



School Playgroups Research Brief

School playgroups: Which features of provision promote child and family capabilities about play and learning?

School playgroups are great for children, their families, schools and communities. This research has connected specific features of school playgroup to child and family capabilities about play and learning. Playgroups with these features were found in a diverse range of schools including communities traditionally considered at risk of educational disadvantage.

Executive summary

This research brief reports the findings from a project examining school playgroups. School playgroups are typically hosted within local primary schools. Some school playgroups are initiated by the school itself with the intention of supporting local families with access to early learning opportunities, or as a mechanism to facilitate children's transition to school. Other school playgroups provide local groups with access to their facilities to develop community connections. Regardless of the approach, school playgroups are growing in popularity as type of a two-generation Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in which children and families learn from each other and form strong relationships with members of the school community.

Research is clear that playgroup participation benefits children and families, including increased developmental outcomes for children (Sincovich, et al., 2020) and improved social connections for adult caregivers (Keam, et al., 2018). However, little is known about the specific features of school playgroups that promote and support children and families, especially in their capabilities about play and learning. This project used a unique combination of capabilities thinking and social capital theory to establish the strength of relationships occurring between children, families, and school-staff as indicators of 'exemplar' school playgroups. Eighteen school playgroups participated in the project, from a diverse range of socio-economic, and parental level of educational and occupation status, as well as of location in regional, rural, and metropolitan areas. Six school playgroups were established as exemplars, with three

of these groups being from the lowest of socio-economic status and parental level of education and occupation, and three from the highest. Two of the school playgroups were from regional and rural areas, and the remaining four metropolitan.

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Exemplar school playgroups were intensively studied to identify the features they commonly shared in their provision. The features included, having access to *materials* suitable for the children's play; a *facilitator* to lead and support the group; an available *space* within the school for hosting the playgroup; the school *location* enabling community access to the playgroups; *scheduling* of the playgroup at times suitable for young children; and ensuring the *health and safety* of participants within the playgroup. Given three of the exemplar school playgroups were from areas experiencing socio-economic, education and occupational disadvantage, and two from regional and rural areas, the features suggest capacity for enabling children and families' capabilities about play and learning through a two-generation approach to ECEC via increased access to school playgroups.

Introduction

School playgroups are increasing in popularity as a two-generation approach to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Two-generation ECEC is based on the idea that children and families do best when adult caregivers and their children are provided with equal opportunities to connect with others in their local communities (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). School playgroups as a two-generation approach provide rich opportunities for children and families to form friendships with their peers, and to develop relationships with others within the school community. This can include with the school principal, junior schoolteachers, teaching aides, chaplains and/or counsellors, and school families and their children.

Research is now clear that participating in playgroups of all types, such as community, supported, facilitated and transition playgroups supports children and families for the better.



Adult caregivers have increased levels of social connection and better mental health from attending playgroup with their children (Keam, et al., 2018). This results in increased positivity about parenting, improved adult-to-child interactions, and more opportunities for children's play at home (Williams, et al., 2017). Children have better developmental and learning outcomes when they attend playgroup. An Australian study shows that children who participate in playgroup are developmentally advantaged on five measures of the Australian Early Development Census than those who do not, including: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication and general knowledge (Sincovich, et al., 2020).

While school playgroups are gaining in popularity, and research shows that playgroup participation has benefits for adult-caregivers and children, little is known about the specific features of school playgroup provision that school and/or community providers can attend to in practice when offering such groups within their local communities. This research brief reports on the findings from a project seeking to identify the features of school playgroups that most effectively support children and their families in opportunities for social connections and play-based learning, including through the Home Learning Environment (HLE). HLE encompasses the range, type and regularity of interactions, and the provision of play opportunities between children and families at home and in the community. HLE is an important predictor of children's developmental and educational outcomes and is of interest in research seeking to enable children and families most effectively in their play and learning (Lehrl, et al., 2020).

