

The role of community-based playgroups in building relationships between pre-service teachers, families and the community

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY was to explore how connections between families, communities and educators can be facilitated in teacher education courses through the use of playgroups. Barriers to building relationships, as well as the perceived benefits of these relationships to families and pre-service teachers, were also explored. Participants were involved in weekly university-based community playgroups. Focus group interviews were conducted and the constant comparative method was used to analyse interview transcripts. Themes of 'Constraints' and 'Enablers' emerged from pre-service teachers' transcripts, indicating that they were initially uncomfortable with community and family involvement but eventually made connections as to why this was important. The theme of 'positive relationship building' emerged from parents' transcripts, indicating that they saw building relationships with families and communities as an important role of early childhood educators. Implications for the importance of authentic learning situations for fostering these relationships in teacher education courses are discussed.

Introduction

Children's development is situated within the context of family, culture and community, rather than in isolation (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). In order to fully understand and respond to children in early childhood settings, educators must be aware of these contexts and facilitate community and family involvement in the setting (Dockett & Perry, 2008). Quality early childhood services focus on building collaborative partnerships between educators and families in order to benefit the child (DEEWR, 2009). However, pre-service teachers may have few opportunities to practise building connections with families and communities. In addition to practicum placements in schools and early childhood settings, practical experiences within teacher education courses should exist to ensure that pre-service teachers are aware of the importance of making these connections.

One way relationships can be encouraged is through community playgroups, which not only provide opportunities for professional learning but also positive outcomes for families (Barbour & Bersani, 1991; Jackson, 2006; Lewis, 2007). Playgroups involve children and their families coming together to socialise

for a set period. Playgroups have been used by a number of university teacher education programs to facilitate the practical learning of pre-service teachers (Lewis, 2007). The purpose of this study was to explore how connections between families, communities and educators can be facilitated in teacher education courses through the use of playgroups. We also examined the barriers that can exist to building relationships, as well as the perceived benefits of relationships for families and pre-service teachers.

It is widely recognised that children's development is influenced not only by individual characteristics, such as temperament or age, but also by the environment, including parents, siblings, and community factors (Neilsen-Hewett & Coutts, 2009). The notion of 'community' has been discussed widely in the literature recently and has multiple interpretations (Fegan & Bowes, 2009). According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecology model, different environments in which children interact (e.g. preschool, a peer's house, home) are separate microsystems. When these microsystems overlap, a mesosystem is created. In this study, we examine an aspect of 'community' in terms of the home-playgroup mesosystem

Because the family is the most powerful influence on the development of a child, collaborative relationships between staff and families can bring benefits to all involved (Caplan, Hall, Lubin & Fleming, 1997; Christian, 2006; Gonzalez-Mena & Widemeyer-Eyer, 2004). The importance of relationships between early childhood educators and families is recognised in its inclusion as an essential component of government-mandated quality assurance systems (Briggs & Potter, 1999; NCAC, 2005) and the recent national *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009). Additionally, the New South Wales Institute of Teachers Professional Teaching Standards state that teachers should be 'actively engaged members of their profession and the wider community' by communicating and engaging with families and making connections with the community (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005, p. 17).

Despite being recognised as important, working with families is an area where early childhood educators receive little preparation (Nieto, 2004). Pre-service teachers are not typically provided with learning opportunities, beyond practicum placements, for building parent-teacher relationships (Christian, 2006). In one study, early childhood educators reported not feeling adequately prepared in their work with families and needed more information on and practice with understanding family dynamics and interacting with families (Bennet, Katz & Beneke, 2006). Another study found pre-service teachers felt that interacting with parents was one of the most challenging aspects of teaching (McFarland & Lord, 2008).

In addition to building relationships with families, establishing community connections is important not only for educators working in the field, but also for pre-service teachers attending teacher education programs (NAEYC, 1993). Exposure to the idea of 'community' for future educators should begin in the initial years of teacher preparation so that, by the time educators enter the workforce, they have an idea of why, when and how to facilitate links to the community.

