

Title: Playgroups as sites for parental education

Abstract

There is widespread international interest in parental education as a means of promoting educational equality through improving educational outcomes for young children. The research in this area suggests an association between the home learning environment and children's educational outcomes and highlights the importance of parental education for supporting young children's learning through play. This article reviews the international literature around parental education initiatives (or 'interventions') in early childhood and then considers playgroups as potential sites for parental education. The article identifies the universal features of playgroups that make these sites appealing for the implementation of parental education initiatives and discusses the complexities associated with the design of interventions aimed at meeting the diverse needs of parents attending playgroups. It concludes by providing a case for community playgroups as cultural contexts, to be considered sites for parental education through curriculum aimed at supporting parents to actively engage in their children's learning and development through play.

Key words: parental education, early childhood, playgroups, learning, play

Introduction

This paper considers the potential of playgroups to operate as a form of parental education intended to enhance parents' awareness of children's learning and development through play. It reports on a review of the literature around parental education initiatives and outcomes associated with regular participation in playgroups. The paper aims to provide a synthesis of the literature in relation to parental education initiatives and the potential role that playgroups may play as sites for parental education.

A literature search was conducted using searching strategies to search a range of databases. Databases that were used as part of this searching strategy included A+ Education, British Education Index, ProQuest Education Journals, Informit Complete, Academic Search Complete and ProQuest Psychology Journals. Key words and terms used in the initial search included 'playgroups + research', 'early childhood + parents' and 'parent + education + early childhood'. After the initial search articles were checked for relevance additional key words such as 'parent + education + interventions' and 'parental + education + play' were included in a second search using the same databases. Limits for publication of literature were originally set between 2004 and 2014, which extended to include some significant works prior to 2004 in the second search. In total 62 articles and reports were

identified during this process and further reduced on the basis of their relevance to the focus of the review.

The literature in parental education seems to be conducted using an interventionist framework (e.g. Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2009). This literature generally describes families using terms such as 'at risk', 'hard to reach' or 'vulnerable'. These terms come out of an interventionist methodology and are used by the authors of the studies. Although there is an alternative movement that is beginning to look at 'hard to reach' services rather than 'hard to reach' families (Author 3, 2013) consistency with terms used in the studies that have formed part of this literature review has been maintained throughout this paper.

In Australia the term *playgroups* is used to describe organised parent-child groups who meet on a regular basis to engage in play and social activities (Dadich and Spooner, 2008; Hancock, et al., 2012; McArthur et al., 2010). These playgroups are most widely accessed by families prior to their children attending formal education (Oke et al., 2007) and participants usually meet for about two hours per week (McArthur et al., 2010). For the purposes of this paper we use this definition of playgroup as it appears to encompass similar views internationally that are

discussed later. Playgroups are also located in other countries including United Kingdom, United States and Netherlands (OECD, 2006).

Parental education in early childhood

Parental education is a term given to educational programs designed to improve outcomes for families. It has been heralded as a means of addressing disadvantage and improving literacy and numeracy educational outcomes for young children (Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003; Author 3, 2012b; Henderson and Mapp, 2002). This has led to widespread interest internationally around the implementation of intervention and prevention initiatives aimed at providing parental education about children's capacity to learn through play. Although play is described in many ways, it is commonly referred to as an activity that is engaged in for enjoyment (Shipley, 2008). In early childhood education, the idea that children's prior-to-school experiences and parental involvement in these experiences influences educational outcomes later in life is not new. However, reaching those families who would most benefit from initiatives designed to engage parents in this type of parental education has proved difficult to achieve (Author 3, 2012a; Author 3, 2013). This also seems to be the case for initiatives designed to support parental learning about children's play and early learning.

Families targeted by parental education initiatives and services are often described as 'vulnerable', 'at-risk' or 'hard to reach' due to their detachment from the system, a lack in skills and resources or problematic life circumstances (Author 3, 2013). Some researchers have said that the term 'hard to reach' should be applied to 'hard to reach' services instead of families (Author 3, 2012a). This is because services could be located near limited transport, have limited hours of operation, assume a particular level of literacy required to read information brochures or have a lack of understanding of the range of factors influencing parental access to these services. Author 3 (2012a) describe a key barrier to parents accessing services as being *communication*. They highlight the need for services to take into consideration factors such as language, culture and literacy in the communication processes used to engage families in the service. They also identify factors relating to the *setting* such as a need for location, activities and organisational aspects to be inclusive and appropriate to the needs of families attending. Further, while research reporting on intervention initiatives, such as the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) (Author 3, 2003) has provided insights into outcomes associated with parental education programs including improvements in children's literacy and numeracy learning and cognitive and physical competence, a key barrier to wider scale implementation of these

initiatives appears to be linked to the many ways, formats and approaches to providing parents with access to these programs (Author 3, 2012a).

