

# Evaluation of *Play, Learn, Read*

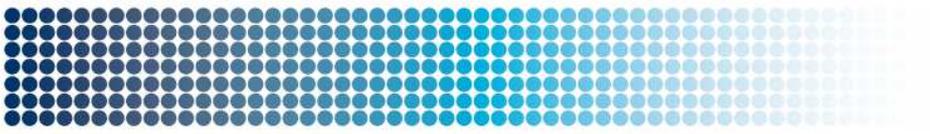
Final Report

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Centre for Community Child Health

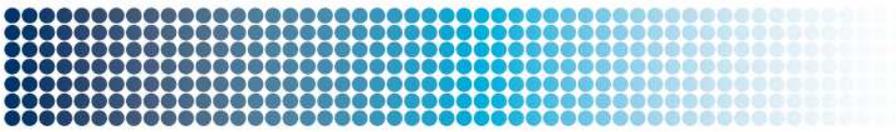
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April 2015



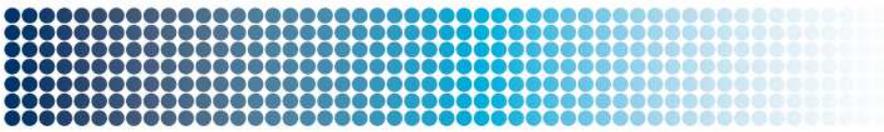
### *Acknowledgments*

The author would like to thank the Ardoch PLR staff and PLR volunteers who contributed to the evaluation workshop series and provided feedback about the proposed evaluation documents. We also gratefully acknowledge the PLR volunteers and early childhood educators and Ardoch PLR staff who provided feedback and/or contributed to the data collection activities to inform the evaluation findings presented in this report. Finally, thank you to Rupert North, Raj Selvam, Jan Sparke, Vivienne Neale and Rebecca Fry for their feedback on earlier drafts of this report.



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## 1. Background

Play, Learn, Read (PLR) is an early literacy program which has been implemented by Ardoch Youth Foundation (Ardoch) since 2012 in metropolitan Melbourne. Since the inception of the program in two inner city early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres, the program has recently expanded into multiple sites within three broad geographical locations within Victoria: Inner Melbourne, Geelong and Frankston. In 2014 the broadening of the program extended to a playgroup setting in Stonnington (Inner Melbourne) as well as other ECEC centres. The playgroup is led by Ardoch with support from Catholic Care and other local organisations. PLR is an interactive reading program with preschool children. Volunteers use an interactive reading approach – reading with children, not to children – to develop: language and vocabulary skills; engagement and social skills; and enjoyment of books. PLR volunteers undergo a training program with Ardoch Early Years PLR staff. Volunteers also are encouraged to undertake a process of ‘shadowing’ experienced PLR volunteers prior to implementing PLR themselves. The PLR program is intended to be delivered to vulnerable children, who are identified by ECEC educators at the selected sites.

Ardoch PLR staff and volunteers have been committed to active data collection processes since the inception of the program. In 2014, Ardoch commissioned the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) at Murdoch Childrens Research Institute to support an external evaluation of the PLR program, including the development and refinement of key evaluation documents, data collection tools and an evaluation report, in order to more effectively evaluate and develop PLR into the future.

## 2. Evaluation Methodology

CCCH facilitated a series of three evaluation workshops with Ardoch PLR staff and volunteers to develop key evaluation documents, inclusive of a PLR program logic and an evaluation plan. The evaluation approach included both impact evaluation and process evaluation. These approaches were selected to determine whether the PLR program had achieved the desired program outcomes, as well as determine the key success factors of the PLR program. Given the changes in the delivery of PLR in 2014 to include delivery within a playgroup setting as well as ECEC centres, it was considered particularly timely to monitor the processes of program implementation as well as the impact of the program.

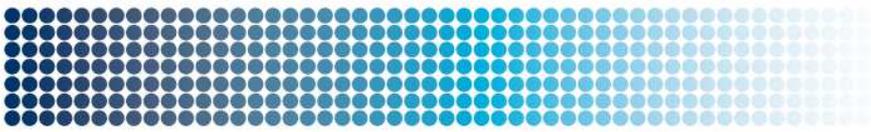
### 2.1 Program Logic

The PLR program logic is intended to diagrammatically depict the key components of the PLR model, and how these components lead to the intended outcomes of the program. Working with PLR staff and volunteers, outcomes were identified for the following stakeholder groups: children, families, volunteers and ECEC centres.

### 2.2 Evaluation Questions

Key evaluation questions that are addressed within this report arise from the information within the PLR Program Logic and Evaluation Plan. The evaluation questions are as follows:

- To what extent did PLR achieve its intended outcomes? Have the following objectives been achieved? (Impact evaluation)
  - Did the PLR program increase the pre-literacy skills of children?
  - Did parent engagement with reading increase?



- Did the skill, confidence and satisfaction of the PLR volunteers increase?
- Were ECEC partner organisations engaged with, and supportive of, PLR operations, staff and volunteers?
- What are the key success factors of PLR? Are there areas for improvement within PLR? (Process evaluation)

### 2.3 Evaluation Plan

The evaluation plan was developed to guide activities to undertake both impact and process evaluation. A specific plan, inclusive of outcomes, objectives, activities, indicators, data sources, responsibilities and timelines was developed for each of the four outcomes.

### 2.4 Evaluation Methodologies

The third workshop in the evaluation series was used to review the existing data collection tools for the PLR program, and to identify improved ways of measuring the selected impact and process indicators. Where relevant, existing questions were retained to maximise Ardoch's ability to compare key data over time. Only one tool (Monitoring and Evaluation Form) was retained without making any changes from the existing tool. It should be noted that the Monitoring and Evaluation Form underwent minor changes between 2013/14, prior to the commencement of the external evaluation.

#### 2.4.1 Tools measuring child outcome

##### *Monitoring and Evaluation form*

As described above, the Monitoring and Evaluation form used from the beginning of 2014 was retained for the current evaluation period. This tool provides information on children's engagement, socialisation, pre-literacy and oral language skills development, and awareness of books. The tool is intended to be completed by the PLR volunteer when the child has been engaged with the program for two to three weeks and toward the end of the year. A combined data set can therefore provide insight on whether the child has improved on any of the domains of interest.

In 2014, 28 Monitoring and Evaluation Forms were completed for children shortly after they commenced the PLR program. Combined data sets only exist for four children. Due to the extremely low response rate obtained for the follow up form, the 2013 data set has been combined with the 2014 results (n=20).

##### *Observation Record*

This tool was implemented at the beginning of 2014 and is completed by the volunteer at the end of each PLR visit. An observation record is kept for each child who engages with the PLR program.

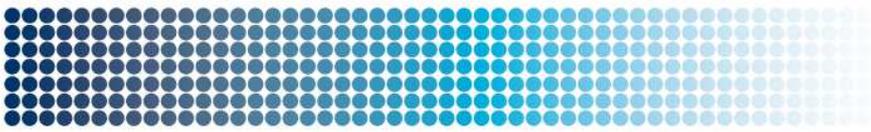
##### *Other tools*

The ECEC staff interview, PLR volunteer survey and Ardoch volunteer survey were also used to investigate this outcome. Questions from the parent interview and PLR ECEC staff survey were also intended to measure indicators related to the child outcome. These tools are described in more detail in sections 2.4.2, 2.4.3 and 2.4.4.

#### 2.4.2 Tools measuring family outcome

##### *Parent interview*

A brief interview schedule was developed to discuss with parents any changes they had observed in their child following participation in PLR. It was anticipated that this interview would provide a means of developing case studies related to the program.



While Ardoch intended to implement this tool in 2014, upon further reflection it was agreed that the tool needed further refining to ensure it was appropriate for use with the culturally diverse families whose children were engaged with the PLR program. As a result, this tool was not used in 2014, and therefore was not used to inform the findings presented in this report.