Establishing genuine connections that are long-lasting and meaningful between universities and the community is beneficial to both universities and members of the community (Bartlett, 1995; Reardon, 1999). One way university-community relationships can be created is through the use of playgroups, which can provide opportunities for student professional learning, as well as positive outcomes for families (Jackson, 2006). The pre-service teachers in this study were able to explore the value of developing a sense of belonging to a community by not only interacting with individual children in weekly playgroups, but also with their parents/carers and siblings.

The aim of this study was to examine how the relationships between community, families and

educators could be facilitated in teacher education courses through the use of playgroups. In addition, barriers to building relationships, as well as the perceived benefits of these relationships to parents and pre-service teachers, were examined.

Method

Participants

After gaining approval from the university ethics committee, participants were recruited. They included pre-service teachers and parents from the local community. Pre-service teachers in their first year were enrolled in an early childhood/primary teacher education course at a regional university in New South Wales, Australia. Seven pre-service teachers (two males and five females) out of the larger cohort of 40 agreed to participate in the focus group. Pre-service teachers were invited to participate in the research, via verbal announcement during class time, and the seven interested participants completed consent forms to take part in the focus groups. Participation in this study was not required as part of the child development subject pre-service teachers were enrolled in.

Also participating in the study were six parents from the community who attended weekly playgroups, and 27 parents who were recruited, through flyers, to participate in play sessions. Some flyers were distributed at two primary schools in a regional New South Wales town, others left at the university where the study took place. The flyers were aimed at families who had children up to five years old. Parents phoned or emailed a research assistant if interested in participating. There were 40 children enrolled in the play sessions, ranging in age from four weeks to five years. As playgroups were run on two mornings of the week to allow for manageable group sizes, parents were organised into either the Wednesday or Thursday sessions. Some of the parents who expressed interest in attending had taken part in playgroups the previous year. In order to facilitate the relationships these parents and children had formed with each other, these families were placed together in one playgroup, and new families were placed in the other. At the first session, parents were invited via written notice to participate in the research study. Six interested parents out of the larger group of 27 completed consent forms to take part in the focus group. Parents were able to attend play sessions even if they were not interested in participating in the study.

Procedure

The two-hour playgroups were held on campus. Pre-service teachers attended for one hour per week, taking part in three playgroups. They had a three-week semester break and then returned for another seven

consecutive weeks. The playgroups were not held while the students were on semester break. Two lecturers supervised the groups, but were not involved in the research.

Parents attended the playgroups with their children. In their first week they were given a letter outlining their responsibilities of supervising their children, as well as the role of the pre-service teachers. Regular attendance was requested of parents and they were told that if they could not attend consistently then their place would be offered to another family. However, attendance did fluctuate.

Pre-service teachers, with the aid of a research assistant, were responsible for setting up the play area each morning. A range of resources was provided for children, including blocks, books, puzzles, art activities, balls, tunnels, sandpit, dolls, dramatic play materials, and an area with infants' toys. Pre-service teachers also interacted with the parents and children during free play. Occasionally, pre-service teachers chose to conduct more structured activities, such as singing with the children.

Additionally, pre-service teachers were given weekly tasks by their subject lecturers, including using a variety of observational techniques to record behaviour, practising various guidance strategies when conflict occurred, and documenting particular behaviours in relation to different theoretical perspectives. Pre-service teachers were expected to interact with parents to gather information to develop and share a parenting resource focused on child guidance. Topics researched and presented to parents included sibling rivalry, tantrums and sleep issues. In groups of three or four, pre-service teachers presented their resources to parents during the final playgroup.

Data gathering

During the last week of semester, two focus groups were conducted, one with pre-service teachers and one with parents. The interviews focused on their respective experiences of the playgroups, with a particular emphasis on community and family involvement. The pre-service teachers' focus group was conducted by a researcher who was not associated with teaching the subject, thus limiting the likelihood that responses could be unduly influenced. The focus group was scheduled outside of class time to enable pre-service teachers to attend. The semi-structured and open-ended questions asked related to their experiences in the play sessions and their understandings of community involvement and relationships with parents. The researcher followed the lead of the participants to facilitate the discussion, which lasted for approximately 40 minutes.

