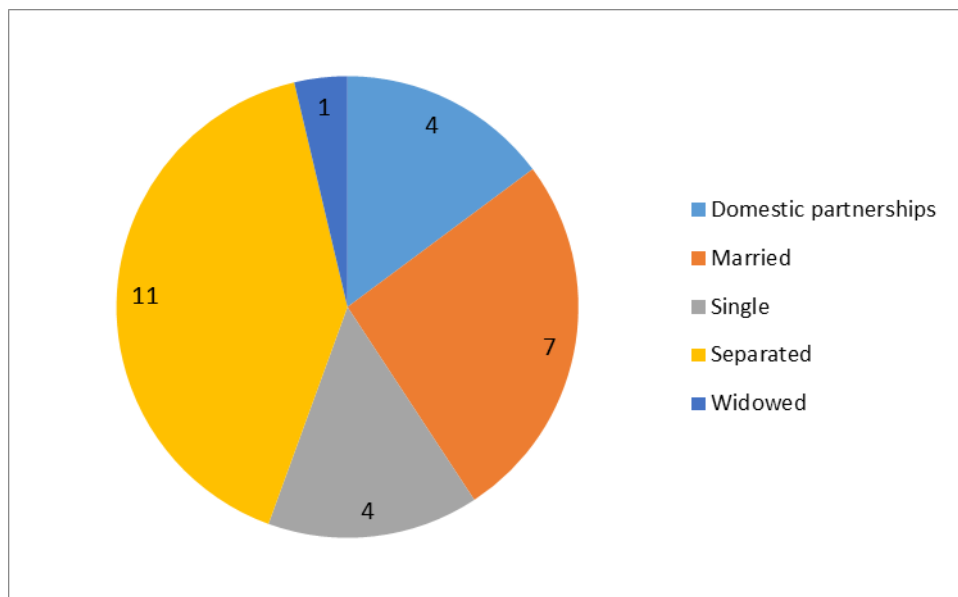


Figure 1: Relationship Status

The most frequently reported relationship status among the participants was separated. Almost half the sample was either married or in domestic partnerships. Five of the twenty-seven participants were single or widowed.

During analysis of the pre and post-surveys it was identified that no data had been collected about participants' children. Twenty-one of the twenty-two participants who has completed the program responded to a follow-up phone call from the PLTI pilot organisers. Twenty of the twenty-one respondents indicated they had children. Of these twenty, the number of children ranged from one child to twelve children. The age ranges of the children varied from one year to 38 years. Of the twenty respondents who indicated they had children, nineteen had children living with them at the time of the PLTI program, though three of these respondents indicated that at least some of the children had left home.

The majority of respondents had learnt of PLTI through "Word of Mouth". Eight participants specified "Word of Mouth" as the main pathway, a further four respondents indicated they had been informed by community leaders and five more participants indicated that they had learnt of the program through various community networks. Seven respondents indicated they had learnt of the program via social media.

Participants were asked about their involvement in the paid workforce and their responses were as follows:

- 8 indicated they did not work outside the home
- 8 indicated they worked full-time in paid employment
- 2 indicated they worked part-time (that is less than 30 hours per week)
- 4 indicated they were unemployed
- 5 indicated a range of "other employment" which included building one's own not-for-profit(1), own business (1), volunteering (1), casual work (2).