Traditional or top-down approaches to parental education about children's capacity to learn through play have focussed on the dissemination of educational information or the provision of formalised parenting programs. Parents and families, who are the main targets of these forms of provision, that is those that categorised as 'hard to reach', 'vulnerable' or 'at-risk', have largely been found to underutilise these programs. Milbourne (2003) has suggested this is because these approaches generally do not take into consideration the voice and priorities of marginalised groups in the community. Initiatives that have been found to be more successful tend to be more informal and seek to engage with the diversity that exists within communities (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). This would suggest that for intervention models aimed at improving children's learning and development outcomes to be transferable to other contexts, there is a need to first understand the complex nature of parental involvement in education interventions.

International literature on parental education interventions

Parental education has been the focus of a number of intervention programs internationally. Notable examples from the United States include the Home

Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) and the Early Head Start program. Both of these programs have a strong focus on the delivery of parental education through home visits and associated research indicates that there is an association between parental education and positive learning and behaviour outcomes in children's later schooling (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). A distinctive feature of the HIPPY program is the involvement of trained paraprofessionals, recruited from similar backgrounds to the families, to model parental engagement strategies such as reading books to children (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Research into other early childhood preschool programs has provided additional insights into the importance of parental education for positive outcomes later in schooling. For example, the High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study assessed three preschool approaches used with children in poverty in the United States during the 1960s. The results of the longitudinal study that followed children, from age three and four to age 15 and 23, found that helping parents to understand children's learning and development had benefits later in schooling and into adulthood (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997). The influence of good parenting is also reported in findings from the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study (Sylva et al., 2004). This study aimed to identify the effects of preschool education in the United Kingdom and the findings were used to inform government policy addressing disadvantage. The EPPE case studies

highlighted the importance of the home learning environment (HLE) for children's educational outcomes and in particular, benefits associated with parents' engagement with their children in early childhood learning experiences and daily home activities (i.e. going to the library, singing songs and rhymes, playing with letters and numbers)(Author 3, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford, et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004).

Improving levels of parental 'involvement in and understanding of their children's learning' (Author 3, 2012b: 164) was the focus of a further study in the United Kingdom. The evaluation of the Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP) employed a mixed methods approach to investigate interventions used by nine organisations working with the most excluded or hard to reach families in their respective communities. It found that interventions that focus on parenting practices aimed at providing a stimulating home learning environment and creating positive family relationships encouraged parents to take an active role in their children's learning. This active role included engaging in practices such as regular visits to the grocery store, sharing books with their children and 'providing a safe play environment and providing a special place for toys' (Author 3, 2012b: 171). The findings of this study are important for future studies aimed at achieving similar outcomes because the findings show that early interventions with an

education focus on parents' active engagement with their children can contribute to positive outcomes and a strong home learning environment. These findings support claims that parents need both an awareness of children's learning through play and an understanding of their role as facilitators in this process (Author 3, 2014). Author 3(2012b) acknowledge that one of the challenges this study highlights is finding ways to respond to the range of parental needs represented by groups accessing this form of provision through the use of concrete examples for parenting and learning through play that are sensitive to these needs.

Another longitudinal study that has provided insights into early childhood intervention programs aimed at improving educational outcomes for children living in poverty is the Abecedarian project (FPG Child Development Institute, 2014). This project investigated educational, economic and social-emotional outcomes through to adulthood using a randomised control study design. Of the 111 infants involved in the original study 101 participated at age 30 (Campbell et al., 2012). As part of this intervention each child was provided with individualised educational activities aimed at improving social, emotional and cognitive outcomes. Outcomes at age 30 indicated significant educational benefits such as higher rates of school completion than the control group (Campbell et al., 2012). The findings of this study suggest that there may be some further research needed

into parental education interventions designed to teach specific activities to promote learning through play as opposed to promoting an awareness of play in general.

In recent years it is playgroups that have attracted attention as possible sites for intervention in the form of parent education. For example, in Australia the *Sing and Grow* intervention uses music therapy in playgroups to build “capacity in parents to support their children's development in the early years of life” (Playgroup Queensland, 2014) and Hancock et al (2012) report on improved social and emotional outcomes for children from disadvantaged families who attend playgroup regularly. With a growing body of research indicating that helping parents understand child development and providing ideas to support children’s learning at home does make a difference to achievement at school (Epstein, 2011) playgroups provide appealing sites for parent education. Epstein (2011) suggests that the focus on parental involvement in children’s learning should be reframed to encompass school, family and community partnerships, as it is these three contexts in which children learn and develop. There is some further suggestion that this notion extends into prior to school contexts. This is supported by research showing that good home parenting (i.e. provision of an intellectually stimulating, secure, safe environment and models for values associated with positive social and

educational outcomes) influences educational outcomes regardless of disadvantage (Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003) and further suggests that playgroups may provide a community context where this notion of partnership may be realised.