Questions about community and parent relationships included: 'What did you think of the experiences in

relation to developing skills around interacting with parents?'; 'What did you think about your role in developing relationships with parents in educational settings, and did play sessions help you feel more comfortable with this?'; 'Have you thought much about the role of community in education and did play sessions help you think about this more?'; and 'What did you think about your role in developing parenting resources?'.

The parent focus group was conducted by one of the researchers who did not have regular contact with the families, in order to minimise possible bias. The parent focus group lasted approximately 40 minutes and was conducted during the last play session. Questions focused on their experiences in the play sessions, what they thought about the pre-service teachers' role, and their views on the role of community and parent-educator relationships in education. They included 'What did you think about the parent resources the students developed?'; 'Do you believe the early educator has a role in acting as a resource for some parenting issues?'; 'What role do you think educators should have in establishing and maintaining relationships with parents?'; 'What role do educators have in establishing relationships with the community?'; and 'What could be done to further strengthen community connections?'. Both focus groups were taped and transcribed by a research assistant. Names were not recorded during the interviews in order to maintain confidentiality and to protect identities. Results of this study will be shared with the participants, as well as other pre-service teachers in the course, via the course forum.

Results

Grounded Theory guided this study as the intention was to discover new constructs or theories related to the research question 'How can connections between families, communities and pre-service teachers be facilitated in teacher education courses through the use of playgroups?'. This type of data analysis requires immersion in the data (Patton, 2002) and so the interview transcripts were read repeatedly in order to identify key themes related to the phenomenon of interest. First, analytic induction was used to develop the themes and properties that emerged from the transcripts. Analytic induction is the 'systematic examination of similarities between cases to develop concepts or ideas' (Punch, 2005, p. 196). The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using the principles of the Constant Comparative Method (see Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Coding was done by the two lead researchers who were not involved as subject lecturers for the pre-service teachers. Each researcher read the transcripts

repeatedly and took notes about prevalent themes. The two researchers then met to discuss the initial notes and compared them, looking for commonalities. Similar aspects of the transcripts were categorised initially into lower level properties of 'outsiders', 'ratios', 'preparation', 'praxis', 'confidence' and 'investment' for the pre-service teacher data, and 'positive relationship building' for parents. As these codes were checked and re-checked against the initial or early codes, the researchers were able to identify two major themes for the pre-service teachers and one major theme for the parents. For the pre-service teachers, 'Constraints' encompassed aspects of the properties of 'outsiders' and 'ratios', and 'Enablers' encompassed aspects of 'preparation', 'praxis', 'confidence' and 'investment'. The results for pre-service teachers are reported first.

Constraints

This theme arose from the data and highlighted pre-service teachers' feelings about interacting with parents in the playgroup environment. The properties that emerged from the data explain what made pre-service teachers uneasy and how they coped with these feelings, what strategies they employed or those they thought lecturers employed to ease these feelings.

Outsiders: Despite playgroups being held on the university campus in an environment familiar to pre-service teachers, some of them referred to parents as 'insiders', which in effect placed themselves as 'outsiders' in the playgroup environment:

The Wednesday group which is the well-established group, so they have got their networks (PST #3).

The parents were really friendly and good about it but also, like, on Wednesdays when you had more of them [parents] and they were grouped together it was kind of intimidating (PST #4).

Two pre-service teachers placed themselves either as 'insiders' or 'outsiders', depending on their own status as parents:

I didn't find it too hard because I am a mum myself and I mean, playgroup is not new to me so that sort of thing didn't bother me (PST #3).

I think personally, because I am not a parent I think when I am talking to a parent I don't know what I am talking about and so I don't have the confidence to strike up a conversation (PST #2).

Because of the way pre-service teachers had positioned themselves, many of them commented on the difficulty they had in starting conversations with parents. Following are examples from one pre-service teacher:

I had trouble trying to think of something to say a good portion of the time, or how to like start a conversation, to ask questions, you know, 'cause I felt kind of awkward just trying to go up there and ask (PST #4).