Methodology

This project used a mixed methods approach to establish 'exemplar' school playgroups from within a cohort of participating schools. Exemplar school playgroups were intensively analysed to identify the shared features of their provision in practice, including consideration of the HLE amongst their participating children and families. Two main ideas were used to establish the exemplar school playgroups. These were 'capabilities' and 'relationships'. Capabilities are understood as what people are able to 'be and do' within their communities (Nussbaum, 2011). Capabilities are not finite, but instead respond to the availability of resources. Social capital theory considers relationships a resource that benefits people through access to other people as source of information, ideas, and experiences.

There are two main types of relationships identified within social capital theory. Bonding relationships are formed amongst likeminded people, such as children and families in a playgroup. Bridging relationships are formed with people outside of the likeminded group, such as families connecting with school-staff. Within bonding relationships people share information, experiences, and skills with each other, such as playgroup families sharing their experiences of parenting. Within bridging relationships, people connect with others who have different sets of information, experiences, and skills to their own, such as playgroup families connecting with junior school-teachers (Gittell & Vidal, 1998).

Social capital theory considers that both types of relationships are significant because bonding relationships support people in their existing capabilities; while bridging relationships expand their capabilities through access to new ideas or possibilities for what they can 'be and do' (Nussbaum, 2011). Bonding and bridging relationships work in both directions, meaning playgroups families can learn from school-staff, and school-staff can learn from families. When communities have strong bonding and bridging relationships the risk of 'structural holes' (Burt, 2004) forming amongst people that limit their capabilities is reduced, therefore enhancing opportunities for learning from each other (Figure 1.0). Structural holes may be characterised by reduced communication, less sharing of information and knowledge, and fewer commonly held community goals for children and families.

“The goal is to produce capabilities for each and every person, and not to use some people as a means to the capabilities of others, or of the whole.”
(Nussbaum, 2011, p. 35)¹

“Social capital exists where people have an advantage because of their location in a social structure.”
(Burk, 2004, p. 351)²

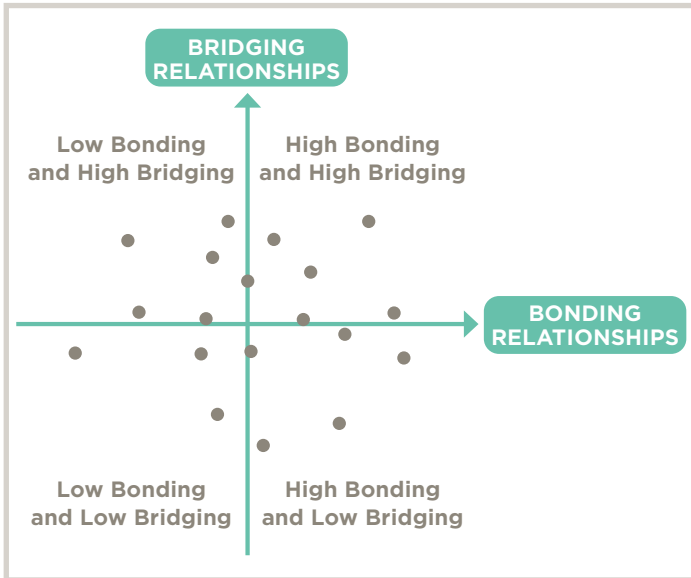


Figure 1.0 Structural holes can form amongst people when strong bonding and bridging relationships are not evident, therefore limiting capabilities and opportunities for people to learn from each other.

This project theorised that school playgroups evidencing high bonding relationships (e.g. amongst children and families) and high bridging relationships (e.g. with school-staff) would enable family capabilities about play in terms of enhanced HLE, therefore acting as ‘exemplar’ groups from within which the shared features characterising their provision could be identified.