What are playgroups and what purpose do playgroups serve?

Descriptions of playgroups as parent-child groups who meet regularly for the purposes of socialisation and engagement in play activities are noted internationally throughout the literature. For example, Mize and Pettit (2010: 1271) describe playgroups in the United States as ‘an arrangement whereby groups of parents and their young children meet together’. In New Zealand playgroups are described similarly but include an added emphasis on the facilitation of play in playgroups (Ministry of Education, 2014). Playgroups as a context or sites for the facilitation of play is also discussed in reference to playgroups in the United Kingdom (Statham and Brophy, 2006) and supports the contention in Australia and internationally, that playgroups are commonly characterised by parental involvement in the facilitation of children’s play (Lloyd et al., 2006). This is significant because as a common element of playgroups in Australia and overseas, parental involvement in playgroups and the facilitation of play draws attention to the potential of these play-based sites to support young

children's learning and parental engagement in communities (Author 1 and Author 2, 2014).

Playgroups have been in existence since the 1960s and evolved 'as a self-help response' (Statham and Brophy, 2006: 40) to a shortage in pre-school or nursery school services. However, in recent years the interest in playgroups has shifted from filling a service gap (Moss et al., 1992) to the very real potential for playgroups to contribute more broadly to social capital (Nyland et al., 2014). This interest centres on playgroups as sites for contributing to community outcomes through parental education about how best to support young children's developmental outcomes through the facilitation of play.

Within the broad range of early childhood services, playgroups have emerged as sites for promoting positive outcomes for families and children (French, 2005; Oke et al., 2007). This has contributed to the establishment of different types of playgroups aimed at meeting the diverse needs of family participants (Dadich and Spooner, 2008). Typically there are two main types of playgroups, and these are usually supported by playgroup associations (Dadich and Spooner, 2008; Mize and Pettit, 2010; Moss et al., 1992). The first type are community playgroups which are self-managed, unfunded and do not necessarily have a strategic focus on improving

outcomes for particular community groups or families. These playgroups generally offer free flowing play activities and are parent-led. In contrast, supported or facilitated playgroups are usually set up to provide a service to families who may not access community or self-managed playgroups (Oke et al., 2007). These playgroups are provided by not-for-profit organisations and rely on a playgroup coordinator to initiate and lead the playgroup. This model of playgroup provision usually aims to engage families and children who are considered vulnerable, at risk or hard to reach (Jackson, 2013). Several other types of playgroups have emerged that can be considered variations of these models. For example, supported playgroups also include intensive support playgroups aimed at providing interventions to 'support isolated or disadvantaged families' (Oke et al., 2007: 5) and mobile playgroups aimed at delivering services to remote communities.

A range of different types of playgroups is also represented under the community playgroup model. These include parent initiated and parent-led neighbourhood playgroups, local government playgroups supported by local government workers and roster playgroups that involve parental supervision of children and playgroup activities on a roster basis (Playgroup Victoria, 2014). Of the two main playgroup models it is community playgroups that may provide insights into sustainable outcomes for families and children who attend on a regular basis. This is because

community playgroups provide access to a broad cross section of the community who attend regularly for a myriad of reasons that are their own and whose attendance has generally not been initiated by interest groups, agencies or the idea that they and children are considered at risk or hard to reach.

One playgroup model that may provide insights into factors contributing to parents' regular attendance is the 'Room to Play' (RTP) model. Author 3 (2006) report on this 'drop in' style provision run by the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) in the United Kingdom. Although not explicitly referred to in the literature as a playgroup, the RTP model embraces similar notions of parental involvement in facilitating children's play. The 'Room to Play' model aims to engage families reported as being least likely to engage in other models of preschool provision through bringing the provision into the immediate community. This is achieved through the implementation of the model in a busy shopping centre. The exploratory evaluation of RTP occurred over three years (2006-2008) and aimed to identify enablers contributing to parental engagement that could be transferrable to other contexts. Using observation, snapshot, interview and questionnaire data collection methods, the findings identified five components of a transferrable model. These components were 1) location, space and time; 2) relationships and communication; 3) curriculum; 4) parent