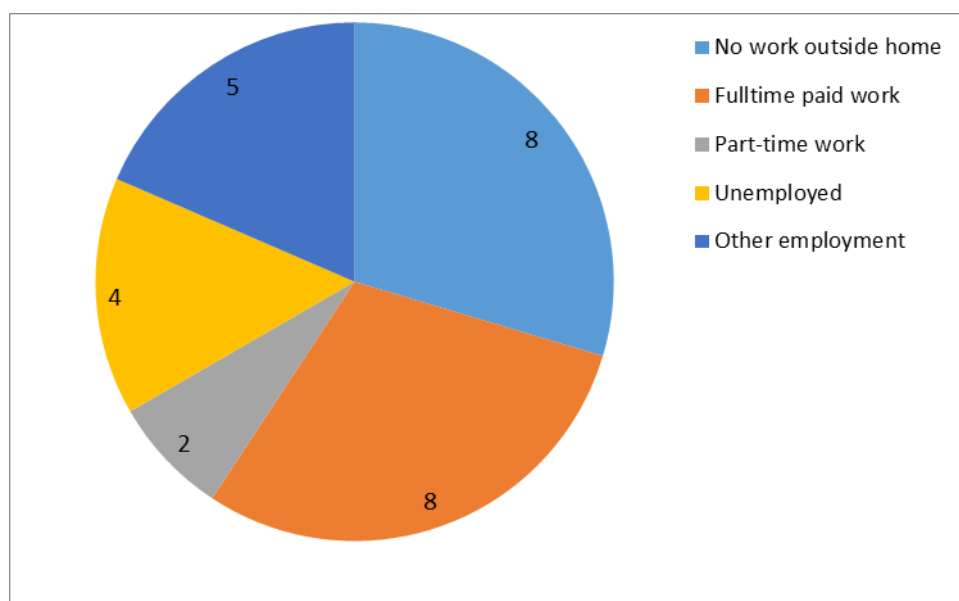


Figure 2: Employment Status of Participants

Figure 2 demonstrates that participants had a variety of employment statuses. The level of full time employment was lower than that reported in the USA cohorts (30% in the Australian sample compared to 46% in the USA cohorts) and a lower level of part-time employment (7.4% in the Australian sample compared to 19% in the USA cohorts).

Participants’ educational qualifications were as follows:

- 4 had completed year 11 or less.
- 4 had completed year 12, that is the Senior High School Certificate.
- 6 had completed level 3 or 4 Vocational Certificates
- 5 had completed a Vocational Diploma or Advanced Diploma
- 4 had completed Bachelor Degrees
- 3 had graduate Diplomas or Certificates
- 1 had a Master’s degree or Doctoral level qualification (Postgraduate Degree).

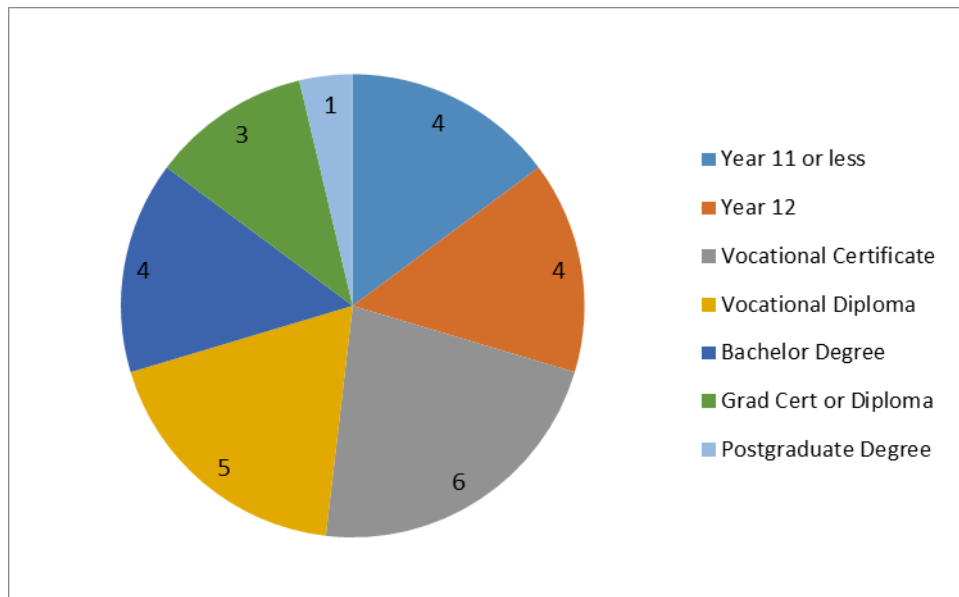


Figure 3: Education Attainment Levels of Participants

Less than \$20000	5
\$20000 to \$39999	9
\$40000 to \$59999	5
\$60000 to \$84999	2
\$85000+	6

Figure 4: Respondents’ household income levels.

In Australia, the average individual income in 2016 was \$79000 approximately (ABS, 2017). We can see that the majority of respondents' household income was below the Australian average.

Motivations to Participate in PLTI

In the post-survey, participants were provided with a list of options regarding their motivations to participate in PLTI. The majority of participants identified a combination of factors, rather than a single factor. Figure 5 outlines how frequently participants identified specific factors as motivating their involvement in the PLTI training program. As most participants identified more than one factor, the frequency with which any specific motivator is identified is greater than the number of participants.

