

An Evaluation of the DELTA Community Parenting Project

Executive Summary Report

Summary Report, November 2004
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DEVELOPING EVERYONE'S LEARNING & THINKING ABILITIES



Foreword

The DELTA (Developing Everyone's Learning & Thinking Abilities) Community Parenting Programme (DELTA Project).

The Southern Boards' DELTA Project started as a pilot project in the academic year 1992-1993. DELTA was set up as a multi-agency partnership initiative. The aim of the project was to develop parenting skills, raise confidence and awareness among parents, to share knowledge and skills, and give parents support by means of individual and group exercises using researched based information and advice.

Following the success of the pilot, there was a decision by Southern Education & Library Board (SELB) and the Southern Health & Social Services Board (SHSSB) to jointly employ a DELTA Development Officer in 1995. Since then the project has expanded and developed through European Union (EU) Peace & Reconciliation Childhood Fund Priority 2 Measure 5, 'Investing in Childcare', Department of Education funding through SELB, grants from SHSSB and Sure Start funding in specific areas.

Over 150 Early Years' Programmes, Upper Primary and Post Primary Programmes are delivered in the Southern area annually. These include tailor-made programmes for parents of children with special educational needs, and programmes for parents from ethnic minority groups. Three Project Staff are employed to cover Sure Start Project Areas namely Clogher Valley, Blossom in Portadown and Orana in Newry and these staff members also work with individual parents and families. In addition the DELTA Project offers Open College accredited courses and a Baby Sitting Course to Young People.

The Project has continuously self-evaluated since its inception. There have been thousands of parental and promoters' evaluations. Anecdotal evidence and feedback from the participants during DELTA programmes has been very positive. However it was felt that an independent organisational evaluation should be commissioned. DELTA took the opportunity to ask Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) to undertake the evaluation. On behalf of the DELTA Project we would like to thank all the parents, school staff, the evaluators, the evaluation reference group and other participants who took part in this evaluation.

Dr Norman Gillespie and Dr Edel McClean are CENI evaluators who worked on the DELTA evaluation. CENI is an independent not for profit organisation which was established in 1995 to provide evaluation services. It is a unique organisation committed to promoting a better understanding and use of evaluation. CENI aims to facilitate organisations to use evaluation to assess their achievements and to assist them in planning and managing their activities.

Finally we would like to take this opportunity to commend the DELTA Project for 'making a significant contribution to promoting social cohesion through developing good practice in partnership working and enabling parents to become more positive in their attitudes to education, social services, health and wellbeing and civic responsibilities. In addition it has contributed to building a sense of community and development of social capital through improving parents' relationships with other parents and linkages between parents, schools and the wider community'.

(CENI Evaluation '04)

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Executive Summary Report

Introduction

The DELTA programme in the Southern area of Northern Ireland was established in 1993 with the aim to promote the holistic development of young children, raise parents' self-esteem, and thus enhance the parent/carer child relationship. Its mission is 'to promote partnership with parents within the Southern Board area on a multi-disciplinary basis through group and individual programmes to parents by imparting parenting information and advice'. Since its inception the project has undergone considerable development and growth, and this has been aided through funding from the EU Peace & Reconciliation Childhood Fund, DENI funding through the SELB and grants from the SHSSB. Over 100 Early Years' Programmes, approximately 16 Upper Primary and 24 Post Primary Programmes are delivered in the SELB area annually. Since its inception over 11,000 parents and carers have taken part in DELTA programmes. Within this context this evaluation is primarily concerned with assessing the project's current operational effectiveness and its effectiveness in meeting its objectives, as well as considering its outcomes and impact on participating parents (and their children). It also assesses DELTA's efficiency in the use of resources and its financial management, including the extent to which it provides value for money.

Summary of Impact and Outcomes

The following is a summary of the main impact and outcomes that the DELTA project has had for participating parents, their children, and the wider community. All percentages are based on the responses of 154 out of 500 parents who returned a postal questionnaire to CENI, giving a response rate of 31%.

99% of parents felt that the programmes were well planned and organised.

98% of parents felt that the programmes were well presented and delivered.

99% of parents were satisfied with the information they were given.

75% of parents felt that participation on the programmes made them feel more confident as parents.

65% of parents felt that the programme had enhanced their child's learning through play.

88% of parents felt that the programme had increased their knowledge of educational issues.