#### *ECEC staff interview*

This interview consisted of a series of questions, designed to collect qualitative data from ECEC staff about their perceptions of the program's impact on children, families and the staff experiences of working with PLR volunteers. The interview was intended to be undertaken with the ECEC director and staff member who attended the End of Year Review meeting in each site. In 2014, this tool was distributed to six staff, three of who were based in Frankston centres, one in Inner Melbourne and two staff in Geelong. The three staff based in Frankston provided written responses to the interview questions. Only selected questions from this tool were used; those questions relating to the impact of the program on families were not given to the staff because they indicated that they would not be able to answer questions about the families' perceptions of the program. As a result, sufficient data was not available to satisfactorily answer the evaluation question related to families.

### 2.4.3 Tools measuring volunteer outcome

#### *PLR volunteer survey*

Existing PLR volunteer surveys that had previously been used by Ardoch were reviewed and updated for the purposes of the external evaluation. The revised survey included 11 questions, which primarily sought to investigate indicators related to the volunteer outcome. The PLR volunteer survey also contained questions to measure indicators related to the child outcome and the ECEC partner organisation outcome. This survey, which was sent to 10 PLR volunteers across the three geographical regions at the end of 2014, was completed by five volunteers.

#### *Ardoch End of Year volunteer survey*

Due to the small number of responses received from the PLR volunteer survey, responses to the broader Ardoch volunteer survey were also provided for analysis for this evaluation report. While the questions included in this survey are not specifically related to PLR, only survey responses from PLR volunteers were provided for analysis. This data was used to inform the evaluation, where possible, for the volunteer outcome as well as the child outcome and ECEC outcome. Four completed surveys were provided for analysis. Three PLR respondents were based in Inner Melbourne, including one volunteer from the Stonnington playgroup setting and the other respondent volunteered in Frankston.

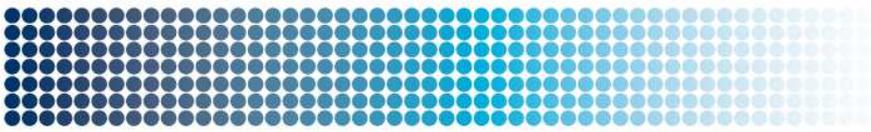
#### *Administrative data*

Data obtained from the Ardoch database (DonMan) was used to calculate the retention rate of PLR volunteers.

### 2.4.4 Tools measuring ECEC partner organisation outcome

#### *PLR ECEC staff survey*

An existing PLR ECEC staff survey was reviewed prior to the development of an updated version of the PLR ECEC staff survey. The final version of the survey contained 12 questions, primarily intended to measure indicators related to the ECEC outcome. It was also anticipated that this survey would provide data to measure indicators related to the child outcome and the process evaluation. This tool was not implemented in 2014 due to ECEC staff turnover at the Inner Melbourne site and Ardoch staff turnover at the Frankston site. Ardoch also opted not to provide the



survey to Geelong ECEC staff members, as the PLR program was implemented in Term 4 2014, and it was agreed that more time was needed for these staff to be able to comment about the program.

#### *Ardoch End of Year Early Childhood Partner Sites Survey*

Given that the PLR ECEC staff survey was not distributed in 2014, Ardoch provided the evaluators with nine responses to the broader Ardoch EC Partner Sites survey. Of the nine responses, four were excluded from analyses because two surveys were completed by staff working in sites where PLR was not running, whereas another two were excluded because respondents only answered the first question. Ultimately, five completed responses were analysed. Four respondents were from Frankston sites while one respondent was based at an ECEC centre within Inner Melbourne. This survey was sent to a total of 12 staff, representing sites in Inner Melbourne, Frankston and Geelong.

#### *Other tools*

Questions from the ECEC staff interview and PLR volunteer survey were also intended to measure indicators related to this outcome. This ECEC staff interview is described above in Section 2.4.2, and the PLR volunteer survey is presented in Section 2.4.3.

#### 2.4.5 Tools measuring process indicators

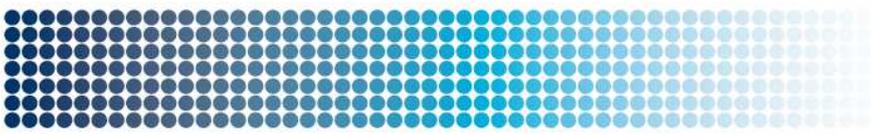
Process data was collected from a range of sources. These included:

- Observation records (see Section 2.4.1)
- PLR Volunteer Survey (see Section 2.4.3)
- Timesheets
- PLR Training Evaluation Form
- DonMan (see Section 2.4.3)
- Partnership records (including meeting minutes)
- PLR Communications eg newsletters
- PLR ECEC staff survey (see Section 2.4.4)
- Ardoch End of Year Volunteer Survey (see Section 2.4.3)
- Ardoch End of Year Early Childhood Partner Sites Survey (see Section 2.4.4)

## 3. Impact Evaluation Findings

### 3.1 What impact did PLR have on children?

The ultimate goal of the PLR program is to ensure that participating children have strong literacy and social skills when they enter school. Given that change in this outcome is dependent on many factors beyond the control of the PLR program, this evaluation sought to determine whether the PLR program was able to increase the pre-literacy skills of children participating in PLR. Pre-literacy, or emergent literacy, comprises of five key factors, which are precursors to the development of literacy skills. These five components are: language ability and vocabulary, knowledge of letters, phonological awareness, conventions of print and experiencing literacy promoting environments (Shoghi et al., 2013; CCCH, 2009). As noted in the methodology section, the primary means of measuring pre-literacy skills in this evaluation was through comparison of scores on the Monitoring and Evaluation Form, which is completed by volunteers soon after the child commences PLR, and again near the end of the year. Due to numerous challenges with data collection during 2014 (please see Section 5 for more details) complete data sets were only collected for four children. In an effort to ameliorate the small sample size, complete



data sets collected during 2013 were added to the analysis, bringing the overall sample size to 20 children.

Pre and post Monitoring and Evaluation Form findings across years and three Inner Melbourne centres have been collated and are summarised in Figure 1. The results have been collated so that percentage figures reflect the number of responses that were rated often or always. This enables a clear interpretation of whether there were changes over time.

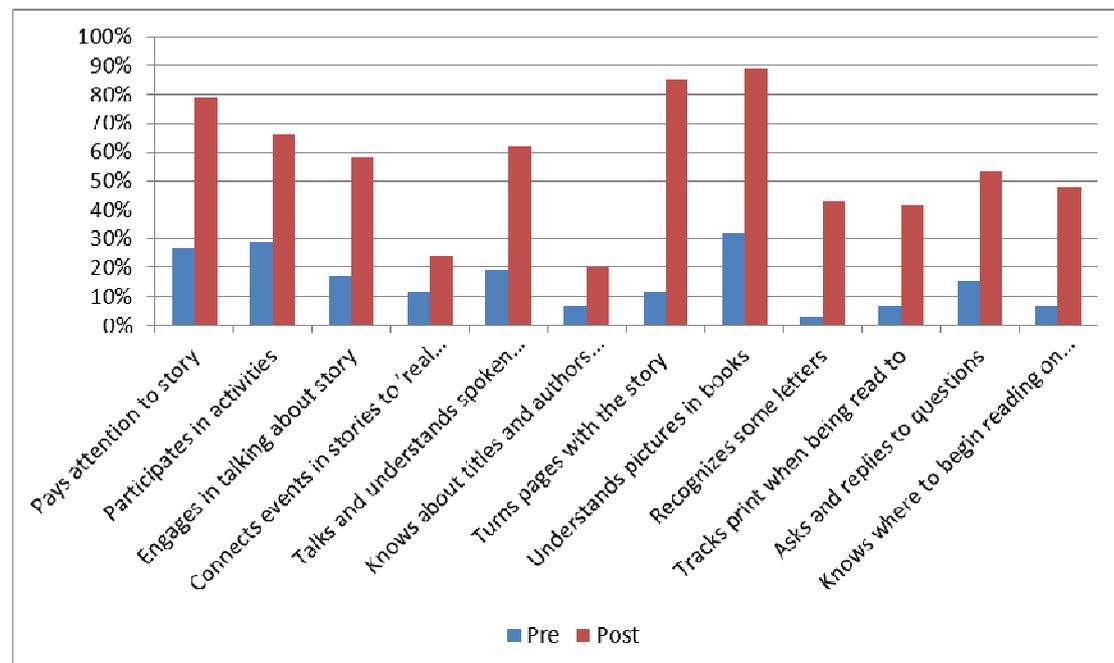


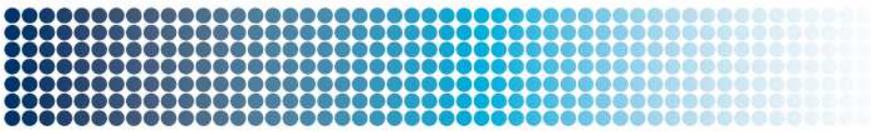
Figure 1. Pre and post PLR comparison of responses 'often' and 'always' (n=20)

