

**Supported Playgroups in Schools: Bonding and bridging family
knowledge about transition to formal schooling**

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Supported Playgroups in Schools: Bonding and bridging family knowledge about transition to formal schooling

Supported Playgroups in Schools (SPinS) are a new initiative in the Australian early childhood education landscape. SPinS are playgroups hosted by a playgroup coordinator co-located on a local school site. Research has identified positive benefits of playgroup participation for children and families. However, little is known about the potential for SPinS to contribute to families' knowledge about transition to formal schooling. This paper uses the social capital concepts of 'bonding' and 'bridging' to examine caregivers' perspectives of their participation in a SPinS with potential to build parental knowledge about their child's transition to formal schooling. We identify three main elements of caregivers' participation in SPinS with such potential, and map these elements into a continuum of low-to-high bonding and bridging relationships to illustrate the potential for SPinS to contribute to the development of increased knowledge about transition to formal schooling by families of young children.

Keywords: Playgroups, transition, social capital theory

Introduction

Supported Playgroups in Schools (SPinS) are a new form of playgroup taking place in Australia. Traditional playgroups known as ‘community playgroups’ operate on a voluntary basis by parents in community settings (McLean et al., 2015). In contrast, SPinS are hosted by a playgroup coordinator and conducted on site at a local school (McLean, Edwards, Colliver, & Schaper, 2014). In this paper, we report on a sub-set of data regarding caregiver perspectives of their participation in a SPinS. The data examined in this paper is located within a larger project conducted in five schools in regional Victoria, Australia. The larger project focussed on multiple stakeholder perspectives of SPinS, and involved caregivers, school staff, the playgroup coordinator and volunteer pre-service early childhood teachers. We define ‘caregivers’ as those participants responsible for bringing their children to the SPinS (parents, grandparents, family-day carers and extended family).

In this paper we seek to understand the potential for SPinS participation by caregivers to build parental knowledge or ‘social capital’ regarding their child’s transition to formal schooling. This is because SPinS represent a unique opportunity for parents to experience and build knowledge about their local school and school participation prior to their children attending as enrolled students. We use the notions of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ as derived from social capital theory (Gittell & Videl, 1998), to conceptualise relationships with like members of the playgroup and school staff as a site for building ‘social capital’ (Putnam, 2000) about school and school transition by participating families.

Research shows that positive transitions to school increase children's social and academic outcomes (Belsky & Mackinnon, 1994; Dockett & Perry, 2013). Research in school transition often focuses on the experiences of children, and includes children's perspectives of the transition process (Murray, 2014). Dockett, Perry and Kearney (2012) have also considered the role of family in school transition. They argue that families play an important role in transition to school because children's early days of schooling are influenced heavily by their families' 'experiences and expectations' (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2012, p. 57) of the transition process. In this paper, we provide new insights into the potential for SPinS to contribute to the building of parental social capital about their child's transition to formal schooling using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging. These insights suggest alternative practices pertaining to school transition and the representation of playgroups in existing policy documentation.

Literature review

Playgroups and Playgroups in Schools

Playgroups are internationally known as groups attended by parents and caregivers with children in the prior-to-school years (McLean et al., 2015). These groups usually sit outside of formal educational contexts and are unique in that families choose to voluntarily attend on a regular basis. In Victoria, Australia, playgroups are represented in two policy documents. These are the national curriculum framework known as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2007) and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (DET, 2016). The EYLF describes playgroups as an 'early childhood setting' (p. 8) alongside pre-schools, kindergarten and family day care. The VEYLDF refers to playgroups as 'early

childhood services' (p. 6). As a relatively new initiative, SPinS are not yet formally recognised as a specific playgroup type in either policy.

Families typically participate in playgroups to increase their social connections with other families and provide play opportunities for their children (Hancock et al., 2012; McArthur et al., 2010). In Australia, playgroup types include community, supported and transition playgroups. Community playgroups are usually unfunded and organised by parents. Supported playgroups are run by a coordinator employed by not-for-profit organisations such as local councils and community service agencies. Transition playgroups are those transitioning from a supported playgroup to a community playgroup. These playgroups continue to receive limited external funding from the funding agency to enable support from a playgroup coordinator to assist in the transition to a community playgroup. In a transition playgroup the funding and support is gradually reduced as the playgroup moves or 'transitions' into operating as a community playgroup. A key role of the playgroup coordinator in a supported playgroup is to provide families with access to play resources and modelled play experiences. Supported playgroups are usually provided with the intention of connecting families and social support services and have particular appeal in communities where families' experience social isolation (Jackson, 2013) due to economic (low income), social and cultural (ethnicity and age) and geographic (rural communities) factors.