Just over half the participants felt that the programme had increased their own self confidence.

83% of the parents felt that the programme had increased their awareness of child health issues.

58% of parents felt that the programme had increased their child's awareness of health issues.

At least 38% of parents felt that the programme had improved their quality of life (46% were unsure).

74% of parents felt that participation on the programme had improved their relationships with other parents.

57% of parents felt that DELTA had helped to improve relationships with their child's teacher.

65% of parents felt that the programme had helped their child's communication skills.

53% of parents felt that the programme had helped to improve their child's relationships with other children.

At least 39% of the parents felt that participation on the programme had improved their child's performance at school.

DELTA has made a considerable contribution to promoting the social inclusion of previously marginalised and socially excluded groups and sections of the population.

DELTA has made a significant contribution to promoting social cohesion through developing good practice in partnership working and enabling parents to become more positive in their attitudes to education, social services, health and wellbeing, and civic responsibilities. In addition it has contributed to building a sense of community and the development of social capital through improving parents relationships with other parents and developing linkages between parents and schools and the wider community.

Strategic Policy Context

The evaluation shows that DELTA's aims and objectives are congruent with a number of strategic policy documents in relation to the field of early years, partnership, and voluntary sector work, particularly given its emphasis on promoting a holistic, 'educare' approach to addressing the needs of children at the earliest possible age, with a focus on working in partnership across departments and sectors. It also provides an additional means (as distinct from formal educational and social and health service interventions) to target those most in need operating, as it does, throughout the whole southern area, using local centres where possible, and providing a specific 'tailored' service for ethnic minority and special needs groups.

Operational Effectiveness

DELTA is a well established project that has undergone considerable development over recent years. It is a registered charity and legally constituted company limited by guarantee with a board of directors (management committee) drawn from well qualified and experienced personnel in professions that are congruent with its aims and objectives. There are also local committees in each H&tSS Trust area to ensure that the project is responsive to localised needs.

The project has demonstrated a number of areas of good practice in its partnership working, bringing different agencies and sectors together to work towards a shared vision and developing creative and innovative approaches to its services and activities. The structure of the project also ensures an equitable and optimal spread of its programmes throughout the catchment area, with specific provision being made to reach 'harder to reach' families – either due to their geographical isolation, personal circumstances, attitudes to educational programmes, or their membership of ethnic or linguistic minority groups. The collaborative working with a wide range and number of interest groups and agencies, as well as the development of strong relationships with certain schools, have all contributed to the project's effectiveness in being proactive to particular needs, as well as maintaining, and developing, its more mainstream programmes. Through its operational effectiveness DELTA therefore makes a significant contribution to promoting a holistic, preventative approach to parenting programmes that generates substantial added value over and above the sum of the project's individual parts.

The evaluation has found that there are a number of ongoing staffing issues, mainly concerned with a lack of consistency in contracts, due mainly, to the plethora of funding sources and while the project was found to have satisfactory policies and procedures in relation to a range of important issues, some staff were found to be unfamiliar with some of these.

DELTA has effective systems for planning and reviewing its work and this informs a planning process that has led to the production of a strategy document and business plan in recent years. However, it was found that it would be useful for the project to measure some of the longitudinal impact of its work, perhaps through tracing the development/experiences of a small sample of (voluntary) participants. DELTA has had considerable success in meeting its key strategic and business targets in recent years. However, the previous business plan has now become somewhat dated and the next two to three years will be a crucial period for DELTA, with a number of key decisions needing to be taken and implemented. Many of these pertain to the issues and recommendations identified in this report. It would therefore be beneficial for the project to produce an up-to-date business plan, which will reflect its current position and inform and guide its future operational development. Furthermore, as this is the first external evaluation completed of the project, DELTA would benefit from ensuring that a comprehensive evaluation is carried out at least every five years.

Effectiveness in Meeting Objectives

DELTA has demonstrated considerable effectiveness in meeting its strategic objectives. It has ensured widespread access to its programmes with a specific focus on children and families in need, taking into account cultural and ethnic factors. The project also delivers programmes in both urban and rural communities, including those where little or no Early Years services exist.

DELTA also networks and collaborates with other parenting programmes and family support services and has had considerable success in raising the awareness amongst all the relevant agencies and the general public of the importance of developing parenting skills through its programmes. It also ensures that its programmes are targeted equitably throughout the Southern area and that they are planned and delivered using a holistic educare approach – an approach to which those engaged in the field of Early Years work attach considerable value. DELTA also keeps well up-to-date and informed by research and evaluation findings in order to regularly review its practice and improve service quality.