Figure 1 clearly shows that children participating in PLR are improving in key areas related to emergent literacy skills, social skills and their engagement with reading. In particular, this sample of children are reported to have made excellent progress in *turning the pages of a story as it is being read* (73 per cent improvement), *understanding pictures in books* (58 per cent improvement) and *paying attention to the story* (52 per cent improvement). Other considerable increases were observed for *talks and understands the spoken language* (43 per cent), *engages in talking about the story* (41 per cent) and *knows where to begin reading on a page* (41 per cent). It is striking that improvements were observed for all measured indicators.

### 3.1.1 Pre-literacy skill development

Due to the potential impact of extraneous variables on the pre-literacy skill development of children, the evaluators also examined volunteer and ECEC staff feedback about the ability of the program to improve outcomes for children. The majority of both groups of respondents provided positive feedback about the PLR program. Most respondents to the Murdoch volunteer survey reported that they either strongly agreed or agreed that they had made a positive impact in improving child literacy skills (75%; n=3).

*"A child was reading to me. Not knowing words, but using pictures or cues to invent her story, and running her finger along the written word, showing emergent literacy skills." (PLR Volunteer)*



Respondents to the Ardoch ECEC staff survey were also positive about the impact of PLR on children. The majority of staff who completed this survey agreed that Ardoch programs supported their children to be more ready for school (80%; n=4). Furthermore, most respondents (80%, n=4) either strongly agreed or agreed that Ardoch programs contributed to improved learning outcomes for children, while one respondent reported they were unsure of this.

*“The extra time [our volunteer] could spend with children focusing specifically on literacy through the PLR program was extremely beneficial.” (ECEC Staff member)*

*“The volunteer reading program has been very successful and has assisted in developing the children's literacy skills and helped to develop an interest in books and reading.” (ECEC staff member)*

*“The PLR program was a fantastic opportunity for us to target children in the group to be involved who needed assistance with confidence or speech.” (ECEC staff member)*

### 3.1.2 Enhanced enjoyment of reading

ECEC staff and PLR volunteers were also strong in their endorsement of the impact of PLR in terms of increasing child enjoyment of reading and other literacy activities. All volunteers who completed the PLR Volunteer Survey reported that ‘most or all’ children involved in PLR enjoyed the weekly reading sessions (n=5). Quotes provided through other surveys endorsed this finding.

*“When I now arrive at <centre>, many of the kids, including one of the designated 'at risk' kids I have been reading to, will enthusiastically greet me and ask to be read books.” (PLR Volunteer)*

*“The lit up eyes and smiles and stories are read and some of the children eager to tell the story.” (PLR Volunteer)*

*“When a child asked specifically for a book we had previously read. It obviously sparked an interest, which led to the child recognising patterns in the story. This enabled the child to engage with the story.” (PLR Volunteer)*

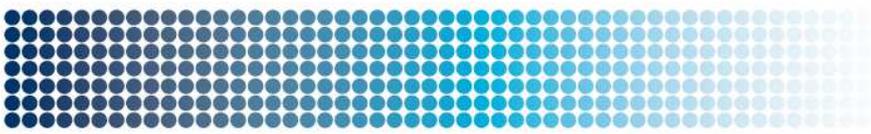
*“The PLR program helped children take a greater interest in books and reading.” (ECEC Staff member)*

### 3.1.3 Ability to access early literacy activities

All respondents to the ECEC staff interview (n=3) agreed that children at their ECEC centre engaged more frequently with early literacy activities at their centre outside of their PLR session. In their responses to this question, educators described improvements to child confidence, social interaction skills, and their ability to concentrate, as well as an interest in books at the centre.

*“Yes absolutely, children seem to go to the book area automatically since the introduction of PLR. Children's concentration level has developed.” (ECEC Staff member)*

*“Children are becoming a lot more confident with books, and dynamics with other children in terms of relationships and conversation is enhanced.” (ECEC Staff member)*



The same group of respondents agreed that PLR childrens’ parents commented about changes they have seen at home that relate to early literacy. Parent feedback related to the child having an increased interest in books, and carrying books around the home.

*“They always say my kids have a lot of interest in books, they walk around with books.” (ECEC Staff member)*

### 3.1.4 Social skill development

All respondents to the Ardoch volunteer survey either agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to make a positive impact relating to increasing child social and communication skills. ECEC staff comments also demonstrated agreement that PLR assisted children to develop their social skills.

*“PLR helped the children to develop confidence within themselves and their ability to interact with books. [Our volunteer] was wonderful with the children. The continuity was also great, coming once a week for each group helped children to develop a close relationship with her.” (ECEC Staff member)*

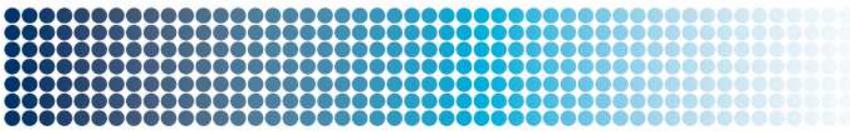
*“[The] dynamics with other children in terms of relationships and conversation is enhanced.” (ECEC Staff member)*

### 3.1.5 Additional evaluation findings related to children

As described in Section 2.4.1, the first Monitoring and Evaluation Form was completed for 28 children during 2014. This data was intended to serve as a proxy baseline measurement of indicators related to child pre-literacy skill development, engagement with reading and social skill development. Although follow up data was not provided for most of these children (please see Section 5.2 for further details), the baseline dataset is presented in Table 1 as a means of demonstrating the need for a pre-literacy program such as PLR within this cohort of children. Fifty per cent of the children in this sample were based within Inner Melbourne, while the other half of children were engaging with PLR at a Frankston ECEC site. No children from PLR within Geelong or the Stonnington site playgroup are included in this sample.

Table 1. Percentage of PLR children reported to have demonstrated skills ‘often’ or ‘all the time’ at the beginning of the PLR program (n=28)

Item	Percentage
Talks with you about the story	21%
Asks and replies to questions	18%
Participates in the offered activities	21%
Pays attention to the story	29%
Pays attention for the session	26%
Talks and understands spoken language	25%
Turns pages along with the story as it’s read	19%
Tracks the print when being read to from familiar simple books	0%
Enjoys and joins in rhymes and/or songs	16%
Connects events and stories to ‘real life’	11%
Knows about titles and authors and illustrators of books	0%
Knows where to begin reading on a page	18%
Understands pictures in books	29%
Recognises some letters and/or words	11%



As shown in Table 1, the majority of children demonstrated room for improvement in their pre-literacy skill development, engagement with books and social skill development. No children were reported to be able to always or often be able to 'track the print when being read to from familiar simple books' or 'knows about titles and authors and illustrators of books'. Further analysis of the dataset, which excluded those children reported to engage in a skill 'regularly' and explored the proportion of children who were reported to 'never / rarely' or 'sometimes' engage in a particular skill, revealed that other items which represented a particular challenge for the majority of children included: 'connects events and stories to real life' (74%), 'recognises some letters and/or words' (74%), 'knows where to begin reading on a page' (71%), 'enjoys and joins in rhymes and/or songs' (63%), 'turns pages along with the story as it's read' (58%) and 'pays attention for the session' (53%).