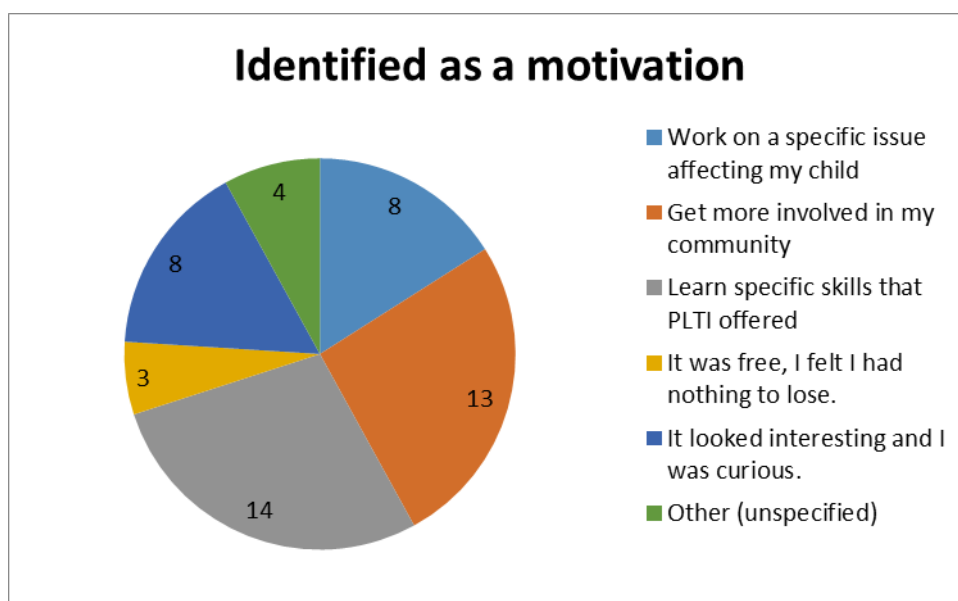


Figure 5: Motivations for Participation

Participants most frequently identified the opportunity to learn specific skills and to become more involved with one's community as their motivations to be involved in PLTI. We can see also that eight participants, more than a quarter of the cohort, identified the opportunity to work on a specific issue affecting their child and curiosity about the program were also motivating factors.



Characteristics of the Respondents Who Left

Five respondents did not complete the program. Among those who did not complete, four were female and one was male. The age range of those who did not complete the program was 42-59 years with the average being 49 years approximately, whereas the overall cohort undertaking the program was 41 years of age. This means those who did not continue were older on average than those who did complete the program. Of those who did not complete, two were separated, one was married, one was single and one was in a domestic partnership. This is consistent with the demographics of the cohort. Notably three were employed full time and two did not work outside the home. While the non-completers were only a small group, they constituted almost half of the original participants who were in full-time work. This raises the question about whether the program may offer specific challenges for those in the full-time workforce. The participants who did not continue reported the diverse range of education levels and income levels as found among those who completed. In essence, the participants who did not continue were slightly older on average than those who remained and were more likely to report being in fulltime work. There were no apparent differences in the level of civic engagement or knowledge and skill level reported by those who left compared to those who remained.



Findings

Community Organising Skills and Activities

Responses were provided with a list of twelve items related to community organising and policy advocacy activities. Respondents were asked how often they used the following skills:

- Advocacy for an issue or public policy
- Public speaking skills
- Community organizing
- Problem solving skills
- Consensus building skills
- Reviewing, analysing or discussing budgets
- Participation on a Board
- Call in or involve the media
- Engage in policy development or policy improvement
- Assess strengths and assets in your community
- Develop projects or programs to address needs in your community
- Use outcome data to determine if a project or program achieved what it started out to do.

Participants were asked if they currently had a job outside the home that involved the use of these skills. Ten respondents indicated they did have a job that involved those skills, while five indicated they did not, and seven provided no answer.

In the pre and post-survey, participants were given six options for responding to how often they used the skills. These were weighted as follows: I don't know what this is (1), Never (2), Yearly (3), Monthly (4), Weekly (5) and Daily (6). These responses were averaged to provide a single score for the whole cohorts' pre and post-surveys. The results are presented in Figure 6.