DELTA has made considerable progress in addressing key priorities and areas of unmet need. It has addressed the deficits in parenting programme provision in the Upper Primary and Post Primary sectors and has developed some programmes with the youth sector. It has also made significant progress in developing networking opportunities with other agencies and organisations, enabling this to be very much an integrated part of its work and grounding the project much more securely in the community. Lack of short stay crèche provision, funding for hiring out venues for parenting programmes based in local community centres, and lack of transport to facilitate travel to programmes remain difficult issues but could perhaps be addressed through seeking advice and/or support from the Early Years Forum, the SELB, or local H&tSS Trusts.

Impact on Parents

Parents have on the whole found DELTA programmes a very positive experience. As well as the information contained in them they also found that the programmes helped to increase their self esteem as well as parental confidence. There were also a number of quality of life outcomes identified by participants and it was also sometimes felt that the programmes contributed to community building. It was also felt that the programmes were making a significant contribution to improving relationships between parents and the schools involved.

Impact on Children

Parents felt that the programme was helping to enhance their children's communication, improving their relationships with their children, and improving their children's performance at school. They also felt that they spent more quality time with their children as a result of the learning generated through DELTA as well as enhancing their children's ability to learn through play more independently. For participants in the post primary programmes it was felt that they had helped them to relate better to their teenage children, and had made them more comfortable in talking to their children about issues such as drugs, alcohol, peer pressure and sex. Some parents also expressed the view that participating in the course gave them greater influence with their children and helped to make them more aware of what happens in school, contributing to stronger links between teachers and parents and, through this, children and school.

Accessibility and Publicity

Participating parents in general felt that DELTA programmes were very accessible and that course content, venues and times were suitable. However, there was strong support for the creation of a locally based directory which could list all courses happening in a particular region over a four to six month period, including the titles of individual sessions. It was felt that this would give greater flexibility for individuals or couples with tight schedules and little free time, and would thus ensure greater participation in programmes.

Impact on Schools

Almost all schools stated that they had a positive experience of running DELTA courses. Project staff were commended as being both easy to work with, helpful and good communicators. Teachers were impressed both with how DELTA helped schools to organise programmes, and by the quality of the training delivered. The willingness of project staff to work alongside schools, to listen to their needs and concerns and to adapt course content to suit the needs of individual schools and parents had made the course more beneficial. Teachers felt that the parents of young children in particular were seen to be more confident in interacting with their children, and in becoming involved as partners in the education process and that parents who had negative attitudes to school and education, based on their own experiences, were made more comfortable with the school environment. One of the most important benefits for schools of running the DELTA programme has been the building of relationships between the school and parents, particularly for programmes running at the beginning of the academic year, and in a child's first year in the school.

Meeting Programme Objectives

It was found that DELTA had achieved its programme objectives in relation to:

- providing a positive experience for parents with children;
- enhancing the parents role as the prime educators of their children;
- developing parenting skills and building parents and children's self-esteem;
- enhancing the parent/promoter partnership;
- promoting the value of literature in the home;
- providing a framework by which parents will be aware of their children's needs;
- improving children's holistic development taking into account their ethnic, cultural, social, emotional, educational, health and physical needs;
- promoting quality time provision between parents and children as a means of promoting bonding and empowering children;
- helping parents develop self awareness and self confidence in order to improve their capacity to support and nurture their children.

Value for Money

DELTA provides value for money in relation to a wide range of indicators. It was found that resources are broadly used for their stated purpose as outlined in the grant conditions, finances are well managed, and the skilled time of workers is focused on key activities. The ratio of management and overhead costs to service delivery costs was low and overhead costs were kept to a minimum. It was also found that costs, for such a professional service, were competitive (free). The project was able to make efficient use of buildings, technology and other resources, partly through using existing infrastructure and the goodwill of the SELB.

A number of service vulnerability factors were identified including: unsatisfactory funding arrangements, continuation of goodwill, lack of replacement staff, staff contracts, inability of current capacity to meet any growth there may be in future demand, and working in difficult areas.

The project has been contributing to meeting key targets set out in SELB and SHSSB strategic and business plans, particularly those referring to the development of holistic approaches to service delivery in meeting the needs of families with young children.