### 3.1.6 Findings

The findings presented in this section demonstrate that the PLR program has a positive impact on the areas of pre-literacy development, enhanced reading enjoyment, child ability to access literacy activities and social skill development. While evaluation limitations necessitate caution when interpreting these results (see Section 5), it is striking that all sources of data provide overwhelming agreement about the benefits of the PLR program to children. Of particular interest were the dramatic improvements in children over the course of the PLR program, unanimous agreement that the PLR program helped enthuse children about reading, and preliminary indications of the flow on effect of the program within the ECEC and home settings. It would be useful to explore these findings in future evaluation cycles.

### 3.2 What impact did PLR have on volunteers?

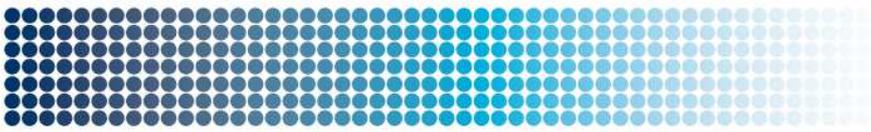
The PLR program relies heavily on the ability and commitment of trained volunteers to deliver a successful program with the children. As such, Ardoch recognize the importance of fostering and supporting their volunteer colleagues. Consequently, this evaluation also sought to determine whether volunteers' satisfaction, confidence and skills increased as part of their participation in PLR.

#### 3.2.1 Volunteer satisfaction

Eighty per cent of respondents (n=4) noted that they were very satisfied/satisfied with the extent of their involvement in the PLR program. One participant selected unsure as a response, noting that while they were satisfied with the impact of the program on children, and the time spent with children, the data collection requirements were detrimental to their satisfaction with the overall role. Respondents to the Ardoch volunteer survey were also predominantly satisfied with their role, although one volunteer described some difficulties in communication with some staff at the ECEC site. At the end of 2014, Ardoch had 19 PLR volunteers actively engaged with the program, which was a retention rate of 79 per cent of the total number of volunteers during 2014.

*"[Ardoch staff member] is an amazing person to work with - she is kind, open minded and hard working. She and I often have chats after our session and say "Did you see that?" or "Did you hear about?" I feel as though my opinion matters and I feel welcomed to have an opinion. I can choose the books each week and go with the flow of how the children are feeling - in terms of content and length of reading session." (PLR Volunteer)*

*"Enjoy the interactions and feel that they are beneficial to the children. However paperwork is tedious and repetitive." (PLR Volunteer)*



*“I believe that Ardoch has a great model, with lots of PD training (which I attended most of) and well supported volunteers – [Ardoch staff member] always got back to me promptly. Working with the kids is a wonderful bonus. I am hoping that financial reasons mean I won't have to give up volunteering, as it has been such a highlight for me this year!” (PLR Volunteer)*

The majority of volunteers who responded to the PLR Volunteer Survey agreed that they were able to contribute to program development (60%; n=3), while one respondent indicated that they do not currently contribute to program development but they would like to in the future.

*“I believe the paperwork/reporting imposed on volunteers and host pre-schools is cumbersome and unproductive/repetitive/somewhat meaningless. I think a simpler system - computer based - could be devised. I also believe the PLR program should have equal focus on the development of spoken language and quality interactions.” (PLR Volunteer)*

### 3.2.2 Volunteer skills and confidence

Eighty per cent of PLR volunteer survey respondents (n=4) noted that they strongly agreed or agreed that their confidence to support the early literacy development of pre-school children had increased as a result of their participation in the PLR program.

The same proportion of respondents (n=4) noted that they strongly agreed or agreed their skills to support the early literacy development of pre-school children had increased as a result of their participation in the PLR program.

The remaining respondent disagreed their confidence or skills in this area had increased as a result of their participation, because they had a professional teaching background and already felt equipped with relevant skills and knowledge to perform the volunteer role.

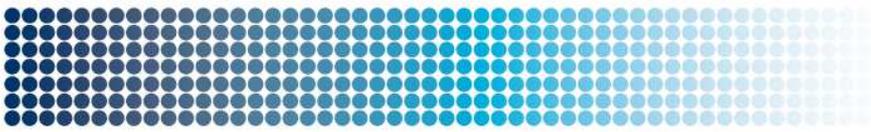
In the Ardoch volunteer survey, seventy-five per cent of respondents agreed that their skills and confidence had developed during their time as a volunteer.

*“The challenge of an ever changing and growing group of children (both in age and size of group) has pushed me in a positive way to try new ways of connecting and making early literacy meaningful for the group in front of me.” (PLR Volunteer)*

*“[I am] already a qualified and experienced teacher, so not really relevant.” (PLR Volunteer)*

### 3.2.3 Findings

The results presented in this section demonstrate that the majority of PLR volunteers are satisfied with their role within the program, and also that their knowledge and skills have increased as a result of their participation. Qualitative responses indicated that volunteers particularly appreciated the support and of Ardoch PLR staff, their own ability to contribute to the decision making within the PLR weekly sessions and access to ongoing professional development facilitated by Ardoch. Two areas were identified as mitigating volunteer satisfaction levels, which may be worthy of further investigation by Ardoch. The overwhelmingly positive response from PLR volunteers was corroborated by the high retention rate of PLR volunteers at the end of 2014.



### 3.3 What impact did PLR have on Early Childhood Education and Care Partner Sites?

The PLR program has traditionally been delivered in an ECEC Centre setting, although the program was expanded to a playgroup setting in 2014. The success of the PLR program partly depends on the engagement of early childhood partner sites who are willing to host the program, identify children for participation, welcome PLR volunteers and provide feedback about the progress of the program within their site. Ardoch recognise the importance of engaging EC partner sites, and used this evaluation to determine whether engagement with and support of PLR had increased among EC partner sites.

#### 3.3.1 EC Partner support for PLR

All respondents to the EC staff interview (n=3) agreed that the program was beneficial to children. Staff reported that children enjoyed the reading time and engaged well with the volunteer at their ECEC. Other positive feedback obtained through the Ardoch ECEC staff survey has been presented earlier in this report (see Section 3.1).

*“Huge benefit for our children, one dedicated person promoting literacy and working with children. Children increase in social skills. Then these targeted children participate in group activities and the child is more focused and makes life much easier.” (ECEC Staff member)*

*“Great program to have, interesting to see children connect with volunteers (another adult) listening, reading, talking, it’s amazing. Children love it and are happy.” (ECEC Staff member)*

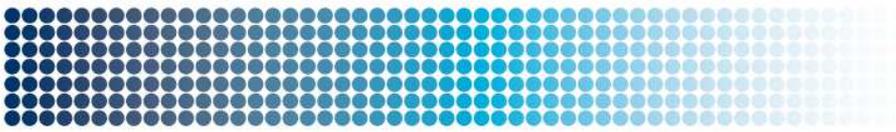
*“Program is really good for children who are delayed in Australian Early Development Index. Volunteer element is fantastic because it lets the individual focus on the child, which I cannot provide.” (ECEC Staff member)*

Volunteer feedback obtained for this report through the PLR volunteer survey suggests there may be room for improvement in terms of volunteer support during PLR weekly sessions. Forty per cent of respondents reported that they were very satisfied or satisfied with the level of support received at the ECEC centre where they volunteered for PLR, while another forty per cent reported that they were dissatisfied with the support received. One of these volunteers explained *“This varies depending on staff but also feel it is also dependent on their actual understanding of the role of the volunteer”*, whereas the other respondent did not elaborate why they were dissatisfied. In the Ardoch volunteer survey, one respondent chose the option 'I do not feel supported by the teachers/staff at the school/site' as his/her biggest challenge as a volunteer. This respondent elaborated further in this comment:

*“I think it is important for all levels of the organisation you are working with are briefed on the requirements and benefits of the PLR program. In particular, the one on one aspect. Whilst I felt a lot of support for the one on one arrangement through the management level of the Early Learning Centre I was affiliated with, the staff in the room did not seem to appreciate the importance of this, making my job as a volunteer more difficult.” (PLR Volunteer)*

#### 3.3.2 Development of EC partner skills for working in partnership with volunteers

All respondents to the ECEC staff interview (n=3) agreed that they would be willing to work with volunteers again in the future.