information and signposting; and 5) staffing, professional training and interpersonal skills (Author 3, 2013). The findings suggested that the *location* of RTP in a shopping centre where families visit regularly, in a welcoming and homely physical *space* that is accessible across a range of *times* was conducive to regular attendance. This component was seen as important for fostering regular attendance necessary for staff to establish positive *relationships and communication* practices with families over time. These positive relationships enabled parental education through modelling interactions between parent and child and through the provision of play-based *curriculum* designed to promote parents' engagement with their children during play. Further, it was found that *signposting* or providing access to *information* was the preferred means of linking parents to other services, as opposed to bringing these services into RTP or co-locating the services in the physical space. This required *staff* to be sensitive to parents' needs and requests and *knowledgeable* about a range of parenting subjects and services. These 5 components of the RTP model may have some transferability to playgroups as sites for parental education. In parent-led community playgroups in particular, it is the component of *curriculum* that may provide the greatest potential for encouraging positive interactions between parents and children and an understanding of learning through play. This is because in parent-led community playgroup contexts there is generally minimal

involvement from other staff and hence the components associated with relationships, parent information and location, time and space (Author 3, 2013) have to a large extent, already been determined by the group.

Although variations in the types of playgroups exist, playgroups seem to have a common aim to engage parents and children in play and social activities. Jackson (2011) describes a key aim of the supported playgroup as providing access to play and parenting resources, social networks, parenting and child development support. Others describe playgroup aims in similar ways (Lloyd et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2004) and highlight a range of benefits associated with regular attendance including social, emotional, physical and cognitive learning outcomes for children and social outcomes for parents that lead to flow on effects in the community (Sneddon and Haynes, 2003). From a research perspective these common aims and associated outcomes are in need of further investigation. This is because reports such as *Pathways to Prevention in Australia* (National Crime Prevention, 1999) have led to increased attention on playgroups as sites for enacting government policies aimed at addressing disadvantage in practice. However, research shows that the “families who are targeted by these intervention policies are families who would (theoretically) like to access the provision, but are unable to do so for a variety of reasons” (Author 3, 2013, p. 128). Lloyd et al.

(1989) drew attention to similar findings in their review of playgroups in the United Kingdom finding that parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to attend playgroups.

Parental understandings of the role of playgroups

It would seem that parental understandings of the role of playgroups in contemporary society have changed. Needham and Jackson (2012) report on a comparative study investigating the roles and purposes of playgroups in Australia and the United Kingdom and found that playgroups needed to provide for both parents' and children's needs. Similarly, a Belgium study reported parents' views on parent support programs and concluded that meeting places such as playgroups should have a relational focus for parents and children (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009). This is in contrast to earlier studies such as those by Statham and Brophy (2006) and Moss et al. (1992) in the United Kingdom. These earlier studies reported on parents' perspectives of the role of playgroups and their reasons for attending and indicated that adult participants described the role in terms of filling a preschool service gap rather than fulfilling a role in meeting parent needs. This somewhat more dynamic role that playgroups serve in contemporary society poses challenges for using playgroups as sites for parental education. This is because responding to local needs requires playgroups as sites for parental

education to cater for a range of parenting needs and skills that exist within and across playgroups.

Playgroups as sites for parent education

Children develop competence to contribute productively as members of society through their experiences with their parents (Bornstein, 2012). As sites for fostering 'playful interactions between parents and children' (Author 3, 2014: 378) playgroups may offer a cultural context for parental education approaches aimed at intervening in early childhood to promote educational outcomes for equality. The importance of children learning through play is well documented and Author 3 (2012) contend that parents need both an awareness that play is important and the skills to enact their role of supporting children's learning through play. For example, the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) program in the United Kingdom engages parents in enacting this role through encouraging learning through the sharing of parenting experiences and through engaging in a 'bi-directional approach' where parents and leaders are valued as partners in children's learning and development (Author 3, 2014). For playgroups to act as sites for actively facilitating this role consideration needs to be given to how these principles can be applied more broadly to the diverse range of contexts that playgroups currently operate within and across.