Because I don't know exactly what to say, I mean I don't have kids and so it's harder, and like I'm not around kids a whole lot either, I mean I'm learning stuff and more now, but it's still hard to pick up on what exactly I should say to them [parents], or shouldn't or you know how to get a good conversation going (PST #4).

Ratios: Apart from how pre-service teachers positioned themselves and parents in the playgroup environment, other factors were cited as contributing to their feelings of uneasiness during playgroups. Ratios of adults to children in the room were often cited as a reason for pre-service teachers having difficulty with their interactions with children and their parents. The ratios may have led to a feeling of awkwardness for the pre-service teachers. Some thought there were too many adults and this hindered interactions and made them feel less at ease:

It was hard as well because there wasn't enough kids for the amount of students (PST #3).

On some days we only had two kids for the group and that was sort of intimidating (PST #2).

Although many of the pre-service teachers had difficulty in the playgroups because of the number of adults present, some used a 'safety in numbers' approach, where a group of them would approach a parent together. This was a strategy some pre-service teachers employed to help them overcome their personal uneasiness in approaching parents:

We were sort of in groups, we could speak to parents so it wasn't quite as scary (PST #2).

The over-arching theme 'Constraints' highlights how pre-service teachers felt when put in the playgroup situation, which may have not initially felt authentic. The properties 'outsiders' and 'ratios' explain and describe how some pre-service teachers saw themselves and how a large number of adults added to their feelings of unease.

Enablers

The theme of 'enablers' explains the learning of pre-service teachers, particularly their awareness and importance of engaging with parents and community. The properties that emerged from the data, 'preparation', 'praxis', 'confidence' and 'investment', help to explain pre-service teachers' learning over the course of the 10 playgroups.

Preparation: Most pre-service teachers agreed that being given structured tasks eased their feelings of uneasiness. Tasks included practising observational techniques, conversing with parents about children's interests and guidance issues, and preparing a parent resource. Pre-service teachers indicated that the prepared or staged tasks forced them to interact, and that this was in many ways easier:

... oh, probably apart from the resource that we had to make, I didn't think there was a structure there to make us interact with the parents (PST #1).

... the best part was when we had to do the parent resource so we were sort of forced to talk to the parents to do that, I think that was good ... (PST #2).

Praxis: Most pre-service teachers viewed the playgroups as an opportunity to see theory-in-practice. Elements essential to the quality of the learning environment were becoming more obvious to pre-service teachers. One such element was the importance of parent/teacher relationships:

... rather than being seen as a drop-off for the kids, to have that relationship between the caregiver and the parents (PST #1).

Even just as a trust thing ... even though the parents are right there in that same room but obviously they did to a certain extent because they went out ... which is good in a way that they could leave the room (PST #1).

... as far as text books and Bronfenbrenner's model, I had never put it into place before the play sessions where I could see, and from outside in a community ... it has been part of our community ... so part of the model [Bronfenbrenner] definitely gave me a bit more focus (PST #5).

The subject that was linked with the playgroup focused on children's development from birth to age 12 and specifically covered aspects of children's contexts, including parenting and the importance of community. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological theory was covered, as well as parent-child relationships as they relate to children's development. Other pre-service teachers were able to see how the subject content they were studying integrated with the playgroups and their own understandings of community:

I thought that the community was really important ... I really got that from [names subject] ... it was all about our own community and how important it is to have the children feel comfortable ... the play sessions I do think help because it gets you a bit more familiar with the parents and the importance of them being there (PST #4).

... we have put what we learnt in theory into practice (PST #2).

Pre-service teachers could also appreciate the diversity in the community:

Yeah it opens your eyes to the diverse range of children you will be having come into your classroom from the community (PST #2).

Playgroups enabled pre-service teachers to practise positive guidance techniques with the children and develop resources for parents. Some pre-service teachers were also able to take this into other situations such their own homes and problem-solve positive ways to deal with challenging behaviour.