*“Yes, having volunteers read to the targeted child is fantastic.” (ECEC Staff member)*

*“Yes, but it depends on volunteers. They need to be self starters as we are very busy.” (ECEC Staff member)*

When staff were asked what they had learnt from working with volunteers, the staff identified a number of factors important to establishing an effective working relationship with volunteers, including open communication, engagement, organisation, respect and flexibility.

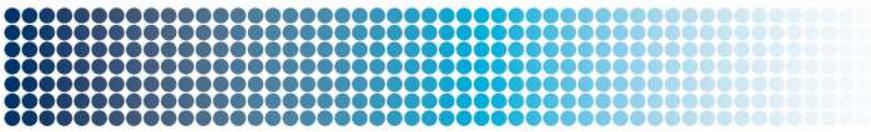
*“We have to be patient, organised, it’s what and how we treat them is what we get back. Everyone brings something to the table, everyone has something to offer.” (ECEC Staff member)*

*“Engage with them, clarify activities too.” (ECEC Staff member)*

*“To be open, flexible and organised.” (ECEC Staff member)*

### 3.3.3 Findings

The results presented in this section suggest that ECEC partners are supportive of the PLR program, in particular the impact of the program on children. Respondents who took part in this evaluation were also interested in continuing to work with volunteers again. It will be important to determine whether the positive feedback from ECEC partners can be replicated with a larger proportion of the ECEC partner cohort across multiple PLR sites in future evaluation activities. While ECEC respondents described an increase in knowledge and/or skills they had gained from working in partnership with volunteers, feedback from PLR volunteers suggests that there may be room for improvement in the working relationship between ECEC staff and PLR volunteers during weekly PLR reading sessions.



## 4. Process Evaluation Findings

### 4.1 What are the key success factors of PLR?

PLR was developed by Ardoch and first implemented in 2012. Therefore, it is a relatively new early literacy program, and is still considered to be in a developmental phase. This is particularly evident from the relatively recent decision to expand PLR into a playgroup setting. The process evaluation focused on measuring four key components of the PLR program, to identify the key success factors of PLR and to ascertain whether any improvements to the program were required. The findings for each component are presented below.

#### 4.1.1 Engagement of children in weekly PLR reading sessions

A total of 81 children were initially engaged with the PLR program during 2014. Of these, 30 children were based in Inner Melbourne, 20 children in Frankston, six children in Geelong and 25 children in Stonnington. It is important to note that PLR in Geelong only commenced in Term 4 2014, therefore there was less time to identify and engage children with the program. Feedback provided by Ardoch revealed that not all children remained in the program for the duration of the year. Children that exited PLR generally did so because they left the centre where PLR was operating. Data is not available in relation to the number of children who left the program.

Of the children who participated in the 2014 reading sessions, on average, children in the Inner PLR sites participated in PLR for approximately 20 minutes per week. Children from the other two sites and the Stonnington playgroup spent approximately 30 minutes in each PLR session. The reason for the difference between sites was not identified in the collected data. Given that follow up Monitoring and Evaluation Forms were not collected for children outside Inner Melbourne ECEC centres, it is not possible to determine whether longer reading sessions had a stronger impact on children experiencing PLR in Geelong, Frankston or the Stonnington playgroup.

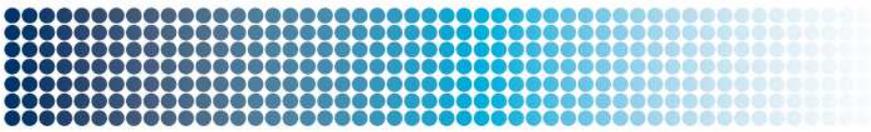
Volunteer feedback was also used to measure the extent to which children were engaged with the weekly PLR reading sessions. All respondents to the PLR volunteer survey (n=5) were very satisfied or satisfied with the weekly PLR sessions.

*“I thoroughly enjoy my weekly Ardoch sessions. Some weeks it is fantastic and some weeks it is hard work. There is so much going on at [the site] but to see children seeking out somebody to read with them and hearing them join in books that they know and love, well, it warms my heart.” (PLR volunteer)*

Qualitative feedback provided by volunteers through the observation records indicate that children engaged to varying degrees within each weekly session. For example, a child may not engage with the volunteer for a reading activity in one week, but will demonstrate interest in the reading session the following week. PLR training advises volunteers to follow the child’s lead during weekly reading sessions, that is, not to force the child to participate if they are interested in another activity at the time. Where volunteers had completed observation records for children participating in PLR, it appears that engagement with reading generally improved over the year.

#### 4.1.2 Volunteer training

In 2014, 55 volunteers completed PLR training. In addition to training, volunteers spent an average of four hours each shadowing an experienced PLR volunteer while



they implemented the program. The majority of the training participants were satisfied with the training, with many noting that it had ‘exceeded expectations’ (see Figure 2). Training evaluation data was collected for 15 participants. A training evaluation form was not provided at two training sessions and not all participants at the other training sessions chose to complete the evaluation form.

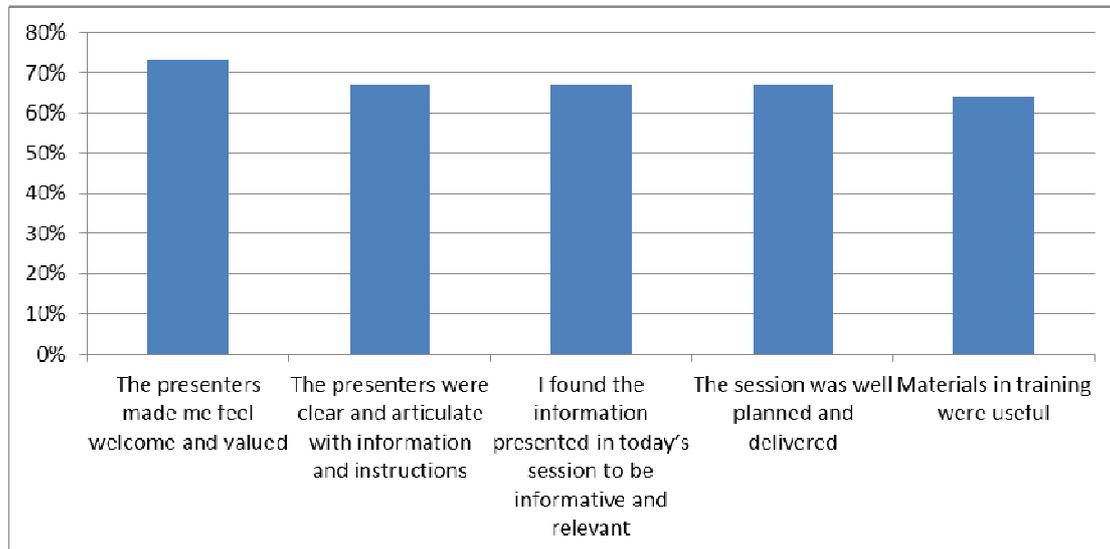


Figure 2. Percentage of training participants who reported training ‘exceeded expectations’ (n=15).

*“Looking forward to starting volunteering.” (PLR volunteer)*

*“Very useful to have current PLR volunteers role playing with you.” (PLR volunteer)*

*“Altogether, a most engaging presentation.” (PLR volunteer)*

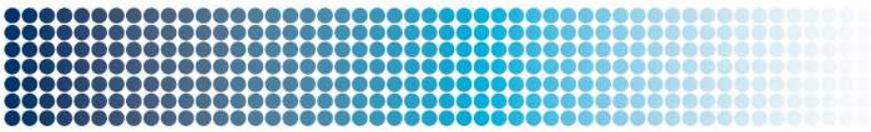
Given that PLR training evaluation forms were collected immediately post-training, volunteers were asked in the PLR volunteer survey whether they believed that the PLR training had sufficiently prepared them for PLR delivery. Sixty per cent of the respondents agreed with this statement.