Research into playgroup attendance suggests value for parents in terms of parental support. Playgroups provide a meeting place for families to come together to socialise, talk about parenting issues and spend time with their children (Hancock et al., 2012;

McLean et al., 2015; McShane, Cook, Sinclair, Keam & Fry, 2016). Jackson (2011) found that parents from supported playgroups described eight categories of benefit associated with playgroup attendance, including: friendships, social networks, emotional support, parenting skills and access to information/resources. Similar outcomes were reported in an evaluation of supported playgroups in Victoria where parents described regular playgroup attendance as contributing to 'a sense of belonging to both playgroup and the wider community' (DEECD, 2012, p. 15).

The benefits for children of regular playgroup attendance are widely reported. Known benefits for children include social, emotional and cognitive learning (Gregory et al., 2016). Using a learning competence index, an Australian study by Hancock et al. (2012) identified benefits of playgroup attendance in academic learning areas such as language and numeracy. Benefits associated with children's wellbeing are also reported in other Australian studies in supported playgroups (DEECD, 2012), particularly in relation to socialisation (Oke, Stanley, & Theobald 2007) and learning through play (ARTD Consultants, 2008). Internationally, similar outcomes for children are described in the Community Play Initiative (CPI) in Ireland (French, 2005) and the Room to Play model in the United Kingdom (Evangelou, Smith, & Sylva, 2006).

Playgroups in Schools represent an emerging area of early childhood community engagement with families in the prior-to-school years. Playgroups in Schools are located on the school grounds and are managed by the school in partnership with a range of not-for-profit agencies. Participation in a Playgroup in School involves parents attending the playgroup on a weekly basis with their children, and so becoming more familiar with the school grounds and staff associated with the school. At the playgroup

parents and children engage in play-activities together. Supported Playgroups in Schools (SPinS) are a relatively new form of playgroup. SPinS are led by a playgroup coordinator who develops and implements a playgroup conducted in a local school on behalf of attending families. In addition to outcomes associated with participation in community and supported playgroups, research into the benefits of SPinS participation for families indicates that regular engagement in this form of playgroup provides families with increased social connections to school and contributes to parental understandings of children's learning through play (McLean et al., 2014). However, an area of SPinS that remains under-researched is the perspectives held by caregivers regarding their participation in SPinS that may inform their child's later transition to formal schooling. The lack of research in this area is particularly significant given SPinS are located and hosted within the school community to which many children and families are likely to attend.

Transition to formal schooling

Positive transitions to formal schooling (primary /elementary school) are acknowledged as contributing to children's later educational achievement (OECD, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). There is a significant body of international research considering different aspects of transition to formal schooling, such as children's perspectives of transition (Murray, 2014); pedagogical differences in early childhood education and formal schooling practices as an influence on children's experiences of transition (Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, 2010); approaches to supporting young children's transition to formal schooling, such as orientation visits (Dockett & Perry, 2007); and the significance of effective transition to formal schooling for families experiencing social, economic and/or cultural disadvantage (Rothe Urban & Werning 2014).

From a parental perspective, Dockett and Perry (2007) identify eight main categories of transition issues faced by families during a child's transition to formal schooling. These include: (1) knowledge of school related concepts [such as knowledge of the alphabet, numerals and colours]; (2) adjustment for children and the school; (3) skills [such as fine and gross motor skills]; (4) dispositions in relation to feelings about school, relationships and networks; (5) rules and expectations; (6) physical issues [such as age, bullying, safety, eating and uniform]; (7) family issues [such as returning to work and lifestyle changes]; and (8) the educational environment [such as staff, curriculum and culture]. Dockett and Perry's eight categories of transition issues for families are confirmed by additional research, including that of Wildenger and McIntyre (2011) and Barnett and Taylor (2009). This research also found that issues such as school expectations, academic skills (Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011) and intergenerational experiences of schooling (Barnett & Taylor, 2009) are typically encountered by families as a child transitions from the prior-to-school years into formal schooling.

Addressing these issues for families is not simply a matter of providing access to increased early childhood services to support the transition process. Instead, many of these issues pertain to caregiver knowledge about school, school processes and practices. The range of issues identified by Dockett and Perry (2007) attests to the range of school related concepts, relationships, networks, rules and expectations that confront families with a child transitioning to formal schooling. Australian research by Henderson (2014) shows that different educational practices conducted by professionals, early childhood services and teachers working in formal schooling contribute to a knowledge disjunction about what constitutes the social processes and

practices comprising school participation. SPinS suggest a unique opportunity for mediating parental knowledge about school processes and practices because they engage families in playgroup-based learning on the school site.

Building parental knowledge about school practices and processes is considered an important aspect of fostering the home-school partnership (Dockett & Perry, 2007). This is because increased parental knowledge about school practices and processes is associated with increased continuity between home and school learning (Morrison, Griffith & Alberts, 1997). Continuities between the home and school, such as daily reading, consistent routines, valuing education (Lawson, 2003), and having high aspirations for children's learning (Lareau, 2011) are known to create conducive learning environments for children and, furthermore lead to an increase in home-school communication (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2012).