I don't think I will have any worries about it [positive guidance], yeah and I think it was good actually as it helped us think about what we were saying and re-wording it at home, every time I say the word 'don't' I think how can I better say that? (PST #6).

Researching and making the parent resource facilitated pre-service teachers' interactions with parents. This was a positive relationship-building experience for the pre-service teachers and they believed that a structured task aided in their interactions:

I think it was a good task to do because it allowed for interaction with the parents and also the information we had to research, obviously we discovered more about it ... it built up that relationship (PST #7).

... it was interesting finding out what parents do wonder and think about (PST #4).

Confidence: The interactions, particularly around the preparation of the parent resource, appeared to add to the positive feelings and increased confidence that pre-service teachers took from the groups. For example, one pre-service teacher observed:

... yeah they were responsive to the information we gave them, and took that on board which was good (PST #2).

... they [parents] obviously cared about what we were doing, were listening and taking it in so it made you feel like it [developing the parent resources] wasn't pointless (PST #2).

The sustained weekly contact with children aided some pre-service teachers in their confidence, particularly around relationship-building:

I felt we were able to build relationships with the kids ... you could go back to the same child and they would remember what you were doing ... you would continue on with your little game or go onto something else (PST #6).

I think it sort of builds confidence in what you say to young children to engage them in what you're doing ... to begin with when you first go in there it is scary and daunting and you wonder what to say, then they run away and it's like, ok, but as that

[confidence] builds up you do learn what to say ... it was good in that respect (PST #2).

Investment: Time spent in the playgroups was generally regarded as time well spent with some pre-service teachers. Some pre-service teachers indicated that more time spent with children and parents would have been even more beneficial:

I wouldn't have minded if we did have [an] extra hour in the play session (PST #3).

It's like play session is a study time, you're learning what you've gone over in class (PST #7).

The theme 'enablers' explains how playgroups encouraged many pre-service teachers to grow as learners and become more aware of the importance of relationships between teachers, parents and community. Most pre-service teachers stated that building relationships was difficult. However, the tasks and time invested in playgroups equipped them with skills to begin to form relationships. When pre-service teachers were accepted, encouraged and listened to by parents, they felt valued and more able to develop these relationships further. Positive experiences that have been scaffolded by the playgroups have set many of the pre-service teachers on the path to successful professional experience and, more importantly, the ability to include the notion of community in their future teaching.

Parent data

The main theme to emerge from the parent transcripts was that of 'positive relationship building', indicating that most parents generally thought it was important for early childhood educators to establish relationships with families and communities and that the playgroups were one way for pre-service teachers to practise this. This theme is similar to the notion of 'collaborative partnerships' which involve trust, reciprocal respect, sensitivity to diverse perspectives, ongoing and open communication, empathy, recognition of the partner's strengths, collaboration and shared decision making (NSW DoCS, 2000; Stonehouse & Gonzalez-Mena, 2004).

Parents indicated the role they thought early childhood educators should have in developing community links and relationships with families and the benefits this had for children. The following quotes by parents (PR) illustrate the theme of 'positive relationship building'.

Maybe as an educator myself I think it is very important (educators' role in the community). And we can see children differently to other people I think too, knowing about the education side of things and there is more to just education really. It's not just education that we're doing (PR #1).

I think it's good for them that they interact with parents. I don't know whether they all have children, or if they've got grown children. Just so they know what's going on and help keep us informed and we I guess can do the same to keep them informed of what's going on (PR #1).

When asked whether educators' links with communities and families would have a positive impact on children, one parent said:

Yes, yes definitely because they would see their early childhood teachers outside of the environment that they...and the community as well, other than just at that setting (PR #5).

Some parents also mentioned the notion of diversity as an important aspect of involvement with community:

I think it is great that it can be available for everyone (play sessions) and especially for the students to see the different cultures. And even probably for the little ones to see, like oh those ones are very dark, they're very, very dark, so to see mine have known them since birth so it's not a big thing for them, but the ones that don't see other cultures I guess ... it's good for them (PR #1).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how the relationships between community, families and educators could be facilitated in teacher education courses through the use of playgroups. Barriers to building relationships, as well as the perceived benefits of these relationships to families and pre-service teachers, were also explored.

