

Supported playgroups in schools and parent perspectives on children's play

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No parts of this thesis have been submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees (where required).

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Lambert', written over a horizontal line.

Signed _____ Date 17/04/2015

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Abstract

This research thesis examines the establishment of Supported Playgroups in Schools (SPinS). The aim of the project was to examine SPinS as an under-researched area of early childhood education, involving parents, children and schools promoting children's access to play. Children's access to play is important because play in the early years is known to increase children's later learning outcomes (Roberts, 2010). A sociocultural approach to this study was used to understand ways in which parents learn. This thesis explores parents' participation in SPinS and the influence of this participation on parents' perspectives of children's play.

The research was framed by one research question: *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?* A key focus of the study understood the provision of SPinS to support parents to engage with their children during a play-based program, and how parent engagement in children's play was transferred to the home.

In Australia, many families attend playgroups in their local communities for the purpose of play and social engagement (Playgroup Victoria, 2012). These playgroups are self-managed and run by the parents attending. A key role of supported playgroups is to engage families in the community who do not attend community groups. These groups are funded by the State Government and employ a trained playgroup coordinator. The key focus is usually to deliver a service that supports the parent role and promotes children's learning through play. This project reports on a new initiative of providing supported playgroups in local primary schools to establish and extend on partnerships between early years services, community organisations and parents. Research on supported playgroups is limited and much of the work in Australia has been conducted by only a few researchers (Matthews, 2009; McArthur et al, 2010 and Jackson, 2011b). The research conducted so far has been on supported playgroups, but not supported playgroups located in schools. Existing research suggests that parent support is a major component to improving educational outcomes of children by promoting quality Home Learning Environments and play-activities in the home (Sylva et al., 2014). Support for parents is achieved by providing access to "high quality learning environments that encourage parents to engage in conversations about children, children's play and children's development (Jackson, 2010, 2012).

The research reported in this thesis therefore focussed on the influence participation in a Supported Playgroup in a School (SPinS) had on parents' perspectives of children's play at home and in the playgroup. This was to expand on existing research regarding supported playgroups and to also better understand if SPinS could be used as a parent support or intervention approach for promoting children's play at home. To conduct the research informing this thesis I used a sociocultural framework that informed social interactions were vital to support learning through guided participation. Rogoff, Matusov and White (1996) investigated a model of learning where learning is described as a process of transformation of participation in sociocultural activities within communities rather than the transmission of knowledge. The focus of learning was parents' perspectives on play in the home and the playgroup during their participation in SPinS.

A sociocultural theoretical perspective explored the perspectives about play parents derived from their participation in SPinS and how they applied these perspectives in the home and at playgroup. A qualitative research design using a single case study methodology was employed in this research. This approach was well suited to the chosen epistemology because it allowed direct interaction with the participants and represented their views and perspectives. Focus groups were conducted at each of the primary school sites during a SPinS session. The participants were parents attending the SPinS with their children living in the local area. Purposive sampling was chosen for this study because it involved understanding the opinions of a predefined group or target population that was easily accessible. The data analysis was conducted using an inductive approach. This was because there was not pre-determined, well established research in the area of investigation. The purpose of inductive analysis is to allow research findings to be generated from significant themes in the raw data. This allows for the development of a model or theory for explaining the structure of experiences. (Thomas, 2003).

The results suggested participation in SPinS positively influenced parents' perspectives of play at home and in the playgroup. These perspectives included how they viewed play at home and at the playgroup. A third finding considered the importance of the

social connections established by parents during their participation in the SPinS. This finding was consistent with existing research that shows that supported playgroups provide opportunities for families with children under five years old to learn new parenting skills, as well as building social networks (Jackson, 2011a). The primary outcomes reported by Hancock et al., (2011) suggest that playgroup participation improves children's developmental outcomes, particularly disadvantaged children.

The findings were used to propose a new model for educators to understand how parents learn about children's play through supported playgroups. This new model was called The Cycle of Intent Engagement (Lambert, 2015). The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) was created from Rogoff's (2003) theories on transformation of participation to show how parents' perspectives of play were influenced by their participation in the SPinS. The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) focuses on empowering change through collaborative engagement.