To date, little to no research has been conducted into the potential of SPinS to foster parental knowledge about school, and the consequences of this knowledge for addressing the range of issues noted by Dockett and Perry (2007) as pertaining to families' experiences of their child's transition to formal schooling. In this paper, we suggest that understanding caregivers' perspectives on their experiences in SPinS may provide a useful starting point for examining the potential relationship between SPinS and young children's transition to formal schooling using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging.

Theoretical framework

Social capital theory 'refers to the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively' (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000, p. 226). The concept of social capital was

initially derived from the work of Hanifan (1916). It was used to describe the significance of community participation in children's school performance. Hanifan (1916) argued that social interactions between people and families comprised a social unit that contributed significantly to children's learning success at school. An important aspect of Hanifan's (1916) work was that it highlighted how social capital is accumulated when people come together to participate in joint activities. In the case of this paper, this applies to the accumulation of social capital about school as caregivers come together to participate in SPinS. Later the concept of social capital was furthered by others, including Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993) who used the idea to consider how communities, such as schools, benefit from the generation of strong community ties. In his research Putnam identified how trust and 'norms of generalised reciprocity' (Putnam, 1993, p. 172) are established within community networks such as sports clubs and church groups, influencing the consequent generation of social capital amongst groups of people.

Social capital theory is now widely used in diverse fields of research, including the areas of public health, family studies, politics and education (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Researchers have previously used social capital theory to consider issues such as risk behaviours in youth (Boeck, Fleming, & Kemshall, 2006); home influences on academic achievement (Dufur, Parcel, & Troutman 2013); and 'civic engagement and social connectedness' (Putnam, 2000, p. 28) through citizens' participation in community clubs, events and activities. Caregiver access to, and deployment of, social capital has also been shown to influence children's developmental outcomes and later success in life (e.g. Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Social capital can be considered in terms of four main domains, including the 'communitarian', 'networks', 'institutional' and 'synergy' perspectives (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). The 'networks' view identifies the importance of relationships conducted between people at the 'horizontal' and 'vertical' level. Putnam (1993) describes relationships at the 'horizontal' level as those occurring amongst 'like' members of a group, while those at the 'vertical' level involve others with differentiated expertise outside of the immediate social group. Using Putnam's descriptions of horizontal and vertical relationships Gittell and Videl (1998) consequently adopted the terms 'bonding' to identify horizontal relationships, and 'bridging' to identify vertical relationships. Bonding and bridging relationships are considered critical for social functioning and the acquisition of knowledge about social processes and practices. Bonding strengthens access to group knowledge about common practices within a community. Bridging increases access to new knowledge and information that enables the continued success of group members outside of the initial group. Putnam (2000) describes the bonding and bridging dimensions of social capital where bonding contributes to the 'narrower self' of participants and bridging to establishment of 'broader identities' amongst participants (p. 23). Woolcock and Narayan (2000) also argue that strong bonding relationships, and at the very least some form of weak bridging relationships are critical for preventing group insularity. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) further show that high levels of bonding and bridging contribute high outcomes and other combinations of high and low bonding and bridging 'account for a range of other outcomes associated with social capital' (p. 231). In this paper, we understand caregivers' participation in SPinS in terms of bonding relationships with like members of the playgroup. Bridging relationships pertain to 'vertical' relationships

established with members of the school community, such as teachers and principals hosting the SPinS.

Methodology

Project overview

The broader project from which the data presented in this paper is drawn was titled: *Supported Playgroups in Schools: Stakeholder Perspectives on belonging, home learning and young children's play* (McLean, Edwards, Lambert, Wickham, & Schaper, 2015). The broader project focused on the perspectives of all stakeholders (e.g. parents, school staff, early childhood pre-service teachers [PSTs], playgroup coordinator) involved in the provision of SPinS within a local regional community across five participating schools. For the purpose of this paper, we focus specifically on the caregivers' perspectives of their participation in the SPinS. This is a deliberate decision to enable consideration of caregiver perspectives on SPinS in relation to existing literature regarding the issues family face in the transition to school. In this paper we pay attention to the following research question:

Using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging, what do caregiver perspectives on participation in SPinS suggest for understanding transition to school?

The two-year study was conducted in a regional community of Australia. The five SPinS were located in areas of the community identified using the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) (Australian Government, 2016); the BestStart Atlas (DEECD, 2009); and the Early Childhood Community Profiles (DET, 2014) as having

children experiencing high degrees of community-based developmental vulnerability. The definition of developmental vulnerability used in this process stems directly from the AEDC (Australian Government, 2016) which describes developmentally vulnerable children as experiencing a number of physical, social, emotional, language, cognitive and/or communication challenges that interfere with their daily lives. The five SPinS operated for approximately two hours per week. Each SPinS was led by a playgroup coordinator. Three early childhood education PSTs from the local university participated in each SPinS as additional playgroup facilitators to the playgroup coordinator. The playgroup coordinator and PSTs used the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) to plan and implement play-activities for children attending the SPinS with their caregivers. The EYLF outlines five main Learning Outcomes for children, including: 1) Children have a strong sense of identity; 2) Children are connected with and contribute to their world; 3) Children have a strong sense of wellbeing; 4) Children are confident and involved learners; and 5) Children are effective communicators.