*“For those with little background in children and education yes, but also a great learning curve on the floor.” (PLR volunteer)*

#### 4.1.3 Provision of ongoing support for PLR volunteers

In 2014, volunteers were invited to six different professional development topics related to their volunteer work with PLR. All respondents to the Ardoch volunteer survey reported that they went to at least one of the professional development sessions offered. Only one respondent offered suggestions for future professional development topics, which related to advice on how to respond to affection from children and managing interruptions to reading time.

Eighty per cent of respondents to the PLR volunteer survey (n=4) were very satisfied or satisfied with ongoing support provided by Ardoch PLR staff. All respondents of the Ardoch volunteer survey also agreed or strongly agreed that they were well supported by Ardoch staff in 2014 (n=4).



*"[Ardoch PLR staff member] has done a great job supporting me this year - prompt to get back to me, and always had a moment to talk with me or discuss any issues. [Ardoch staff members] have facilitated great professional development and training sessions which has really boosted my skill set in dealing with the kids." (PLR volunteer)*

#### 4.1.4 Development and maintenance of partnerships with Early Childhood sites

In 2014, there were 13 partnerships established with early childhood sites who supported the delivery of PLR within their ECEC centre. Ardoch also received six new requests to partner with other early childhood sites. Prior to the establishment of a partnership with a new early childhood site, Ardoch PLR staff meet with the early childhood site staff and centre management to brief them about the operations and requirements of PLR and Ardoch's other programs. This meeting also provides an opportunity for Ardoch to learn more about the staff and culture of the early childhood site. A formal Partnership Agreement is then written up outlining the roles and responsibilities of Ardoch and the partner site, including the specific requirements for PLR and other activities (if applicable).

Each established site partnership group met three times during 2014, for annual planning, a mid year review and an end of year review. Partnership meetings were regularly attended by the Ardoch Programs Team Leader, Education Partnership Coordinator, the ECEC Centre Director and an ECEC Centre Educator. Meetings were also attended by other Ardoch staff members, where required.

ECEC Partner Sites are positive about the partnership with Ardoch in relation to PLR. Respondents of the Ardoch EC staff survey all reported that the customer service and support received from Ardoch in 2014 was either excellent or good (n=5). The majority of respondents also agreed with the statement 'my centre is better able to meet the needs of our children and/or families because of our partnership with Ardoch'.

*"Yes absolutely, we value the partnership with Ardoch, volunteers are fantastic." (ECEC Staff member)*

*"The support has been wonderful this year." (ECEC Staff member)*

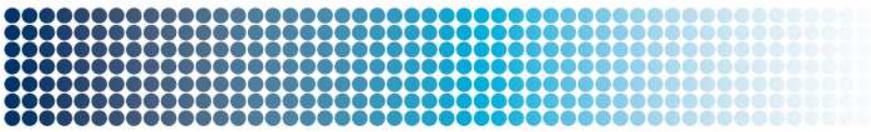
*"Ardoch have been a fantastic support for our struggling families and also for children by providing them with added experiences throughout the year (PLR program and excursions)." (ECEC Staff member)*

#### 4.1.5 Findings

The process evaluation findings suggest that there are a number of key success factors of the PLR program:

- engaging children into the program,
- engaging children during the weekly reading sessions,
- providing PLR volunteers with a strong training program and ongoing support and
- establishing partnerships with early childhood sites to support the delivery of PLR.

Potential areas for improvement were also identified; these areas are described in more detail below.



### *Engagement of children*

The program has been successful at engaging children to commence the program, with 81 children participating in 2014 across three geographical areas. Given parental consent is obtained prior to implementing PLR with any child, parents appear to be positive about the program and willing for their child to engage with the PLR program. The data suggests that the most likely reason that children disengage with the program is beyond Ardoch's control; one of the biggest factors in all regions is transience, with many families withdrawing their children from early childhood centres due to housing instability.

Collected data demonstrated that children in Inner Melbourne sites experience shorter PLR weekly sessions than children in other sites. In future it would be useful to investigate whether different weekly reading times have an influence on the impact of the program. This would help to determine how important the amount of time spent during PLR sessions is, and whether this should be consistent across sites.

While child engagement with the program can vary from week to week, volunteer feedback suggests that once children are enrolled in PLR, their engagement with reading increases over time. It appears that the current approach of the volunteer being guided by the child's interest in the weekly reading session is a key success factor for overall engagement with the program over time.

### *PLR volunteer training*

Training is a key aspect of the PLR program, one that is highly regarded by the volunteers. The benefits of the shadowing process are less clear from the available data. While it does not appear that the shadowing process does any harm, it can be time consuming and requires additional resourcing by Ardoch staff to organise shadowing for each new volunteer. Further data needs to be collected about the utility of the shadowing process, particularly for volunteers who will be operating within the playgroup setting.

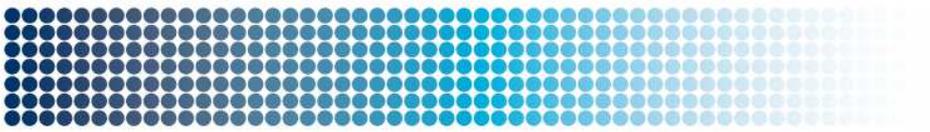
### *Ongoing volunteer support*

PLR volunteers all reported being satisfied with professional development opportunities that were offered to them during the year. All volunteers attended at least one of the offered sessions. The impact of these sessions was difficult to ascertain from the data provided, however, limited qualitative data implied that the availability of this professional development added to their satisfaction, skills and confidence, which is the short term outcome for PLR volunteers. Ardoch may wish to consider collecting more data about the impact of professional development opportunities into the future. Ongoing support by Ardoch staff during 2014 was also highly commended by PLR volunteers.

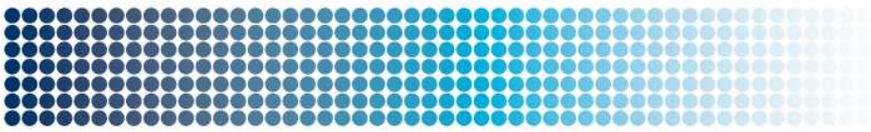
### *Development and maintenance of EC partnerships*

Data suggests that Ardoch has fostered a number of successful partnerships to support the delivery of PLR. The vast majority of EC staff surveyed for this evaluation endorse the benefits of a partnership with Ardoch.

While it is encouraging to obtain positive feedback from EC partner sites about the strength of the partnership, feedback from a select few volunteers (see Section 3.3.1) suggests that there is room for improvement in terms of the relationship with some sites. These volunteers suggested that the support for their role within the early childhood site could be improved. As such, while the development and maintenance of partnerships is working strongly to improve the EC partner outcome, there are some sites where this process is not contributing to the desired outcome. Given Ardoch have undertaken significant work to establish and maintain partnerships with



EC partner sites, there may be opportunities for EC partner site leaders to address issues with their staff at relevant sites. Ardoch may need to undertake further work with EC partners to help them understand what EC sites must commit to in order to ensure the success of the PLR program.



## 5. Limitations of the evaluation

The findings presented in this report must be interpreted with caution due to the nature of the methodological limitations experienced during the evaluation period.