This investigation identified the necessity for further research into the way parents engage in their children's play during SPinS and at home. Findings from this study may be used to inform early childhood professionals, families, schools and governments by expanding their awareness of the benefits associated with supporting families to participate in supported playgroups in the community, especially local primary schools.

Chapter One: Introduction to the thesis

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of what the study set out to achieve. It discusses the research rationale and my personal interest in conducting the study. The chapter also briefly outlines the theoretical perspective used to inform the conduct of the research, the research question and the thesis structure.

1.2 Research foci and rationale

Some current theories of learning focussed on the meaning individuals make based on their experiences within a sociocultural context as part of a community (Edwards, 2009). These theories provide explanations of the relationship between the parents and a SPinS community. This thesis is undertaken to understand the influence participation in a Supported Playgroup in Schools (SPinS) has on parents'¹ perspectives of children's play at home and in the playgroup setting. For the purpose of this thesis 'SPinS' is defined as a supported playgroup operated by a playgroup coordinator co-located at a local primary school.

Early childhood education is underpinned by the tradition that play is regarded as essential to learning and development. Theories of play were adapted to regard the rights of the child and generated new ways of understanding childhood. Children were seen as an immature form of adults early in the century. Many children worked in factories for long hours and in dangerous conditions. Froebel (1967) pioneered a new educational philosophy and method for children to learn, based on play activity in kindergartens. He saw that "there is substantial value in the exercises of the Kindergarten, which pleurably bring out the active powers of the children - their powers of observation, judgement, and invention - and make them at once apt in doing as well as learning "(p. 2). It is understood that young children learn as they play. Early in the twentieth century theories of play were

¹ The word parent is used in this thesis to represent the adult, who may be the biological mother or father, grandparent, relative, foster or adoptive parent who raised the child. The word parent is also used when citing the literature.

informed by the work of Dewey (1902), Montessori (1952) and Piaget (1952). The work of Piaget (1952) has been influential in early childhood education because his theories of play positioned play as “essential to children’s learning as a developmental need and a fundamental right” (Wood, 2013, p. 3).

Specifically age appropriate play supports children’s education (Piaget, 1972, Erikson, 1950), and more recently there has been increasing attention to indicate that helping parents understand child development to support children’s learning at home may support children’s later achievement at school (Epstein, 2011). Evidence from Desforges with Arbouchar (2003) found that ‘good at home’ parenting positively influences educational outcomes regardless of disadvantage (p.4). At a crucial time in the child’s development, Supported Playgroups may provide opportunities for parents to engage with their young child’s development through the participation in a variety of developmentally appropriate play experiences and activities. Quality programmed early childhood play activities by qualified early childhood educators, may allow participants to share stories and information: “building on the parent’s capacity to support their child’s health, development, learning and wellbeing” (Jackson, 2011b, p. 1). Also, it has been reported that supported playgroups have an impact on social outcomes and are seen to help reduce feelings of isolation for some families (McArthur et al, 2012; Jackson, 2011a).

The Victorian Department of Education and Training’s (DET) Strategic Plan for 2013-2017 (DEECD, 2013) was to support Victorians to build prosperous, socially engaged, happy and healthy lives for children from birth to adulthood (Sharp, 2013). The role of this mission was to foster lifelong learning and development. This was done by strengthening family supports in the community to gain skills and knowledge. One of these strategies was to boost children’s learning and wellbeing in the early years. This was done by introducing the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ACECQA, 2009). The Early Childhood Development Strategy mission statement suggests supporting parents and carers to be actively involved in their children’s learning through play. One way of achieving this outcome in the early years was to improve interactions between children and parents. Research indicates that parental involvement in children’s play supports children’s educational outcomes (Wood, 2013). Improved interactions between children and parents may well be achieved as parents engage in supported playgroup programs. These programs may provide parents with skills and confidence as they observe the modelling of developmentally appropriate

play experiences and parenting practices by experienced playgroup coordinators. McArthur et al 's (2012) report on playgroups, conducted for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, stated that “attendance at supported playgroups significantly increases parents’ social networks and support systems, the learning of new play activities in the home, builds parental confidence and skills, improves parent-child relationships and enhances parents’ knowledge of services” (p. 38).