Ethics

Ethics was approved through the University Human Research Ethics Committee, the Victorian Department of Education and the local Catholic Education Office. Care was taken to reduce participant load by spreading requests for interviews across the two years of the project. Caregivers were also invited to nominate their level of participation across the data collection procedures in this project.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants (Leonard & Onyx, 2003). This was to enable a range of stakeholder perspectives regarding SPinS to be examined in the context of the broader project. Participants in the broader project included: 2 playgroup

coordinators, 26 PSTs, 10 school staff members and 50 caregivers. The data reported in this paper pertains only to the caregiver participants. Of the 50 caregivers, 14 engaged in a focus group interview in the first year of the study. In Year 2 of the study, 18 caregivers completed a survey and 11 caregivers continued to complete the second focus group interview. In this paper pseudonyms are used for all playgroup and caregiver data.

Data collection

Data pertaining to caregivers' perspectives on their participation in SPinS included two focus group interviews and one written survey. Focus group interviews were conducted in Year 1 and Year 2 of the project. The survey was administered at the commencement of Year 2. Focus group interviews conducted in the first year of the project were orientated towards understanding families' perspectives on their participation in SPinS. The Year 1 focus group used a semi-structured interview schedule (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Questions comprising the semi-structured interview schedule were generated from a pilot-study project evaluating the implementation of SPinS in the local community in the previous year. The pilot-study findings indicated that bonding and bridging relationships were evident in SPinS (McLean, Edwards, Schaper, & Colliver, 2013). Sample questions from these interviews included, 'How often do you chat to other parents/carers at playgroup?' 'What sort of things do you and other parents/carers talk about?' All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcription company. The transcription company adhered to a stated privacy policy.

The survey was derived from responses to the Year 1 focus group interviews and intended to further refine the identification of caregivers' perspectives regarding their participation in the SPinS. The survey was drafted several times using iterative feedback

from colleagues with experience in survey design (Mertens, 2005). The survey was also trialled with caregivers who were not participating in formal data collection associated with the project to confirm participant readability. Feedback provided from the survey trial was used to refine the survey prior to its implementation with participating caregivers. The survey contained closed and open-ended questions providing quantitative and qualitative responses (Mertens, 2005). In this paper we refer only to the findings generated by the qualitative questions.

The Year 2 focus group also used a semi-structured interview schedule. This interview sought to further explore caregivers' perspectives of their experiences in SPinS focussing on the relationship between SPinS participation and home learning. Sample questions included: 'What does your child do at home that they also do at playgroup?' and 'How do you see the children playing at playgroup?' All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the same professional transcription company used in Year 1.

Analysis

Analysis involved a combination of inductive and deductive coding. This involved four phases. First, multiple readings of the transcribed focus group and qualitative survey data were conducted by two members of the research team to become familiar with the 'depth and breadth' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) of the data set. Second, the transcripts and qualitative survey data were inductively coded to identify caregivers' perspectives on their participation in SPinS. Inductive coding 'involves researchers working back and forth between the themes and the database until they establish a comprehensive set of themes' (Creswell, 2007, p. 45). Inductive coding is typically used in situations requiring the exploration of new ideas (Rennie, 2011). The inductive

coding generated three recognisable ‘themes’ or ‘elements’ comprising caregivers’ perspectives on their participation in SPinS. Third, the established elements were further inductively coded to identify the sub-themes comprising each element. Finally, all three elements and their associated sub-themes were deductively coded to the concepts of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’. Deductive coding deployed our definitions of the terms for ‘bonding’ as *like members of the playgroup*, and for ‘bridging’ as *vertical relationships established with professionals and members of the school community, such as teachers and principals hosting the SPinS*.

Findings

The findings indicated three main elements of caregiver perspectives on participation in SPinS for understanding transition to school using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging. Each element comprised at least two sub-elements. The three main elements were: Element One: Interactions in SPinS; Element Two: Experiences in the SPinS; and Element Three: Connections to the school. Coded to the concepts of bonding were Elements One and Two, and coded to bridging was Element One and Three. Table 1 summarises the elements and associated sub-elements characterising caregivers’ perspectives on their participation in SPinS with potential for understanding transition to school using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging.

Insert Table 1 here

Element One: Interactions in the SPinS

Caregivers’ descriptions in relation to ‘Element One: Interactions in the SPinS’ highlighted bonding and bridging relationships within the SPinS. The predominant relationship form was of bonding between caregivers. Bridging relationships were

formed within the group between the playgroup coordinator and the PSTs. Loose bridging relationships were also formed with school staff.