Twenty schools were recruited to this project. Two schools withdrew, one for unspecified reasons, and the second due to COVID19 - resulting in 18 schools in total. Four of the school playgroups were from rural areas, five regional, and nine metropolitan. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) and Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) were used to classify the school playgroups. For IRSD: 11% of school playgroups were decile 1 (lowest 10% of areas in terms of socio-economic

disadvantage); 39% decile 2-3; 39% decile 5-6; and 11% decile 7 (higher level of socio-economic advantage). For IEO: 39% of school playgroups were decile 1-3 (lowest percentage of education and occupation); 33% were decile 4-6; and 28% decile 7-9 (higher level of education and occupation).

Within each school playgroup, families and school staff participated in an intervention, during which the concepts of bonding and bridging were explained by members of the research team, and participants consequently invited to identify any aspects of their own playgroups they considered open to further development or improvement in terms of family and/or school-staff relationships. Pre- and post-intervention interviews were conducted with families and school staff. Caregivers from participating families also completed a version of the HLE survey (McLean, et al., 2016) at pre- and post-intervention. In addition, a review of school playgroup documentation and their websites was conducted.



Analysis and findings

Data were inductively analysed for evidence of bonding and bridging relationships. Detailed definitions of the sub-types comprising bonding (Appendix 1) and bridging (Appendix 2) relationships were created, and these definitions applied across the data for all 18 schools. The mean bonding and bridging scores for each school playgroup were then calculated, and the median bonding and bridging scores for all 18 school playgroups confirmed (Appendix 3). In this way, any school playgroup with a mean above the median for bonding and bridging relationships was established as an exemplar school. Six school playgroups were confirmed as exemplars, with the HLE results of the families in these groups examined at pre- and post-intervention according to a null hypothesis (i.e. that there is no significant statistical difference between the pre- and post-intervention results). This confirmed the relatively stability of the provision and regularity of play opportunities for children in these families at pre- and post-intervention, with high bonding and high bridging relationships theoretically enabling their capabilities about play.

Data from all six exemplar school playgroups was re-analysed, this time inductively coded for their shared features. Definitions for each identified feature were developed and cross-checked with the available literature. Six main features were confirmed, and all data consequently recoded for these features (Appendix 4). Coded features were analysed in terms of their relative frequency within each exemplar school to establish the order of priority in which they should be addressed in practice. In order of priority the identified features were:

Material

A range of *materials* are available for children to use

Facilitator

A paid/volunteer *facilitator* leads the playgroup

Space

A defined *space* within the school is available for hosting the group

Location

The school *location* is accessible to families and supports children in becoming familiar with the school environment

Scheduling

The playgroup is *scheduled* at times suitable for infants and toddlers

Health and safety

Health and safety requirements for children and families are met

“There are so many diverse things that my child can do here, playing on the gym equipment or painting or making – doing pasting, and playing with different toys.” (Ali, caregiver)

“Our facilitator is a very good bridge between our playgroup and this school.” (Dinya, caregiver)

“It is really convenient for us because we live nearby, and we don’t have a car so we can just walk here.” (Laura, caregiver)

Of particular interest in this project, three of the exemplar school playgroups were from the lowest possible IRSD and IEO, and three from higher IRSD and IEO. One school playgroup was from a regional area, another from a rural area, with the remaining four school playgroups from metropolitan areas. The presence of school playgroups from the lowest IRSD and IEO; and from regional and rural areas, suggests their commonly held features with school playgroups from higher IRSD and IEO, and metropolitan areas potentially mediates against socio-economic, educational and/or geographic disadvantage in the formation of strong bonding and bridging relationships (Figure 2.0). Theoretically, this is consistent with the claim that bonding and bridging relationships can protect communities against the formation of structural holes (e.g. reduced communication, shared information and knowledge, commonly held community goals), therefore enabling learning opportunities that may not otherwise be available.