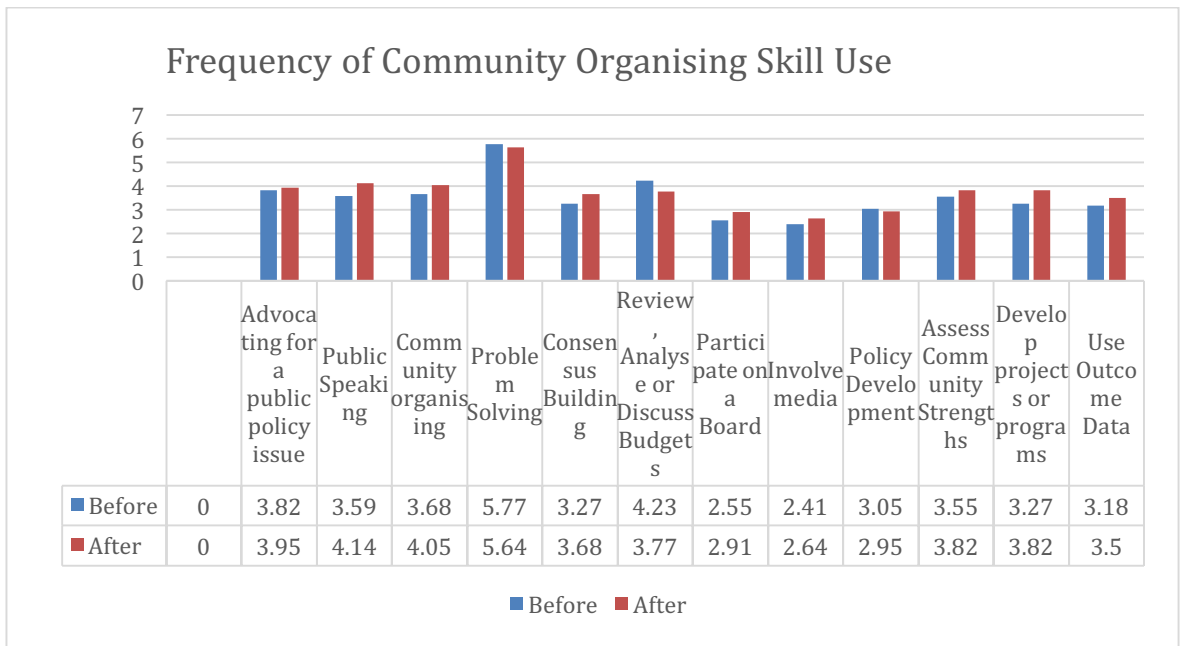


Figure 6: Respondents Reporting Some Use of Specified Skills: Before and After Comparison

In almost all items participants reported a modest increase in the frequency of use of community organising skills after completion of the program. This modest increase may in part be attributed to the fact that most participants reported a reasonably high level of this skill use at the commencement of the program.

Notably, there were three items where a small decline in reported skill use were observed, these were: problem solving (which the majority reported were used daily), review and analyses of budgets and policy development. Participants reported some small increases in the use of media, though overall, reported engagement in media was low. Similarly participation on boards was infrequent though substantial changes in this item would be difficult to achieve in the three months over which the program was conducted as many boards and committees have annual election cycles.

While changes in the frequency of skill use were positive but modest, one area of substantial improvement was the reduction in the number of participants who reported that they either “did not know” if they used the skills or “never” used the skills. The following figure reports on the number of participants who reported they never used the specified skills before or after the program.