Both bonding and bridging relationships in the SPinS were cemented via the three identified sub-elements that comprised the main forms of interaction within the group. These were: a) adult to adult; b) adult to child; and c) child to child.

Adult to adult

Bonding relationships were evident in ‘adult to adult’ interactions within the SPinS. These interactions served a multifunctional purpose and were primarily social. These interactions involved the sharing of information and resources such as information about ‘enrolling in kindergarten’ (Kym, Larkin Park School Playgroup), in similar ways to social and psychological support attributed to bonding in community organisations (Putnam 2000). The multifunctional purpose of these bonding relationships was evident in caregiver examples of interactions which included as friend, counsellor and confidant. These interactions provided ‘adult conversation’ (Jarrod, Sweeney School Playgroup) and access to group parenting knowledge including ‘trouble shooting and problem solving with other parents’, (Jarrod, Sweeney School Playgroup) ‘comparing what’s happening with children’s growth and development’ (Lana, Larkin Park School Playgroup) and ‘how they [children] interact with each other’ (Kym, Larkin Park School Playgroup). These interactions were further indicative of ‘social networks’ (Dockett & Perry, 2007, p. 94) with potential to support transition to school by providing access to group knowledge about families’ issues, knowledge of skills, development and school related concepts (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

Relationships between caregivers and professionals within the playgroup were typical of assigned levels of trust associated with bonding when professionals are linked to networks with strong bonding social capital (Leonard and Onyx, 2003). Caregivers described 'adult to adult' interactions where potential existed for the building of new knowledge about processes and practices through professional ties (Leonard and Onyx, 2003) established between the playgroup coordinator, PSTs, school staff and caregivers. This included advice about programs, parenting, reflection on children's needs and interests as experienced in the SPinS and extra-curricular activities. These conversations typically included 'general parenting questions' (Jarrod, Sweeney School Playgroup). For example, one caregiver described talking with the coordinator, PST facilitators and school staff about their children's language use including 'how much they [children] talk' (Thea, Maryland School Playgroup). Another caregiver sought assistance about children's sleep patterns noting that 'all our kids have slept through from about six weeks but Jocelyn wakes up during the night and it's been happening for a few months now' (Jarrod, Sweeney School Playgroup). Further, caregivers described conversations with school staff as fundamentally about 'school of course' (Nathan, Primrose School Playgroup) and were typically described as brief: 'they all [school staff] come, do a round, say hello to everybody ... and off they go' (Ruby, Maryland School Playgroup) but importantly school staff still 'see what is going on ... and [that] playgroup is part of the school ... not separate' (Clara, Maryland School Playgroup).

Reciprocity associated with professional trust (Putnam, 2000) was identifiable in bridging relationships between caregivers and the playgroup coordinator and PSTs through caregivers sharing knowledge with the playgroup coordinator and PSTs about their children's interests and needs. For example, one caregiver noted:

I've had a chat to let them know a couple of things that [child] needs, so that she can enjoy herself.... she's got a disability, so just to know that they [others at the SPinS] know how to interact with her a little bit differently maybe than some of the other children (Nathan, Primrose School Playgroup).

'Adult to adult interactions' may serve to address transition issues experienced by parents by creating positive family dispositions regarding engagement with professionals, such as school teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2007, p. 95). However, although strong vertical relationships were established by caregivers with the playgroup coordinator and PSTs within the SPinS, this degree of reciprocity was not fully realised as bridging relationships with school staff. We suggest this occurred because school staff were unable to commit to regular attendance and participation in the SPinS due to their existing school-based responsibilities.

Adult to child

Bonding relationships were also evident in 'adult to child' interactions in the SPinS. Caregivers described these interactions as beneficial for their children's socialisation, particularly in relation to getting along and being comfortable with other adults and children. One caregiver noted that 'over the year, they've [children] got really attached to the PSTs, and really comfortable and confident (Tabita, Maryland School Playgroup). Caregivers also described being influenced by observable patterns of behaviour when interacting with their children:

Sometimes he [child] might want me to be involved in the craft. Other times, he'll want to do it with the other kids and then present it to me afterwards ... Sometimes he's happy to play with the cars ... other times he wants you to be engaged in what he's doing ... he's the instigator really (Thea, Maryland School Playgroup).