The findings contribute to the literature about the importance of teacher education courses in establishing authentic opportunities for pre-service teachers to practice building relationships with families and communities as well as potential avenues to develop such skills. We found that pre-service teachers experienced some unease in developing relationships with families, although they also understood why establishing relationships with families and communities is important. Other research also supports our finding that developing relationships with parents, although important, is an area that teachers and pre-service teachers have difficulty with and feel under-prepared for (Bennett et al., 2006; McFarland & Lord, 2008). This suggests that teacher education programs may need to provide pre-service teachers with more opportunities to practise building these relationships, and perhaps participation in playgroups is one way to do this.

Finally, the fact that pre-service teachers were beginning to make connections as to why building relationships with parents and community is important

suggests that involvement in community activities, such as playgroups, from an early stage in their course may be beneficial. The playgroups appeared to highlight for pre-service teachers how to make connections with the community through their teaching. Again, knowing that community relationships in educational settings promote positive outcomes for children (Kamara, 2007), pre-service teachers' knowledge and understandings about how to establish these community connections should be a focus in teacher education courses through the use of practical and 'authentic' community experiences.

The analysis of focus group interviews from parents in our study suggests that parents also viewed building relationships with communities and families as an important aspect of the early childhood educator's role that has benefits for children. Parents appear to echo the pre-service teachers' views that the development of such relationships is an expected and beneficial aspect of teaching.

There are some limitations to this study that impact on the generalisation of the data. First, the sample size was small and it is possible that the views of the seven pre-service teachers who took part in the focus groups were not representative of the larger group of students who participated in playgroups. A possible explanation for the low participation is that interviews were conducted at the end of the semester, which was a busy time for university students to complete assignments and finish classes. Taking time to participate in a focus group may not have been a high priority for most pre-service teachers. The small sample size of both parents and pre-service teacher limits how we can talk about the findings, so results found and conclusions drawn in this study are tentative. However, the data is still valid in that it reflects the views and experiences of our participants, and the findings can be used to plan other studies. Future studies are needed, using larger samples and with more diverse populations.

Another limitation of this study was that the focus group interviews were relatively short, and multiple sources of data were not available. It is possible that longer focus groups would have allowed participants to reveal their perspectives and experiences in more depth. However, we began the focus groups with a set of questions and did not limit the time frame. The focus groups ended only when participants had finished discussing the set questions and had made any additional comments. Multiple sources of data (such as observations or field notes) would have added more depth to the data. Future studies need to use methods of triangulation to check the consistency of information from the participants (see Patton, 2002).

Also, we did not specifically ask pre-service teachers and parents how they defined the term 'community'. Therefore it is possible that participants had a variety

of views about what this may mean. In lectures, pre-service teachers had studied Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, which highlights community influences on children's development. Thus it is likely that pre-service teachers had some consistent understanding of 'community' as it was addressed in this study. However, it is not known if parents had a similar understanding.

Despite some limitations, the results of this study do reflect the views and experiences of our sample and can be used to inform future studies, as well as inform practice in teacher education courses. Our findings suggest that, although the pre-service teachers and parents in our sample thought that building relationships with families and communities was an important aspect of the early childhood educator's role, the pre-service teachers faced challenges in developing these relationships. Indeed, playgroups may be a useful way for teacher education courses to prepare pre-service teachers for this aspect of their career. Although the sample in this study was situated in a rural Australian community, the findings support other research suggesting that teachers and teacher education programs need to be responsive to communities and families in order to facilitate the best outcomes for children and families (Dockett & Perry, 2008).

Conclusion

Teacher education courses need to provide pre-service teachers with support and authentic learning situations to foster their ability to develop relationships with families and communities. Community playgroups are one way this can be done. Giving pre-service teachers these authentic experiences from an early point in their course may equip them with a deeper understanding of why building these relationships is important, and how this can be done in early education settings. Early childhood educators who strive to build meaningful community and family connections will enhance the quality of children's, families', and their own experiences in the educational setting.

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