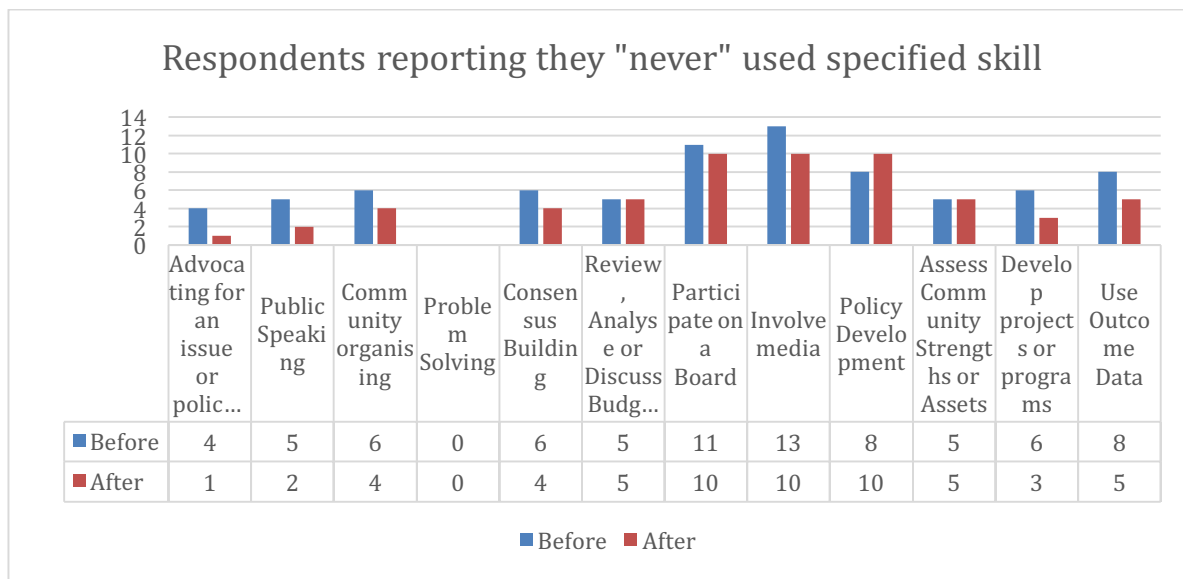


Figure 7: Respondents reporting they had “never” used specified community organising skill

At the commencement of the program, some respondents identified that they never used eleven of the twelve specified community organising skills. In the pre-survey, all respondents indicated that they regularly used problem-solving skills, indeed, 19 of the 22 respondents stated that they used these skills on a daily basis. The figure shows substantial declines in the number of participants reporting that they never use skills in: advocacy; public speaking; community organising; consensus building; participation on a board; involving the media; developing projects; or using outcome data. This suggests that the program was effective in creating a shift among those who were previously inactive to becoming engaged in civic activity.

While participants reported an increased use of the range of skills, most substantial gains were made in relation to participants’ reporting involvement in policy or issue advocacy, involving media and using outcome data. In these three items, five or more participants indicated that they now used skills that they had previously reported they either “never” used or “did not know” if they have used. Notably, there was one area in which there was a very slight reduction in reported skill use, with one less participant indicating they used problem-solving skills, however, the use of these skills was the most commonly reported skill among the participants. We noted also no reported increase among participants use of skills associated with reviewing, analysing or discussing budgets.



Community Knowledge and Empowerment

Respondents were asked to rate their understanding of community systems and their confidence to influence change in relation to the following ten statements:

- Q.5.1. When problems arise within my community, I do something about them.
- Q.5.2. I feel I can have a part in improving my community.
- Q.5.3. I feel confident in my ability to help my community grow.
- Q.5.4. I make sure that professionals understand my opinions about what my community needs.
- Q.5.5. I know what to do when problems arise in my community.
- Q.5.6. I get in touch with my elected officials when important legislation affecting my community is pending.
- Q.5.7. I understand how public policy affects my community.
- Q.5.8. I understand how service systems for communities are organized.
- Q.5.9. I make sure I have regular involvement with people who are providing services in my community.
- Q.5.10. I am able to get information to help me better understand my community.

Respondents were given four response options which were weighted as follows: none of the time (1), some of the time (2), most of the time (3), and all the time (4). The results were collated and averaged with the findings presented in figure 8.

In Figure 8 we outline the respondents' overall weighted response to these questions.