These types of 'adult to child' interactions indicated an awareness by caregivers of their children's developing social skills enabled through strong bonding relationships in the SPinS. Parental awareness of these aspects of child development have potential to support school transitions through addressing adjustment to school issues such as separation from parents and being a part of a large group (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

Child to child

'Child to child interactions' indicated bonding relationships through caregiver perspectives on their children's social development via peer based engagement in the SPinS. Caregiver understanding of their children's social development has relevance for addressing transition issues faced by families in relation to dispositions and feelings about school (Dockett & Perry, 2007). For example, one caregiver described playgroup participation as being about 'the interactions they [children] have with other children which helps introducing them to kindergarten and then preparing them for school at a later date' (Jarrod, Sweeney School Playgroup). Caregivers also described 'watching' their children play and noting 'how they interact with each other ... and how they are going with other children' (Gemma, Larkin Park School Playgroup) and valued the opportunity to 'watch all the different kids interact and play and ...also watch other kids grow' (Mabel, Ormandville School Playgroup). Bonding relationships such as these

seemed to benefit the playgroup families collectively through a focus ‘on the children rather than the parent interaction... not just a group for adults ... a kid-focused group’ (Kym, Larkin Park School Playgroup), and also the individual through increased social engagement. These findings draw attention to parental awareness, through their participation in SPinS, of children’s developing social skills and the necessity of these skills for their child’s later transition to formal schooling (Dockett & Perry, 2013).

Element Two: Experiences in the SPinS

In ‘Element Two: Experiences in the SPinS’ two sub-themes were characteristic of knowledge building through bonding relationships enabled through participation. These were (a): Activities and (b) Routines and structure.

Activities

Activities in the SPinS supported the development of bonding relationships through shared goals (Gittell and Videl, 1998) for children’s enriched play. Enriched play experiences were described in a range and choice of activities. These activities included art and craft, painting, stories, songs, construction, play dough, imaginary play, puzzles, dancing and outdoor activities such as ball games. These activities were ‘fairly similar’ (Nancy, Primrose School Playgroup) to what may be offered at home or activities that would not be done at home such as ‘messy craft’ (Thea, Maryland School Playgroup). Typical comments about activities included, ‘I don’t do a lot of play-dough and painting [at home] ... because it’s too messy’ and ‘they do good messy craft here’ (Mabel, Ormandville School Playgroup). Having shared goals for enriched play seemed to contribute to positive relationships and family networks which are important for families in the transition to school process (Dockett & Perry, 2007). This was noted in

examples where parents described having the confidence to extend on the play in the home including ‘teddy bear picnics with our teddy bear masks’ (Zara, Larkin Park School Playgroup) and ‘adding a second verse [at home] to [the nurse rhyme] *the cows in the meadow*’ (Chelsea, Larkin Park School Playgroup). In a further example a caregiver described how playing soccer at playgroup ‘even got dad to come [to playgroup] one day’ (Thea, Maryland School Playgroup) as the children ‘took the ball home and wanted to show what they’d learnt [about soccer] at playgroup ... with whoever [dad] was at home who wasn’t there’ (Thea, Maryland School Playgroup).

Routines and structure

Bonding social capital was enabled through familiar routines and structure in the SPinS. One caregiver described this as ‘a sort of process’ (Ruby, Maryland School Playgroup) that seemed to support families to establish bonding connections: ‘we play and eat and do craft. Then that’s packed up and its fruit time ... then it’s a book – so they [children] know that it’s book and song time’ (Ruby, Maryland School Playgroup). Another caregiver described organisational aspects such as using blankets to define play spaces as a way of drawing attention to the play: ‘It might be blocks, baby toys and puppets ... rather than toys just out everywhere ... in their little sections. It ... focuses their play’ (Clara, Maryland School Playgroup). In a further example, a caregiver noted that the familiar routines and structure enabled parents and children to ‘feel comfortable in the [playgroup] space ... because you [caregivers and children] can move in and out socially and feel comfortable to socialise’ (Thea, Maryland School Playgroup). In these examples caregivers described group knowledge of familiar routines and structure as contributing to connectedness within the group.

The various descriptions of activities, routines and structures in the SPinS were indicative of caregivers having access to group knowledge regarding common processes and practices in the educational learning landscape of the playgroup. This reflects a central tenet of social capital theory, whereby bonding relationships promote access to social capital about 'how things are done'. For example, access to group knowledge of children's play was evident in caregivers' descriptions of familiar play activities. Further, access to common practices such as story-time and snack-time seemed to be valued for the opportunities these provided to caregivers regarding similar school-based practices, such as formalised learning or lunch times.

Element Three: 'Connections to the school'

'Element Three: Connections to the school' suggested that caregiver participation in SPinS enabled the establishment of subtle connections or bridging relationships between caregivers and the school. These connections comprised two sub-themes: (a) Friendships; and (b) School routines. Friendships bridged into the school through relationships forged between caregivers who would later have children attending the school. School routines bridged into the school through capturing caregiver knowledge of formal schooling routines including shared reading between children, parent helpers and school staff, and understanding the scheduling of recess and lunch times.