The research reported in this thesis considers the influence of parent participation in SPinS on parents’ perspectives of play at home and in the playgroup. It should be noted that the research reported was located within the context of a larger project investigating the efficacy of SPinS for families in areas of noted vulnerability. The researchers involved in this larger project included; Karen McLean, Susan Edwards, Yeshe Colliver, Clare Schaper and Pamela Lambert. The Connecting Schools and Communities through Supported Playgroups Consortium, which contributed to seeding funding for this research consisted of a regional Catholic Education Office, Regional Best Start, Regional campus of a university, Playgroup Victoria, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and 5 regional primary schools from both State and Catholic sectors.

The larger project was conducted over a three year period (2012-2015) and involved five supported playgroups co-located in one of the five participating primary schools. Each SPinS was operated by a paid, trained playgroup coordinator, with support from two pre-service teachers from Australian Catholic University.

The broader project had three main aims:

- 1) Increase the social connectedness arising from playgroup attendance for parents,
- 2) What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children’s play at home and in a playgroup setting?
- 3) Determine the role of technologies for supporting children’s learning in playgroups.

This Master of Philosophy study addressed the second aim:

To understand; *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?*

For this project, five SPinS groups were established in five local primary schools in a large regional city of rural Victoria. These outlying areas were targeted by Victorian State Government agencies as underachieving or as at risk of poor developmental outcomes according to Australian Early Development Census (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013) data. At the time of data collection for this thesis, the SPinS project had been in operation for three years. For the purpose of this thesis, the data was generated over a period of two years conducting focus group interviews by the researcher at each SPinS group. The research began by visiting each group to establish a rapport and understanding of the group dynamics before asking the parent participants any questions about their participation in SPinS and perspectives on play.

Evaluations of the impact of early childhood interventions on child and parenting outcomes conducted by Wise, de Silva, Webster and Sanson (2005) for the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services indicate that there are positive and substantial short-term effects of playgroups participation for parents and children. However, the long term outcomes of playgroup participation have rarely been studied. Information regarding the effectiveness of playgroups as intervention programs currently operating in Australia is under-researched and there is a need for more data on playgroups as a form of early childhood parenting intervention to be evaluated. Furthermore, there is limited research that looks at what factors affect parent-child interaction during participation in playgroups and if interaction with children's play is continued into the home.

The aim of this research is to establish clear links between the research question and findings to develop an educational model to for supporting parenting skills to encourage parent-child interactions. This study therefore was a way to generate and understand '*What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?*'.

1.3 Personal interest

As a qualified early childhood educator I have a personal interest in families and how they support their children to learn through play. Through my professional experience of over thirty years as an early childhood educator, I have seen parents engage more with children's play in a kindergarten setting when they understand value of play for children's learning (Oliver & Klugman, 1990). I was therefore interested in the process of SPinS in providing parents' access to information and examples of children learning through play, and how this was achieved in the playgroup setting.

Society has changed over the last decade and some of these changes include a shift from only one parent working, to both parents working outside the home. There is also an increase in families who are single parent families (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2014) meaning parents are relying on childcare centres. As parents enter the workforce due to economic or other reasons, many children experience less time with their families during the day and the opportunity for interaction through play is limited in the evenings. It has been reported that the lack of play providing a structure for learning has resulted in some children entering formal schooling without even the basic social, emotional and cognitive skills required for education (Jackson, 2010). There are the range of skills typically established in early childhood education through children's exposure to, and participation in play that arise, such as being able to pay attention, understand the basic function of letters and some early number concepts. These skills are learnt when children have the opportunity to engage in reading quality books, playing with blocks, painting, craft, sand and water and other age appropriate early childhood activities. It is possible to support parents to understand what children are learning when they are 'just playing' and guide them to engage in children's play.

When conducting this research, I had an inquiry to understand when parents engage with their children through play. The focus of this study allowed me to understand ways in which parents engage and interact with their children during play and what activities provided within a SPinS were likely to promote this engagement with children.