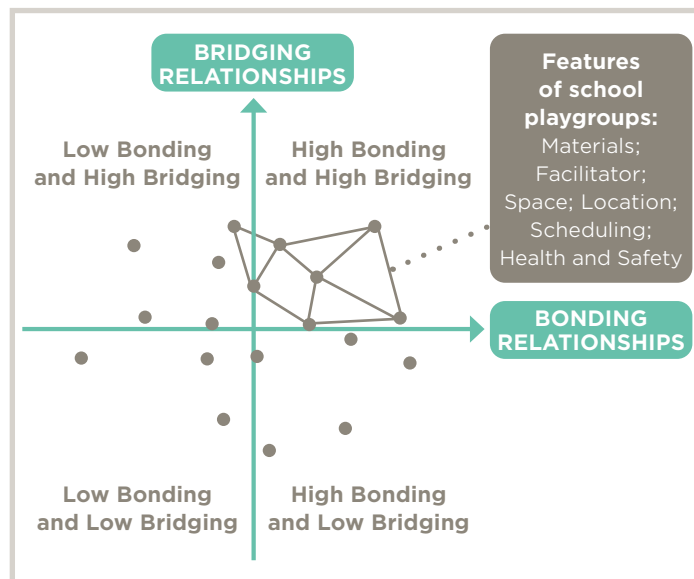


Figure 2.0: Features of exemplar school playgroups with high bonding and bridging relationships protecting against structural holes and promoting learning opportunities for children, families and school-staff.

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Conclusion

Existing research highlights that participating in playgroups benefits children and families, and that the adult-child interactions and opportunities for play in the HLE supports positive developmental and learning outcomes for children. Increased popularity in the provision of school playgroups suggests strong potential for these groups to operate as a two-generation approach to ECEC, enabling children and families via strong bonding and bridging relationships to enhance their capabilities about play and learning at home. To date, the exact features of school playgroups associated with these relationships for enhanced play and learning amongst children and families have not been known. This project identified six features of school playgroup provision associated with high bonding and bridging relationships, suggesting capacity for enabling children and families in play and learning at home and in the community as evident from stable scores at HLE (Figure 3.0).