Friendships

'Friendships' bridged into the school via relationships established in the SPinS that caregivers expected would be carried with them during their child's transition to the school. Putnam (2000) describes this as long-term reciprocity. As caregivers made friends with other caregivers within the SPinS they were effectively building their potential knowledge base for engaging in the later transition to formal schooling. One

caregiver explained her friendship with another caregiver who already had an older child attending the school:

I have made a good friend here and we plan to catch up for a barbeque over the school holidays ... their daughter goes here [school] with my daughter and their son who comes here to playgroup - he's a year older, but they're quite similar and ... like to play together. They've been to the little boy's birthday party so we're slowly making up a nice friendship together (Mabel, Ormandville School Playgroup).

In a further example, another caregiver described how friendships at SPinS could provide bonding support to deal with family issues associated with transition to school (Dockett and Perry, 2007). This included obtaining advice from other caregivers about finding employment necessary for supporting additional school expenses. Caregivers also described relationships among children at SPinS as important for influencing school transition by providing a 'familiar face to relate to' (Tabita, Maryland School Playgroup) when children begin school. Bridging into school via friendships was important to caregivers regardless of whether these friendships were long lasting.

School routines

Bridging connections were evident in caregivers' descriptions of 'school routines'. Caregivers described building new knowledge about school processes and practices through familiarity with school routines, for example: school staff supervision of children, expectations associated with school attendance, arrival and collection practices and/or knowledge of school rules parents were 'expected' to know. One caregiver

described her decision to attend SPinS with her daughter ‘the year before she started school just to get her [daughter] used to coming here [school]’ (Mabel, Ormandville School Playgroup). Others described benefits in being ‘exposed to the school environment’ (Lana, Larkin Park School Playgroup). Some caregivers further saw participation as influencing their decisions about choice of school:

There are a couple of parents who’ve even said they are considering their children to go to this school because of the parents that are here [at SPinS] ... maybe it helps that they’ve seen the principal (Ruby, Maryland School Playgroup).

Other caregivers valued visits to the SPinS from school staff because it made them feel welcomed and ‘part of the school’ (Tabita, Maryland School Playgroup) - reflecting Putnam’s (2000) notion of caregivers creating ‘broader identities’ (p. 23) through bridging relationships.

Discussion

SPinS are a new initiative in the Australian early childhood landscape and the provision of playgroups in the early childhood community. As a new initiative in early childhood education the potential for SPinS to contribute to thinking about transition has yet to be fully researched or examined. In this paper, we consider the question: What do caregiver perspectives on participation in SPinS suggest for understanding transition to school using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging?

Our findings established three main perspectives or ‘elements’ of SPinS participation held by caregivers. These were – Element One: Interactions in the SPinS; Element Two:

Experiences in the SPinS; and Element Three: Connections to the school. These findings raise the question: How do the identified elements of SPinS participation contribute to understanding transition to school using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging? To engage with this question, we draw on the work of Woolcock and Narayan (2000).

Drawing on research with female participants in a micro-finance program, Woolcock and Narayan (2000) show how the relationship between low and high levels of bonding and bridging elements contributes to varying degrees of successful financial outcomes for participants. They argue that the bonding and bridging relationships can be represented on an x and y axis on a continuum of high to low relationships (where 'x' equals bonding and 'y' bridging) (p. 237). To understand the elements of SPinS participation with the potential to build caregiver knowledge about transition to school we propose an adaptation of this model (Figure 1). Our adaptation of the model shows four clear quadrants comprising different combinations of high and low levels of bonding and bridging.

Insert Figure 1 here

Findings from our study can be plotted directly into this model. 'Element One: Interactions in the Spins' can be placed into quadrant 3 'high bonding-low bridging'. This is because this finding was characterised by high levels of group bonding by caregivers within the playgroups (e.g. sharing information and resources about parenting) with some lower levels of bridging relationships experienced with the school (e.g. school staff 'popping into playgroup'). Likewise, 'Element Two: Experiences in

the SPinS' can also be placed into quadrant 3 'high bonding-low bridging'. This second element also suggested high levels of bonding amongst the group developed through participation in planned activities and consistent implementation of group routines. Bonding relationships in this element contributed to parental knowledge about the value of play for children's learning, and understanding the role of routines in formal learning environments. Little bridging with school staff was evident in this element. The final finding 'Element Three: Connections to the school' was characterised by lower levels of insular group bonding and a higher degree of contact with the school. This bridging was associated more with understanding school routines and developing friendships with members of the school community. Element Three can therefore be placed in quadrant 2 'low bonding-high bridging' (Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 here

Placing the three elements into quadrants 2 and 3 leaves two remaining quadrants. Quadrant 1 represents low bonding-low bridging. Our findings did not indicate the low bonding-low bridging as Elements of SpinS for caregivers. In itself, quadrant 1 is representative of isolation and disengagement for caregivers and is unlikely to contribute to a positive transition to formal schooling for caregivers and their children. Quadrant 4 shows the highest potential to contribute to caregiver knowledge about transition to formal schooling. This quadrant shows that potential exists to capitalise on the provision of SPinS to further build strong bonding-bridging relationships such that the existing strength of the bonding relationships in SPinS between caregivers continues to build, while further effort is expended on the development of the bridging relationship with school staff (Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 here

