

Playgroups As Sites For Parental Education

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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.*

Keywords—early childhood, learning, parental education, play, playgroups.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article 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 article 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.

2. LITERATURE ANALYSIS

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 and 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 (Evangelou et al., 2013), consistency with terms used in the studies that have formed part of this literature review has been maintained throughout this article.

In Australia, the term playgroups are used to describe organized 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 2 hours per week (McArthur et al., 2010). For the purposes of this article, 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 the Netherlands (OECD, 2006).

2.1 Parental education in early childhood

Parental education is a term given to educational programmers 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; Goff et al., 2012; 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 engaging and beneficial activity that is associated with enjoyment (Karpatschof, 2013). In early childhood education, the idea that children's prior-to-school experiences and parental involvement in these experiences influence 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 (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou, 2012; Evangelou et al., 2013). This also seems to be the case for initiatives designed to support parental learning about children's play and early learning.

2.2 International literature on parental education interventions

Parental education has been the focus of a number of intervention programmers internationally. Notable examples from the United States include the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPO) and the Early Head Start programmer. Both of these programmers 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 behavior outcomes in children's later schooling (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). A distinctive feature of the HIPPO programmer 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 programmers 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 Ages 3 and 4 to Ages 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; Evangelou and Wild, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004).

2.3 What are playgroups and what purpose do playgroups serve?

Descriptions of playgroups as parent-child groups who meet regularly for the purposes of socialization and engagement in play activities are noted internationally throughout the literature. For example, Mize and Pettit (2010) describe playgroups in the United States as 'an arrangement whereby groups of parents and their young children meet together' (p. 1271). In New Zealand, playgroups are described similarly but include an added emphasis on the facilitation of play in playgroups (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 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 characterized by parental involvement in the facilitation of children's play (Lloyd et al., 1989). 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 (McLean et al., 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 preschool 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 centers 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.

2.4 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' (Evangelou and Wild, 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 Evangelou and Wild (2014) 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 PEEP programmer 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 (Evangelou and Wild, 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.

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