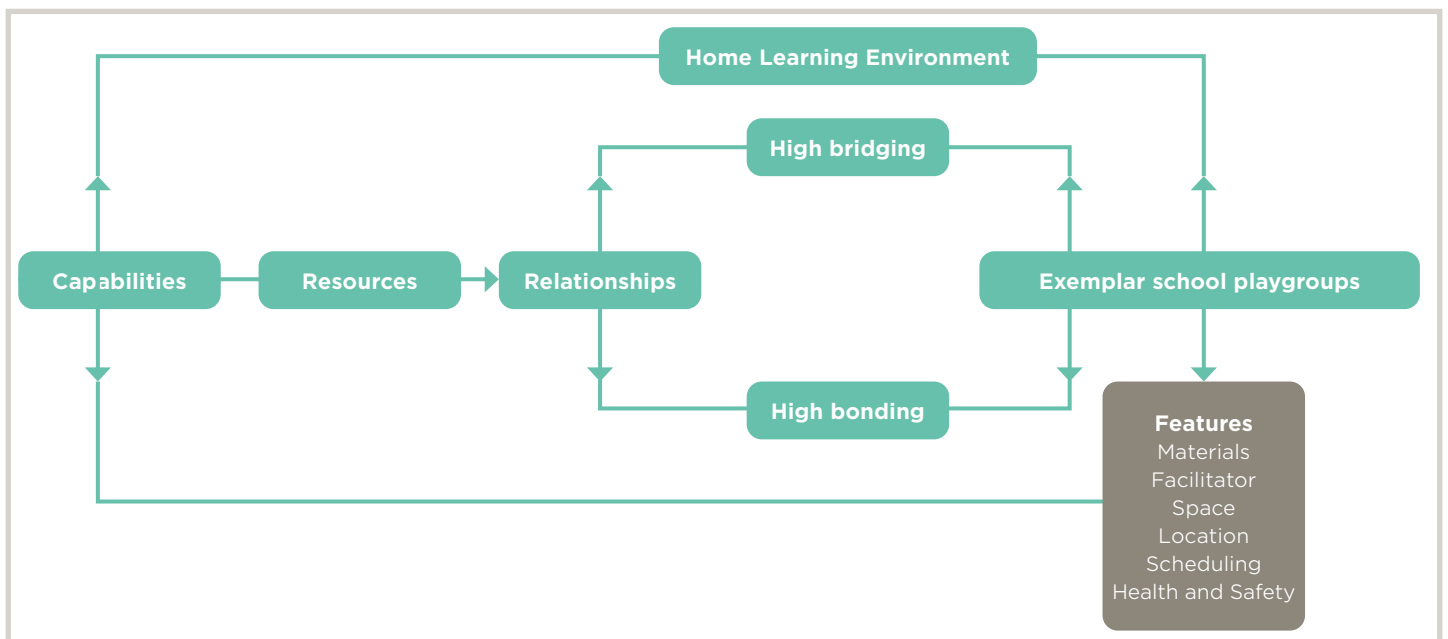


Figure 3.0: Six features of exemplar school playgroup provision associated with high bonding and high bridging relationships with capacity for enabling children and families' capabilities about play and learning.

Policy recommendations

As playgroups are recognised globally as institutions that offer significant developmental and educational benefits for children alongside increased social connections and mental health outcomes for adults this study recommends that:

1. Playgroup organisations, primary schools and early childhood services recognise school playgroups as a viable, two-generation approach to ECEC enabling child and family capabilities about play and learning
2. Providers of school playgroups consider options for government and/or not for profit funding to support school playgroups in the purchase of materials and the employment of a paid facilitator
3. Local government areas with children and families experiencing lower socioeconomic status, parental education and occupation and/or from regional and rural areas strategically implement school playgroups to promote child and family community connections
4. Existing providers of school playgroups evaluate their offerings in terms of the six features of provision to promote the development of strong bonding and bridging relationships between playgroup children and families and the school community

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Appendix 1

Relationship type	Definition	Illustrative data
Caregiver-to-caregiver bonding	Caregivers report, describe and/or explain friendships, social connections and/or supportive value engaging with other caregivers.	Sometimes they [other caregivers] even offer like if we're sick, "Oh...you can just drop off your kids to us and we can take care of them for you."
Caregiver-to-children bonding	Caregivers report, describe and/or explain relationships and/or social and emotional connections amongst themselves and children of the playgroup, including with other caregivers.	I suppose you could liken it to a meerkat community, there seems to be that catch-all parenting.
Children-to-children bonding	Caregivers report, describe and/or explain relationships, friendships, social connections and/or play amongst participating playgroup children.	Because all the children have formed bonds with my child, and she's an only child at this stage so it's really important for her to be socialised and to work well with other children and play...and share.
Global bonding	Caregivers report, describe and/or explain a social connection and/or personally valued relationship with the playgroup as a global entity.	Before marriage I was so independent and doing all a lot of crafty works and stuff... that is me. But after marriage and two after kids, I lost myself. Coming to playgroup, I'm regenerating myself in all the ways. This playgroup has definitely helped me.

Table 1.0: Detailed definitions of sub-types comprising bonding relationships

Appendix 2

Relationship type	Definition	Illustrative data
Caregivers-to-school-staff bridging	Caregivers/school-staff report, describe and/or explain valued relationships and/or social connections with each other.	There's a lot of parents who just drop their kids to school you know, so I think it's nice [that] the principal is interacting with the playgroup (Caregiver).
Playgroup children-to-school-staff bridging	Caregivers/school-staff report, describe and/or explain relationships and/or social and emotional connections between playgroup children and school staff.	My third child, she was so shy when she started. And before she started prep, she knew the place. She didn't even cry when she started prep because she knew the place, she knew people that work here as well (Caregiver).
Playgroup children-to-school children bridging	Caregivers/school-staff report, describe and/or explain relationships, social connections and/or activities conducted amongst playgroup children and school children.	We run our joint excursions. The last three years, we have had a joint excursion to a living museum. Last year was to a Wildlife Park, the Maze, this year we've been to the Zoo, the idea being we take parents as well as kids, so the parents are learning with the students. There are enough big kids around to support, to look after little kids and it works really, really, well (School staff).
Caregivers-to-school-children bridging	Caregivers/school-staff report, describe and/or explain relationships, social connections and/or activities conducted between families and school children with the intention of supporting caregivers and playgroup children.	We have year six children who are leaders. So, we've got some leaders, coming into the group and they get to know the families. The leaders last year, they noticed that families weren't doing any craft activities. They did some research and then they presented to the families about the importance of art and craft (School staff).