The role of playgroups in increasing social capital

Increased interest in the role of playgroups in supporting families and young children has resulted in some emerging Australian research findings. This research has particularly focussed on supported playgroups as sites for increasing social capital through bridging and bonding (Author 1 and Author 2, 2013). In the research in this area social capital is usually described in terms of the assets that a person has to draw on (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000), or in a broader sense the 'networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups' (OECD, 2001: 41). Leonard and Onyx (2003) describe bridging and bonding as contributing to social capital. Bridging is when parents are able to connect with professionals associated with early years provision, such as playgroup leaders, early childhood teachers, primary school teachers or maternal and child health support staff. Bonding is when parents have opportunities to connect with other parents who may be having experiences that are similar to their own. Research into participation in supported playgroups has provided insights into the extent to which playgroups as sites for bridging and bonding can improve social capital (Author 3, 2003). For example, Warr, Mann, Forbes and Turner (2013) reported on a qualitative study exploring migrant families experiences attending a supported playgroup and found that it was

important for the facilitators to first build trust with families for social connections through bonding and bridging to occur. In a further study, Jackson (2011) identified eight categories of parental support required to facilitate social connections. This qualitative research reported on three case studies of playgroups in marginalised areas of the community and findings suggested that these different types of parental support contributed to parents' wellbeing, which had flow on effects in the form of positive outcomes for children. Although the importance of social inclusion or feelings of belonging to a community are highlighted internationally (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000) and are increasingly linked to regular playgroup attendance (McArthur, et al., 2010; Oke, et al., 2007) this also contributes to a great diversity within and across playgroups as playgroups evolve to meet the needs of the communities they reside. Hence, the challenge identified by Author 3 (2012) of finding a way to incorporate concrete examples for parental education about children's capacity to learn through play that are applicable to the broad range of families participating in playgroups remains.

Positive outcomes for children attending playgroups have been reported in a range of studies and indicate that most of these outcomes are mediated via parental support (Needham and Jackson, 2012). Some studies report that the opportunity playgroups provide for children to socialise with other children is one of the main

reasons why parents choose to attend playgroups on a regular basis (Needham and Jackson, 2012; Plowman, 2003). Other studies draw attention to parents' valuing the role of play for their children's socialisation and learning (McArthur, et al., 2010; Author 1 and Author 2 2014). Given the reported significance of the home learning environment in influencing children's learning and developmental outcomes (Author 3, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford, et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004) playgroups as sites to influence parenting practices and children's play experiences in the home are of particular research interest. However, much of this research to date has drawn on parents' perspectives of their involvement in playgroups and their perceived influence of these experiences on what happens in the home. The existing playgroup literature does not strongly canvass the extent to which children's experiences in the playgroup are perceived by parents as contributing to their understandings of the home learning environment and how providing opportunities for play in the home can support children's learning. Research in this area would provide further insights into the bi-directional approaches described by Author 3 (2014) as important for connecting home and educational play in ways that contribute to children's learning.

Conclusion

Current research has reported on a range of early childhood interventions aimed at promoting educational equality through parental education about the importance of play for young children's learning and development. The research and literature in this area highlights the complexities associated with service provision and working with a diverse range of families to achieve these aims (Author 3, 2012a). Playgroups as sites for these interventions are attractive because they offer a cultural context where parents and children come together to facilitate children's play. As cultural contexts, playgroups are also sites where children learn about becoming a member of society, which makes them appealing for enacting policies aimed at addressing disadvantage. Like other forms of preschool provision, playgroups aim to meet a diverse range of parent and community needs and this makes it difficult to generalise reported research outcomes outside of individual studies (Dadich and Spooner, 2008). However, the substantial body of international research into early childhood interventions does show that parental education can make a difference to children's learning and development outcomes (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Schweinhart, and Weikart, 1997; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000) and that the home learning environment plays a significant role in children's educational outcomes (Sylva et al., 2004). Hence, it is timely that the potential of playgroups to be sites for parental education is investigated further.

The existing research in this area tends to focus on supported playgroups, which target particular groups in the community (Author 1 and Author 2, 2014; Jackson, 2011; McFarland-Piazza et al., 2012), yet community playgroups that are largely parent-led may provide additional insights into how parental education interventions can contribute more broadly to outcomes within and across communities. We therefore believe there is a knowledge gap in better understanding the role that community playgroups may play as sites for parental education. These community playgroups are of research interest because parents have chosen to attend and be involved in their children's play, which makes them ideal contexts for raising parental awareness and understandings of specific activities and games designed to foster learning through play. This would also indicate that further research is needed to investigate the types of initiatives suitable for use in the community playgroup context where parents take the lead in the program or curriculum development and implementation. From a research perspective this calls for the design of an initiative, perhaps in the form of curriculum, with widescale appeal and applicability to the diverse range of participants in these groups. While community playgroups may have broader appeal than supported playgroups as sites for the implementation of widescale parental education initiatives, the need for understanding of the local context should inform curriculum development and the creation of concrete examples to

facilitate parental awareness and understanding of the importance of play in children's learning and development (Author 3, 2014) is essential.

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