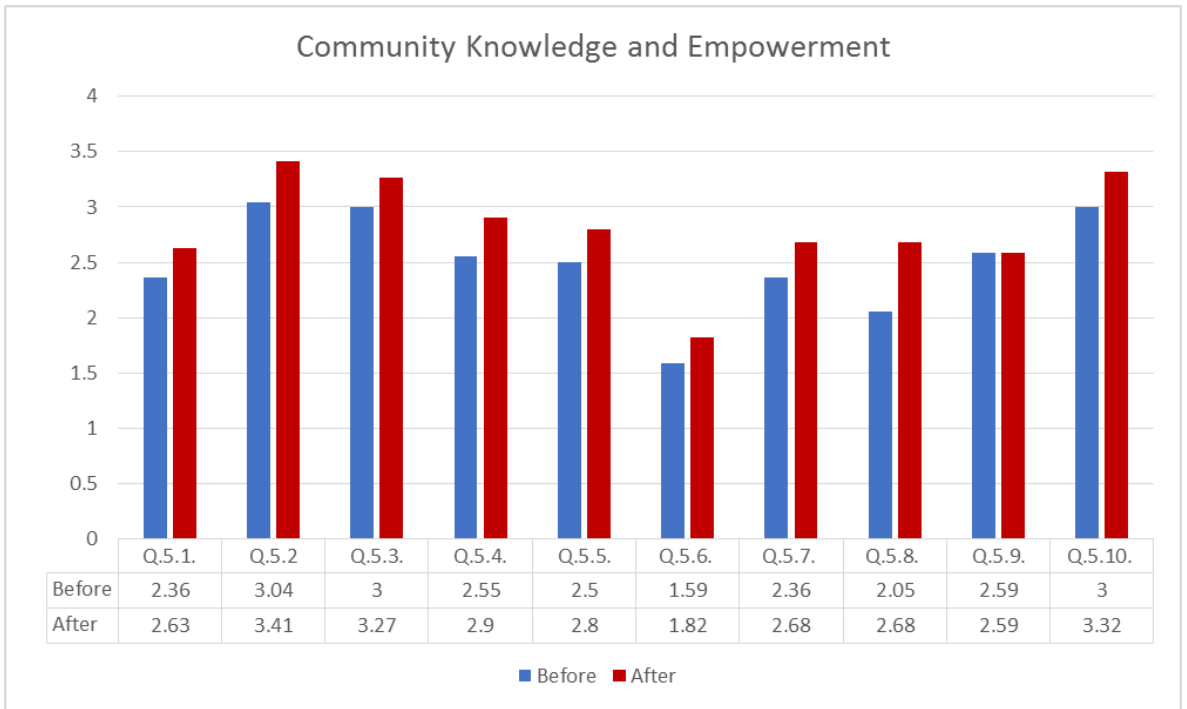


Figure 8: Community Knowledge and Empowerment

Participants indicated an increased level of community knowledge and empowerment on all items except item 5.9 which remained constant. Item 5.9 referred to the respondent reporting regular contact with people providing services in their community. The overall score on this item was 2.59 (out of 4). Substantial gains were seen in the reported frequency of respondents developing confidence in managing community problems and doing something about issues in their community.

Community Level Advocacy

Participants were asked a series of six questions about their involvement in activities related to community level involvement. These included participating in and speaking at community meetings, using media and in contacting public officials. Most respondents indicated some level of involvement in this type of activity at the outset though their level of involvement was higher following PLTI as indicated in Figure 9.

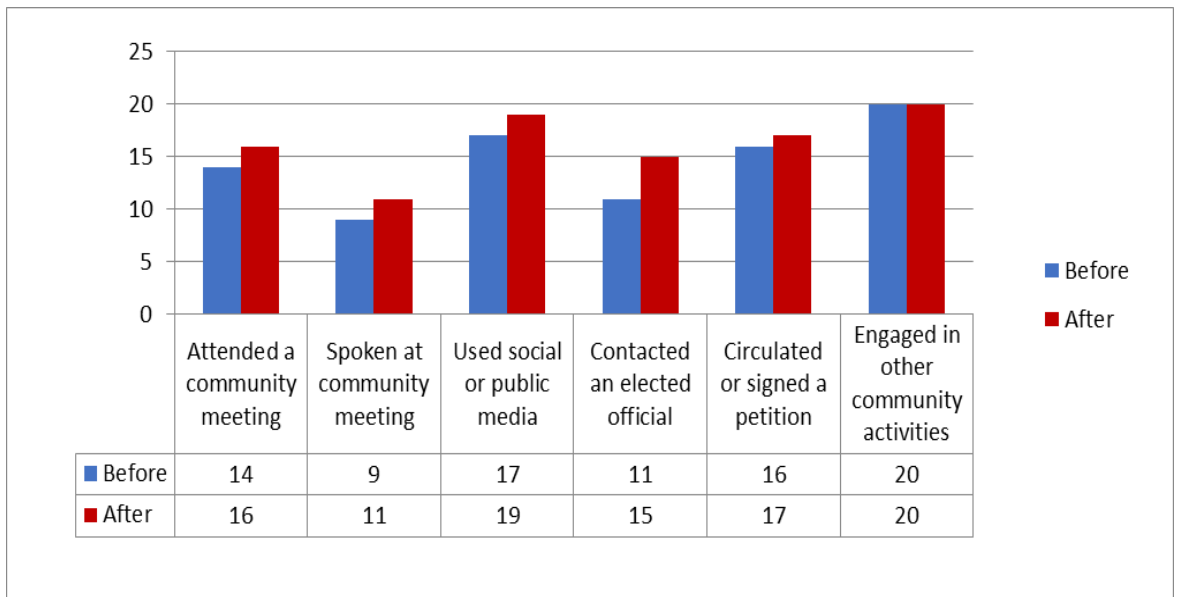


Figure 9: Reported levels of engagement with various community advocacy activities

Figure 9 demonstrates that more participants were more likely to report being engaged in community advocacy activities following PLTI. The largest increase was among those stating they had contacted an elected public official in the last six months. We note that in both the pre and post surveys twenty of the twenty two participants stated they had engaged in “other community activities” in the last six months. This question is somewhat vague and we would recommend that it is not included in future surveys.