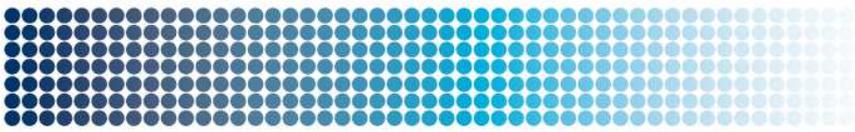
### *5.1 Limitations related to the evaluation methodology*

The intention of this report is to investigate whether PLR is achieving the outcomes it set out to achieve (impact evaluation) and to determine the key success factors of PLR (process evaluation). It can be a difficult task to demonstrate the impact of a small community based program. For example, one of the primary outcomes of the PLR program is that 'all children who participate in PLR have strong literacy and social skills when they enter school'. This is a long term outcome, which is influenced by a range of factors, several of which are external to the PLR program. For the purposes of this evaluation, evaluation questions that are addressed in this report related to short term outcomes of the PLR program, such as 'to increase the pre-literacy skills of children participating in PLR'. These outcomes were identified by Ardoch staff and volunteers for the program logic used to guide the evaluation. Theoretically, the PLR program is more likely to have a direct effect on short term outcomes. A common challenge for impact evaluation based within community program settings is that even short term outcomes can be influenced by extraneous factors. While Ardoch does not claim that PLR is solely responsible for improvements in child pre-literacy skills, it is a variable of interest for measuring the impact of the program (for example, improvements in child pre-literacy skills as measured on the Monitoring and Evaluation Form). The use of a mixed methods evaluation design somewhat ameliorates this limitation, through using other sources to corroborate the data collected from the Monitoring and Evaluation Forms. It is important to acknowledge that this limitation is most applicable to evaluating the child outcome; the short term outcomes measured for volunteers and ECEC partners are less likely to be subject to external variables.

### *5.2 Limitations related to data collection*

The external evaluation commenced in mid 2014, and commenced with a series of workshops aimed to re-examine the intended outcomes and activities of the program. While a number of data collection tools and processes had been established at the commencement of the PLR program, Ardoch indicated that they were open to changes being made to these tools. As such, it was recommended that existing tools be revised, streamlined or removed, and that new tools be developed where agreed upon evaluation questions could not be measured with existing tools. These tools are described in more detail in Section 2.4. However, these tools were not finalised until December 2014. Therefore, some tools were not implemented during the current evaluation period, while other tools were only implemented with a minimal number of volunteers and ECEC staff. Data presented in this report may not be representative of all volunteers and ECEC staff engaged with PLR.

Ardoch undertake a number of other important programs within ECEC settings, which also use volunteers for implementation purposes. Therefore, Ardoch has established processes in place for collecting feedback from both these groups, primarily the end of year Ardoch volunteer survey and the Ardoch Early Childhood partner sites survey. While these surveys were used to supplement the data provided within this report in an effort to ameliorate the low number of responses for other PLR data collection tools, these surveys were also subject to low response rates. Given the PLR volunteer survey was also administered around the same time as the Ardoch volunteer survey, volunteers may have been unwilling to complete two surveys.



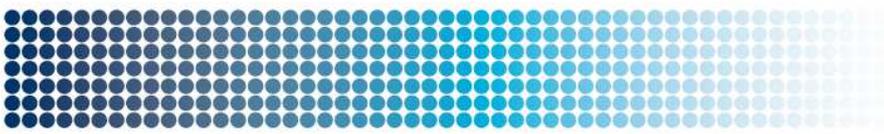
Conversely, given volunteers were able to complete these surveys anonymously, the evaluators cannot be certain whether any volunteer has responded to both surveys, therefore potentially creating artificial trends in the data.

No changes were made to the Monitoring and Evaluation Form that is used to collect data about children taking part in the PLR program. It is intended to be completed by the volunteer two to three weeks following the child's commencement in PLR and then again toward the end of the year. Ardoch records show that 81 children were enrolled in PLR across the four geographical areas in 2014. However, at the time data was provided to the evaluators in early 2015, only four children (5 per cent of the original cohort) had records for both time points. Completed forms were submitted for 28 children who commenced the program within Inner Melbourne or Frankston (35%). Monitoring and Evaluation Forms were not completed for children participating in Stonnington or Geelong sites. Feedback provided by Ardoch staff indicates that a number of challenges contributed to the lack of data collection using this tool, including: children leaving the centres, and staff changes at Ardoch and partner sites during the evaluation period. For the purposes of this report, data collected using Monitoring and Evaluation Forms for 2013 PLR children who participated in Inner Melbourne sites was collated with the 2014 data. It is important to acknowledge that, given the number of children who participated in PLR, this is still a small sample of children, and results should be interpreted with caution.

While an external evaluation was considered particularly timely in relation to the program expanding into a playgroup setting, the majority of the data provided for the impact evaluation relates to existing sites in Inner Melbourne and Frankston. The only data provided about the impact of PLR in Stonnington was from one volunteer, while two volunteers from Geelong responded to the survey. It is acknowledged that some volunteers did not disclose which site they volunteered in. No ECEC partners from Geelong participated in the evaluation; only one ECEC partner from Inner Melbourne completed the survey. As a result, findings presented in this report may not accurately capture the experiences and beliefs of volunteers and ECEC partners from other sites. It is important to acknowledge that Inner Melbourne sites were subject to a number of ECEC staff departures during 2014, and that PLR was established in Geelong in Term 4, 2014. As noted in Section 2.4.5, the process evaluation relied on a range of data sources. Therefore some of the data provided a more holistic picture of the PLR program across the three geographical sites (for example, the administrative data) whereas other sources were subject to same biases described above for the impact evaluation.

### *5.3 Summary of limitations*

While there are clear limitations with this evaluation, the evidence collected during 2014 demonstrates a number of positive findings that merit further investigation in 2015 and beyond. It is important to acknowledge that small scale community programs can often be subject to evaluation challenges such as withdrawal of participants, staffing turnover or deprioritisation of data collection tasks. Resourcing limitations can also make it difficult to procure rigorous evaluation data. It is commendable that Ardoch are committed to investing in evaluation processes to measure the impact and processes of the PLR program, with a view to identifying key success factors of the program and areas for improvement. With some modifications to data collection processes, it is anticipated that Ardoch will be able to strengthen their evaluation processes in the future. Through overcoming the limitations documented in this report, it will be possible for Ardoch to determine whether the extremely positive findings documented in 2014 can be replicated.



## 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, the following recommendations are suggested for the PLR Program:

### *Recommendation 1*

*That Ardoch undertake further evaluation of PLR to substantiate the findings presented in this evaluation report.*

As described in Section 5, a number of limitations were encountered during the current evaluation period. While the evaluators sought to address the methodological limitations of the evaluation approach through the use of a mixed methods design, there were also a number of challenges related to the data collection processes. In summary, low response rates, the delay in finalisation of data collection tools, disproportionate responses from each geographical area where PLR is operating and multiple data collection requests made to individual stakeholders at the end of the year all contributed to a small dataset.

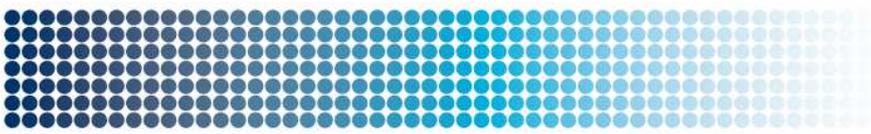
The data that was available for analysis suggest that PLR has benefit to children who participate, by increasing their pre-literacy skills, enjoyment of reading and enhancing their social skills. Furthermore, it is notable that both PLR volunteers and ECEC partner site stakeholders shared positive views about the impact of PLR on children. The process evaluation findings also suggested that a number of key factors contribute to the success of PLR, including the weekly reading sessions with volunteers, PLR training, volunteer support from Ardoch and the partnerships with ECEC sites. Areas of further investigation relating to PLR processes were identified. Two suggestions to improve PLR were also shared by volunteers.

The extent of positive feedback is striking, and indicative of a successful program. However, given the limitations summarised above, further evaluation needs to occur to ensure that these findings are reliable and also representative of all sites in which PLR is implemented.

### *Recommendation 2*

*Processes for data collection require further review by Ardoch, in consultation with PLR volunteers.*

Refinement of the data collection processes may mitigate the low response rates experienced during the current evaluation period. In particular, the 2014 Monitoring and Evaluation Form response rate of five per cent of commencing children is particularly low. Other data collection tools, such as the PLR volunteer survey and the ECEC staff interview, were not provided to all volunteers or staff, whereas the family interview and ECEC staff survey were not implemented at all in 2014. As documented in Section 5 of this report, anecdotal data from Ardoch suggest a variety of reasons for the low response rates. It will be important to explore which of these reasons are most common, and establishing strategies to address these challenges and improve response rates in 2015 and beyond. For example, if the departure of children or staff from centres is a primary reason for lack of follow up, Ardoch may wish to implement selected PLR data collection tools on a quarterly or six monthly basis, rather than only at the end of the year. It will also be important to explore why Monitoring and Evaluation Forms were not completed at all for the 31 children participating in PLR at Geelong and Stonnington sites, and establish strategies to overcome data collection barriers at these locations.