Our adapted conceptualisation of Woolcock and Narayan's (2000) model suggests that the identified elements of SPinS inform thinking about transition from a social capital perspective. This is because the new model shows potential for high bonding-bridging relationships to be fostered via SPinS to build parental knowledge about school transition. In the literature review section of this paper, we described the eight categories of issues Dockett and Perry (2007) identify as facing families on the transition to school. These included school practices and processes, such as knowledge of school related activities, dispositions in relation to feelings about school, building relationships and networks within the school and understanding school curriculum, routines and culture (p. 19). Some of these issues are already addressed by caregiver participation in SPinS – as evidenced by the placing of Elements One, Two and Three into quadrants 2 and 3. Caregivers in SPinS are building relationships and networks within the school that they anticipate being of use when their child commences formal schooling. Caregivers in SPinS are also sharing knowledge about parenting and building understandings about the daily school routine. Significant potential now exists for stronger bridging relationships to be developed with caregivers in SPinS such that SPinS can be used to capitalise the building of social capital knowledge amongst parents pertaining specifically to school transition. For example, school staff attending SPinS to foster parent-staff and child-to-staff relationships. Staff participation in SPinS could also be used to actively build parental knowledge about school processes and practices regarding curriculum (e.g. home reading, mathematics activities and the teaching of writing) (Dockett & Perry, 2007). While valuable, it should be noted that increased school staff participation in SPinS is not easily achieved as deployment to

SPinS means losing staff presence in other areas of the school. Given SPinS currently use a combination of government and philanthropic funding to support the role of the playgroup coordinator, attention may need to be given in the initial stages of establishing SPinS to ensure appropriate financial support for school staff participation in SPinS.

Conclusion

SPinS are a new initiative in the Australian early childhood education landscape. To date, little is known about the potential of SPinS to influence the transition to formal schooling by families and children. Social capital theory suggests that understanding relationships in terms of bonding and bridging highlights how people are able to access information that extends their knowledge base. With respect to transition to formal schooling, research shows that families face issues related to their knowledge or access to ‘social capital’ regarding transition to formal schooling. Our examination of SPinS in this paper using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging suggests strong potential for considering the role of SPinS in building parental knowledge about transition to school. This may be achieved by focussing on the development of strong bonding-bridging relationships between caregivers in SPinS and school staff via increased participation in SPinS. This suggestion has implications for thinking about the role of SPinS in policy, such that SPinS may move from a peripheral role in early childhood education, to a more considered role in understanding the relationship between families, children and schools in the transition to formal schooling. It also has implications in practice, with respect to future school staffing and funding of SPinS. This is necessary for the potential of SPinS to capitalise on the process of family knowledge building about the transition to formal schooling to be more fully explored.

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Table 1. Elements characterising caregivers' perspectives on their participation in SPinS for understanding transition to school using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging

	Social capital concept	
Element	Sub-element: Bonding	Sub-element: Bridging
Element 1: Interactions in the SPinS	a) Adult to adult (caregiver to caregiver) b) Adult to child c) Child to child	a) Adult to adult (caregiver to playgroup coordinator and/or pre-service teacher and/or school staff)
Element 2: Experiences in the SPinS	a) Activities b) Routines and structure	
Element 3: Connections to the school		a) Friendships b) School routines

Figure 1. Adaptation of Woolcock and Narayan’s (2000) model (p. 231) showing four clear quadrants comprising different combinations of high and low levels of bonding and bridging

		Bridging	
		Low	High
Bonding	Low	<u>Quadrant 1</u>	<u>Quadrant 2</u>
	High	<u>Quadrant 3</u>	<u>Quadrant 4</u>

Figure 2. Elements of caregiver perspectives on SPinS placed in quadrants according to the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging

		Bridging	
		Low	High
Bonding	Low	<u>Quadrant 1</u>	<u>Quadrant 2</u> Element Three: Connections to the school
	High	<u>Quadrant 3</u> Element One: Interactions in the SPinS Element Two: Experiences in the SPinS	<u>Quadrant 4</u>

Figure 3: Quadrant 4 illustrates high potential to contribute to parental knowledge about transition to school through the application of social capital concepts of bonding and bridging to caregivers’ perspectives on their experiences in SPinS.

		Bridging	
		Low	High
Bonding	Low	<u>Quadrant 1</u> Low potential to contribute to knowledge about transition to formal schooling	<u>Quadrant 2</u> Element Three: Connections to the school
	High	<u>Quadrant 3</u> Element One: Interactions in the SPinS Element Two: Experiences in the SPinS	<u>Quadrant 4</u> High potential to contribute to knowledge about transition to formal schooling