Participants’ Perceptions of Change


Participants were asked how they had changed as a result of the program. Two key themes emerged and these were that participants’ reported increased confidence in public speaking and in advocacy. For most, the two themes were intertwined. Many participants mentioned “finding” their “voice” and provided examples of speaking up at meetings and being more confident in approaching decision-makers to advocate for issues of concern.

As one respondent stated

“I feel so much more aware, confident and empowered. I had no idea before now that if I am passionate enough about something, rather than just whinge, I have the tools to do something about it. Little old me!” (Participant 111)

Other participants stated

“I am more confident in my ability to go out and ask questions, research, talk to policy makers and governing bodies.” (Participant 104).



“I learnt so much! I got more confident in public speaking and feeling confident about standing up for others” (Participant 123).

“I feel confident to be an effective change agent” (Participant 126).

Participants also observed positive changes in their understanding of society and tolerance of difference, as a respondent observed:

“It has made me a better convenor of a volunteer group by following example of facilitators. I have increased tolerance / acceptance / understanding / awareness of diversity of people in society” (Participant 110).

Participants were asked to provide examples of how they had put the training into practice. Numerous examples were provided including:

- Becoming active in community and school committees
- Participating in change policy submissions for government
- Participating in public activism associated with the rights of vulnerable children and families such as families affected by domestic violence and families who are refugees and asylum seekers;
- Establishing or becoming active in support networks for families.

Participants were asked about what they had enjoyed most about the program. A major theme concerned the opportunity to meet others who were similarly motivated to create change. The friendships, support and ongoing networks emerging from the PLTI training was a highlight for many participants. Comments from participants included “finding my tribe” and “meeting new people” as positive features of the program. As one participant summarised, these relationships will continue and evolve into the future as PLTI training continues, she stated:

“Forming friendships and networks that will continue after PLTI and being future mentors for upcoming parent leaders undertaking the course.” (Participant 108).

Participants reported feeling inspired, stimulated and motivated by the group discussions. As one respondent stated:

“Because I have a project already. PLTI drove my project so much more and provision of a mentor helped progress.” (Participant 106).

Participants were asked about how they would use the ideas and experiences gained into the future. Participants outlined that they were motivated to become more engaged with their communities, to form networks and to continue to advocate and work for change in collaboration with others. One respondent stated that she planned to:

“Continue my project and really mainstreaming ideas and knowledge about how great parents can be and how they can make change if provided with opportunities. Getting parents more involved in groups so that they can learn to speak up for themselves and own issues / problems.” (Participant 127)

Issues and Concerns

A frequent point of criticism was the large amount of information conveyed over the course. Several participants noted that the American version of the program was 20 weeks while the Brisbane pilot was conducted over 15 weeks. There was a perception that this contributed to the training program being rushed. The following comment was typical of the concern about the time frame expressed by several participants.

“There was not enough time for chatting / getting to fully know people. I feel like I have lots more to learn from and about the other participants. Make it a longer course 20 weeks not 15 weeks.” (Participant 110).

At the same time, several others found the time commitment to be challenging. Some participants found the length of individual sessions to be too long and reported that it was difficult to maintain concentration. Several participants found the overall time commitments daunting. This was most strongly put by one participant as follows:

“I found it to be a really big commitment and struggled to complete project drafts and oral presentations on time. This may be because I didn’t allocate enough time to my project. Maybe some more emphasis and explanation around projects need to happen, be advertised, to ensure that those recruited have time to commit and are prepared for this.” (Participant 127).

Notably this participant was in full-time work.

Some participants expressed frustration with a perceived lack of practical skill development in particular domains such as in advocacy.

Several respondents raised concerns about the matrix in various parts of the evaluation form. For example, in suggesting improvements for the program, one participant stated:

“In phase I, linking some of the more esoteric activities to clear goals for the sessions, explaining what the heck the matrix is for. Why do PLTI participants need to know where they are on the Matrix – What’s the value in knowing?” (Participant 113)

Some issues around the practical organisation of the training sessions were also raised. Several participants raised concerns about the poor quality of food provided and one raised issues about the child-care while, conversely, another participant praised the high quality of child-care. It would seem that organisational issues had a negative impact on some participants’ overall experience of the program.