The implementation of PLR in the Ardoch-facilitated Stonnington playgroup represented a departure from the usual method of PLR provision within an ECEC setting. As such, it is important to determine whether this change had any influence over the desired outcomes. Given that the 2014 dataset includes limited feedback that is specific to the Stonnington playgroup, it will be important in future evaluation activities to capture more data that is specific to the experiences of staff, volunteers and children who are engaged with the playgroup-based PLR program. Improving data collection processes within the playgroup context will enable Ardoch to measure whether implementation within a playgroup results in better pre-literacy outcomes for children and to justify expansion into other playgroup settings in the future.

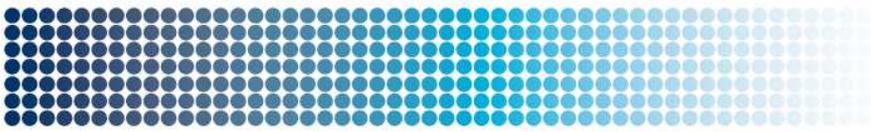
Feedback from one volunteer provided during the current evaluation period suggests that data collection processes are detrimental to the volunteer experience of the program. This finding is corroborated by feedback provided directly to Ardoch's Education Partnership Coordinators. While there is merit for asking the volunteers to complete the Monitoring and Evaluation Form to minimise requests on the ECEC staff time, it is important to look for options to streamline overall data collection requirements. For example, while the observation record provides a source of rich qualitative data about the program processes and potential impact of the program for the child, it is time consuming to complete, analyse and other data collection tools are in use which capture information about program processes and impact. Prior to making any changes to existing data collection requirements, Ardoch may wish to investigate how other volunteers perceive the data collection requirements of their role. Alternatively, given Ardoch's intention is not for PLR to be run by volunteers with a professional background, there may also be merit for Ardoch to consider a reallocation of the data collection responsibilities, particularly for the Monitoring and Evaluation Form, to ECEC educators. If Ardoch were to consider a change of this nature, it would be important to do this in consultation with the ECEC managers and staff, and documented as a requirement of the program in the PLR Partnership Agreement. Ardoch would also need to determine who would be responsible for data collection within the Stonnington playgroup, as it is not conducted in an ECEC centre setting.

### *Recommendation 3*

*Ardoch are encouraged to further develop the Partnership Agreement, which clearly explains the expectations of all PLR partner site staff.*

One of the few areas for improvement documented as part of this evaluation relates to the support of volunteers by educators during the implementation of the weekly PLR sessions. Given not all of the current group of PLR volunteers responded to the survey, Ardoch staff may wish to undertake further investigation of how widely this experience is encountered by other volunteers prior to actioning this recommendation. Should Ardoch find that this issue is experienced by a number of volunteers, they may wish to determine whether there is anything that Ardoch staff can do to foster continued engagement and support of PLR at both Centre director level as well as educator level. However, given that Ardoch staff have already undertaken significant work to strengthen the partnerships, Ardoch may need to request that Centre directors take a lead role in strengthening the support of educators within their site.

Should Ardoch wish to reallocate some of the data collection responsibilities to ECEC educators (as described above under Recommendation 2), these changes should also form part of a further development of the Partnership Agreement.

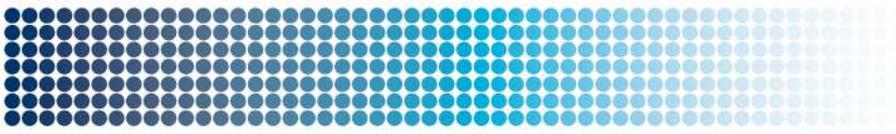


#### *Recommendation 4*

*Ardoch are encouraged to monitor the quality of the implementation of PLR reading sessions as the program expands.*

One of the long term outcomes for PLR which is documented in the PLR Program Logic is 'PLR is embedded as a key program in Early Childhood Centres'. As noted above, further evaluation that supports the positive findings presented in this report will strengthen the likelihood of that PLR expands into other sites. It is notable that PLR initially consisted of a small group of volunteers and staff implementing PLR in two ECEC centres within Inner Melbourne. By the end of 2014, the program had been expanded into two new centres in Inner Melbourne, a playgroup setting (Stonnington) as well as multiple sites within Frankston and Geelong. This expansion has included the employment of new Ardoch staff members such as Educational Partnership Coordinators for each area, more PLR volunteers and new ECEC settings. Based on the findings presented in this report, the expansion of PLR to date is a positive outcome for the children and sites engaged in the program. However, program expansion may lead to inconsistencies in the quality of implementation of the weekly reading sessions. The advantage of a small program is that oversight of the program quality is usually closely monitored and supported by one or two people, which appears to have been the case with the PLR model. While oversight of PLR quality continued to be sustained into 2014, it is an important consideration with any further expansion of the program during 2015 and beyond.

Given the resourcing required to enable Ardoch to deliver PLR within the community, Ardoch have considered outsourcing the delivery of the PLR program to other organisations as a means of expanding the overall reach of the program. In this model, Ardoch would be responsible for training the selected organisations so that they are capable of delivering the PLR. If this approach was to be adopted, there would potentially be an increased risk to the quality of the program. There are currently a number of key success factors of the program that are directly attributable to Ardoch's strong leadership of the PLR program, for example, the training program and ongoing support of volunteers. Should Ardoch wish to outsource the delivery of the PLR model into the future, it would be advisable to create a training manual and also closely document the key aspects of the ways in which Ardoch staff currently support PLR volunteers. Ardoch would also need to consider how to ensure quality implementation over time.



## 7. Conclusion

Based on the findings presented in this report, the PLR program appears to be attaining improvements in three of the program's short term outcomes: increasing the pre-literacy skills of children participating in PLR, increasing the confidence, skills and satisfaction of PLR volunteers and successfully engaging ECEC partners with the PLR program.

In relation to the three stakeholder outcomes reviewed as part of this evaluation, the findings suggest that there may be scope for improvement in terms of obtaining ECEC partner support of PLR volunteers in some sites. Further investigation of this finding with a wider selection of sites is encouraged.

The process evaluation focused on four core components of the PLR program, and sought to identify the key success factors and areas for improvement. Process evaluation findings suggest that PLR is successful at engaging children into the program and at engaging children with reading over multiple reading sessions. PLR training is a key component of the program's success, and the availability of continuing professional development and ongoing support by Murdoch staff appears to contribute successfully to the desired volunteer outcome. Areas for improvement and further investigation were also identified.

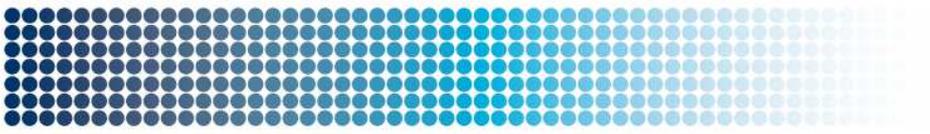
While the vast majority of the findings were very positive about the impact and processes of PLR, it is important to acknowledge that the findings are based on small sample sizes, which are not representative of the different geographical locations in which PLR is currently embedded.

Four recommendations have been presented in this report, which underline the importance of continued evaluation to determine whether the results presented in this report are reliable and representative of the whole PLR cohort. Of particular importance is monitoring the impact of PLR within the new playgroup setting, as well as continued oversight of the quality of program processes as the PLR program expands into new sites.

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Shoghi, A., Willersdorf, E., Braganza, L. and McDonald, M. (2013) *2013 Let's Read Literature Review*. Victoria: The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.



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