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Relationship type	Definition	Illustrative data
Caregivers-to-community organisations bridging	Caregivers/school-staff report, describe and/or explain supported or facilitated connections with community organisations external to the playgroup of benefit and/or perceived value to the playgroup family and/or child.	One day, the Maternal and Child Health nurse comes and the other day the family support worker comes. So, we've helped a family with referral for speech or the National Disability Insurance Scheme. A lot of families, their kids become like two years old and they don't know that you have to enrol your child in kindergarten [from] two years old (Caregiver).
Global bridging	Caregivers/school-staff report, describe and/or explain beneficial, valued and/or an accepted relationship with the school as a global entity.	I've gotten to know the school, so it doesn't feel awkward for me to do anything here. It's been very comfortable. (Caregiver).

Table 2.0: Detailed definitions of sub-types comprising bonding relationships

Appendix 3

Case-type	School Playgroup	Bonding	Bridging
Exemplar	Spring Gully	44.20	4.83
	Highbury	30.00	6.25
	Norwood	31.33	4.87
	Samberg Gardens	27.40	6.92
	Mount Keema	26.00	5.38
	Croydonvale	25.20	4.00
Partial	Grevillea East	27.25	3.60
	Kallum Valley	27.14	3.63
	Hearthend	25.33	2.13
	Mimmia North	23.33	4.18
	Straits Gully	23.00	5.00
	Warmane	22.22	6.63
Standard	Taravan Park	24.67	3.88
	Stephendale	23.67	2.60
	Shelldon	23.00	2.93
	Bridgeburn	23.00	2.58
	Nambour	17.40	1.25
	Brightwood	16.00	2.50
Median		24.93	3.94

Table 3.0: Exemplar school playgroups above the median for bonding and bridging relationships

Appendix 4

Feature	Definition	Illustrative data
Materials	A suitable range of toys, equipment, craft resources and/or indoor and outdoor options support children's play and caregiver interactions with children.	They have these arts and crafts, cutting things, which sometimes I have at home, but I just don't have time to sit down with her. In here, maybe I do have time, or she can learn from other kids. She learns from some of the toys that maybe I don't have at home.
Facilitator	A nominated person [paid and/or voluntary] manages, supports and leads the playgroup-in-school fostering relationships between caregivers, children and the school.	The facilitator always greets everyone when they come in, and she makes a big effort to remember everyone's names. She will offer everybody tea and coffee and organise someone to cut up the fruit and encourage people to come and sit and have some fruit during morning tea. Then of course, she reads books and plays some games at the end, but she also just wanders around. She's really good at trying to come around and talk to everybody.
Location	The school location is accessible and convenient for caregivers and children.	Well it's close to home and the kids enjoy it.
Space	Enough space is allocated to the playgroup-in-school within the available school facilities.	Here there's a slide. She can go outside in the garden. And play. She played hide and seek for the first time here.
Scheduling	The playgroup-in-school operates according to drop off and pick up times for older children	There's a timetable down there. I think they [operate playgroup] four days. There's in the morning sessions [after school drop-off] and there's afternoon sessions [before school pick-up].
Health and Safety	Existing school policies and procedures support the physical and mental health and safety of playgroup-in-school caregivers and children	We're very happy with the school. It's great learning, it's safe.

Table 4.0: Features of exemplar school playgroups with high bonding and high bridging relationships