My experience as an early childhood educator, a parent of two children, and a Venturer Scout Leader, has given me many opportunities to understand and see the value of the importance of parent involvement on children's wellbeing and their ability to learn. From my professional and personal experiences, I see participation with children in all stages of their learning as vital for developing a well-rounded citizen ready to engage in life. When parents are involved with their children's learning, the children are intellectually challenged, learn to problem solve and benefit from the social interaction of learning life skills. Therefore, the focus of this study was of professional and personal interest to me.

1.4 Theoretical perspective

This study is conducted using a sociocultural theoretical perspective. Sociocultural theory places a lens on learning within a social context and seeks to understand how people learn from their interactions and experiences with one another (Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1988; and Rogoff, 2003). In his work Vygotsky was interested in understanding how people learn through their interactions, actions and shared experiences in a sociocultural context. (Crawford, 1996). Sociocultural perspectives on learning in a community suggested two streams of thinking that informed this thesis. The first is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological approach, which was later built upon by Rogoff's (2003) argument regarding community of learners and how people transform their learning by participating in activities with other people in that community.

A sociocultural theoretical approach was used because this description showed how an individual's learning cannot be separated from the community in which they are located. Sociocultural theory takes the perspective of explaining the interpersonal and social interactions of an individual within a community. It recognises that learners with different skills and backgrounds use language to understand, relate and negotiate through interaction in everyday events to arrive at a shared understanding of a subject or project (Vygotsky, 1978). Leont'ev (1981), who studied Vygotsky's theories, also talks about the significant influence of sociocultural forces in shaping learning and development. He looked at the different types of interactions that occur between members of the community and children that contribute to learning and development (Leont'ev, 1981).

I am building up a perspective that social interaction mediates the knowledge of the learner.

Bronfenbrenner's (1988) ecological systems theory also noted a person's development is affected by their social relationships and by everything in their immediate surrounds. Bronfenbrenner saw that the close interdependence of the family, community and school ecosystems shape learning, and the cultural beliefs of those participating in the environment. Ecological systems theory provided a framework to enable understanding of processes that occur in different environments that influence behaviours.

Rogoff's (1994) community of learner's model is based on the theory that all participants are active participants in their own learning. This model built on Bronfenbrenner's ideas, but instead of seeing culture as an influence of development, understood community and culture as a cause of development. She says that "the idea of a community of learners is based on the premise that learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavours with others, with all playing active in a sociocultural activity" (Rogoff, 1994, p. 209). For example, in this study, parents were given support by the SPinS playgroup coordinator and the early childhood pre-service educators to participate in play-activities with their children. The children were in turn supported by their parents to engage in play at home and in the playgroups as the parents learned more about play for their shared participation with the playgroup coordinator and pre-service educators. A *community of learner's* model involves active learning with "more skilled partners who provide leadership and guidance" (Rogoff, Matusov & White, 1996, p. 388) in a collaborative manner (Rogoff, 2003).

As the parent and child move from the home into the community, they become more active and engaged within the new culture of SPinS they are attending (Rogoff, 2003). SPinS provided a venue for social connections with others and the chance for the parents to learn about play from the playgroup coordinator and pre-service educators. Rogoff (2003) is particularly interested in the cultural aspect of people learning through observation, collaboration, and the role of adults in shared learning. Sociocultural theory argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning by interacting with others (Rogoff, 1994). These ideas were applicable to thesis because they helped to explain how the

parents' participation in the SPinS influenced their perspectives on children's play in the home and playgroup.

Rogoff's (2003) shared learning, talks about building peoples knowledge and understanding from each other, and is known as '*transformation of participation*'. This is important as it is different to viewing development as a transmission of knowledge acquired from experts (Rogoff, 2003) or cognitive theories of a child development (Piaget, 1952) where children learn in stages. Piaget (1952) believed that children incorporate their own understandings and new discoveries of the world around them to make sense of their environment (Wood, 2013). Piaget's (1952) approach was followed by other scholars of social constructivism such as Vygotsky (1978) who emphasised language playing a part in enabling children to learn. Social learning was important in relation to SPinS as it highlighted how parent interactions with children can be modelled by the playgroup coordinators and pre-service early childhood educators working alongside parents. It is argued by sociocultural theorists that the environment of a person supports their behaviour and learning. The importance of social learning in this respect links in with Vygotsky's (1978) argument that development is preceded by social interaction. Human development is the study of changes that occur to the person over a course of their life.