All the key targets in relation to strategic and programme objectives have been met, with the only exceptions being some of the priority areas of unmet need as set out in the Business Plan; such as the lack of funding for parenting programmes based in local community centres and the lack of transport to facilitate travel to programmes. In addition there were very high levels of satisfaction expressed by users in relation to key aspects of programmes and the project has been able to demonstrate a high proportion of successful outcomes in key areas of work.

Professional standards and supervised practice were maintained throughout the project, which were informed within both the host agency and participating partners by a comprehensive list of appropriate policies and procedures.

There has been substantial interest in and attention paid to DELTA by those in related fields of work who have felt that its approach has much to offer in relation to informing current developments in early years' practice, particularly through its educare approach and its role as an agent for providing family support in a general, holistic way. In addition it was also seen as a useful means of accessing 'harder to reach' parents.

It is difficult to conceive of any alternative means by which outcomes could have been achieved more cost effectively and, indeed, considerable added value has been generated through the project's approach and the synergy produced as a result of good partnership practice. In short, in terms of its efficiency, effectiveness and cost effectiveness, as well as its contribution to promoting equity, social inclusion and the welfare of families with young children, the project provides considerable value for money.

Recommendations

While this evaluation has shown DELTA to be a very successful project, demonstrating effectiveness, efficiency and a wide range of positive impacts and considerable relevance to the strategic policy context and social environment within which it operates, the report contains a number of recommendations that, if implemented, would make significant further improvements to performance. The following is a complete list of all the recommendations made.

Operational Effectiveness

- DELTA should encourage more representation from other community organisations on its management committee.
- Contracts of employment should be reviewed in the near future, in conjunction with partner/funding agencies, with a view to establishing a more consistent and coherent funding environment.
- The project should consider the co-option of an appropriate person with a Human Resource background onto the management committee.
- DELTA should approach the Labour Relations Agency for support in relation to addressing human resource/staffing issues.
- The project should explore the possibility of linking all salaries to NJC pay scales.
- Staff should be given further opportunities to familiarise themselves with all relevant policies and procedures.
- DELTA should investigate ways of providing accreditation for DELTA Promotional training.
- DELTA should consider measuring some of the longitudinal impact of its work, perhaps through tracking the development/experiences of a small sample of (voluntary) participants.
- DELTA should commission a business plan to inform its future development, set targets, and suggest a strategy for securing appropriate funding.
- DELTA should ensure a comprehensive external evaluation is carried out at least every five years.

Meeting Objectives

- DELTA should encourage particular teachers to more actively encourage parents, especially those 'harder to reach' parents to avail of the programmes.
- DELTA should seek advice and/or support from the Early Years Forum, SELB, or local H&SS Trusts in relation to addressing the issues of lack of short stay crèche provision, funding for parenting programmes based in local community centres, and lack of transport to facilitate travel to programmes.
- DELTA should also seek ways of securing funding to enable staff to undergo training leading to a recognised parenting skills qualification.
- DELTA should consider raising its profile throughout the area, perhaps through the production of an updated promotional/informative leaflet.

Impact

- DELTA should ensure parents know where to go for advice if the course has raised concerns about which they need further information (i.e. complaints or grievances procedures).
- DELTA should provide contact details for local colleges and adult education providers at the end of courses, to encourage people to get involved in other courses.
- DELTA should create an area based directory of courses, listing all courses and individual sessions happening in a 4-6 month period.
- DELTA should provide leaflets and suggestions to parents at the end of courses to encourage the continuation of the relationships formed through the course.
- DELTA should promote its services further among class teachers.
- DELTA should raise its profile through articles in local newspapers, and local radio stations and also raise the profile of the DELTA logo.
- DELTA should seek funding to develop updated comprehensive information leaflets and which can be sent out to parents by schools.
- DELTA should ensure that all schools in its area are aware that they can provide a DELTA staff presence at school open and induction days.

Value for Money

- The project needs to develop a comprehensive funding policy.
- Although DELTA has some sessional staff to provide cover, it needs to pursue a policy whereby sufficient replacement staff will be available whether through posts vacant, or existing staff being on leave of absence.
- Current capacity needs to be increased in order to meet future demand, particularly in regard to providing support staff including someone able to take responsibility for some of the functions of the Director (perhaps a Deputy Director).



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