Similarities and Differences with the USA Evaluations

The demographic profile of the participants reported in the Australian and the USA evaluation studies was similar in age however the Australian cohort had a relatively lower proportion of participants in full-time work (around 30% compared to 46%) and in part-time work (around 7.4% compared to 19%) of the USA cohort and a lower level of cultural diversity. Nonetheless 50% of those completing the PLTI program in Brisbane identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or as being from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse group. By contrast in the USA cohorts, 72% identified as other than “white”. The levels of educational attainment in the Brisbane cohort were reasonably equivalent with USA cohorts, with 72% reporting completion of a post-secondary school qualification compared to 67% of the USA cohort. However, in the Brisbane cohort, the majority of those with post-secondary qualifications were from the Vocational and Education Training sector (40% of the cohort overall) compared to the USA cohort, where only 16% held such post-secondary qualifications. 47% of the USA cohorts held bachelor degrees or higher compared with the Brisbane cohort where only 14% of participants held qualifications at this level.

The Likert scales concerning civic knowledge and engagement were differently analysed between the two contexts. It would appear that the Brisbane cohort were more likely than the USA cohorts to commence with a high level of civic skills and involvement in civic activities. An important difference between the two contexts is that Australia has a compulsory voting system for government elections and this may create a greater sense of involvement in political processes than may be found in other contexts. At the outset of the program the majority of participants reported that they had some experience in a range of advocacy activities which included: advocacy for an issue or public policy; public speaking and community organising. Consistent with the USA cohorts, the Brisbane participants reported substantial gains in participation in civic engagement by the end of the program which included increased activity related to: attendance at and participation in community meetings, use of public media and contacting public officials.

Conclusions


The evaluation results suggest that the participants gained many benefits from the PLTI program. The evidence indicates that:

- Participants increased their use of community organising skills. It is noted that the cohort, on average, commenced the program with a reasonable level of knowledge and skill in most areas of community organising. While the increase in skill use was positive but modest overall, substantial gains were made in activating those who had previously been inactive. Marked declines were noted among those who reported “never” using specified community organising skills suggesting a substantial shift from inaction to action among those in the Brisbane PLTI group. By the completion of the program, close to 80% of participants (or more) reported using nine of the 12 community organising skills reported on the evaluation.
- Similarly there were small but modest improvements in participants’ reports of community knowledge and empowerment on nine of the ten indicators of community knowledge and empowerment considered in the evaluation. Participants reported the greatest increase of knowledge in relation to understanding “how service systems for communities are organized.”
- A greater number of the participants reported active engagement in all five types of community level advocacy evaluated following the program compared to the level of activity reported prior to the program. There was a particularly marked increase in the number of participants who reported contacting an elected official.
- Participants reported increased confidence and skill in civic engagement. Many commented on increased confidence and activity in public speaking, group facilitation and in researching policy concerns.
- Participants also reported increased activity including developing their involvement in their communities and schools, initiating support and advocacy networks and in becoming involved in policy advocacy.
- Participants reported that they valued the networks they had formed and several indicated a commitment to being involved in the PLTI alumni.

The evaluation suggests three areas where the program could be developed further.

One issue concerns the program length and timing. There was a clear tension in participants’ responses to the evaluation with several indicating they were concerned about the shortened length of the program in the Brisbane pilot compared to the USA model. Yet, the evaluation data also shows that five people (almost 20% of the original cohort) left the program before completion. Those who left were more likely to be in full-time employment than those who stayed, however as the numbers were small it is not possible to confirm that their employment status played any role in their non-completion of the program. We do note however that some respondents, one of whom was in full-time employment, also commented that she struggled with the time commitment of PLTI training.

A second concern is program content. It is notable that participants appeared to have gained in several areas but some important skill areas appeared not to have been



developed in PLTI. The evaluation data suggests that participants' involvement in reviewing, analysing or discussing budgets declined over the course of the program and there was no change to the number who reported "never" using this skill. It is suggested the training component on budgets, which is an important part of community organising is reviewed.

A third possible issue concerns diversity of the participant pool. We note that there are substantial differences in the demographic profile of those who participated in the Brisbane pilot compared to the USA. There were substantially fewer participants in employment and fewer participants who identified as from culturally diverse backgrounds than the USA cohort. Naturally, based on the small number we would urge caution in making too much of these differences and we note also that 50% of the cohort in the Brisbane pilot identified as either Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or as from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Background. Still there may be some consideration as to how to further diversify the base of PLTI in future programs.

Overall, the funders, organisers, facilitators and participants are to be congratulated on bringing PLTI to Australia. The evaluation data suggests that the program has contributed to real gains for the majority of participants who have become more confident and skilled advocates for their community and proud alumni of the first PLTI training program offered in Australia.