1.5 Research question and approach

The purpose of this study was to understand how parental participation in a SPinS influenced parents' perspectives on children's play in the home and playgroup and to understand if there was some change due to the SPinS influence. The research question for this thesis is to understand:

What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting.

Exploring parent perspectives required that the researcher was situated within the SPinS environment to interact with and interview the parents. The research project therefore employed a qualitative approach because qualitative research has a more interpretive approach and focuses on research in the field conducted with participants (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research is a social science discipline interested in finding deeper understanding of the perspectives of participants in everyday practices and everyday knowledge (Flick, 2007). That's why a qualitative and interpretist methodology was used.

1.6 Thesis structure

This thesis has seven chapters.

The *first chapter* introduces the research topic and the background of the research context to present the significance of the research. It includes the rationale of the study and its' location within a broader project being conducted into the efficacy of SPinS for families in vulnerable communities.

Chapter Two discusses current literature in relation to playgroups in Australia, particularly the concept of supported playgroups. SPinS groups are an under-researched area of playgroup provision predominately because they are a new service being offered to families. Highlighted in the literature was the importance of the role of the playgroup coordinator in facilitating support for parents to learn while engaging with their children in play. The role of the coordinator was to build trusting relationships which was fundamental for success of building parent confidence (Carbone et al., 2004; Hydon et al., 2005). This chapter also looks at the literature about children's play and the provision of play to children by parents in the Home Learning Environment.

Chapter Three outlines the theoretical framework used in this thesis to orient the explanations of the study in relation to the research question. A sociocultural framework informed the understanding that social interaction supports learning about play for parents through transformation of participation with the playgroup coordinator and pre-service early childhood educators within the SPinS environment.

Chapter Four outlines the methodology of the study. The research approach was qualitative informed by an epistemological, ontological and axiology perspective that values understanding the way that people go about making meaning of their lives in everyday conditions. This type of study required me as the researcher to conduct a single case study using in-depth focus group interviews with parents to understand their

perspectives of children's play. Purposive sampling was chosen for this research as because it allowed me to learn more about "issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry", (Patton, 2002, p. 230),

Chapter Five presents the main themes of the research. The three main themes identified were:

- 1) Parent experiences of play at playgroup
- 2) Parent inclusion of play at home
- 3) Playgroup as a site for social interactions

Chapter Six discusses the findings in more detail. The findings were analysed in relation to learning as a process of transformation of participation in sociocultural activities. The 'Cycle of Intent Engagement' is proposed as a way of understanding how learning about play by parents was being transmitted by the playgroup coordinator and pre-service educators in the SPinS. Finally, this chapter considers the implications of the findings for understanding what constitutes an effective SPinS for parents and their children. The thesis concludes with an overview of the research problem investigated, the research contribution made and implications of the findings for practice in the future. Thus the conclusion provides a summary of the contribution the thesis makes to the development and understanding of the role of SPinS and formulates questions for further research.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an introduction and overview of the thesis. The research focus and rationale have been identified. The researcher's professional and personal interest in the study have been described and the research question identified. The sociocultural theoretical perspective used to frame the research has been introduced in this chapter with a rationale for its use for understanding the learning that occurs in communities guided by the process of transformation of participation in sociocultural activities (Rogoff, Matusov & White, 1996). The chapter concluded with an outline of the structure of the thesis.

Chapter Two: Review of the literature

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the current literature and research around the development of the playgroup movement and playgroup provision in Australia and internationally. The chapter begins with an outline of Australian playgroups. Next, the benefits of playgroups for children and families are outlined and the Supported Playgroups in Schools (SPinS) model is introduced. This is followed by a summary of the research literature on the benefits of having a Playgroup Coordinator who organises the play-based activities for both parents and children in a playgroup setting. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the role of children's play in learning and how play in the home and the Home Learning Environment relates to children's development.

2.2 Development of the playgroup movement

The playgroup movement grew from programs in the United States that recognised a cycle of children's underachievement, particularly in areas of literacy and numeracy due to experiences of poverty. The HighScope (Epstein & Salinas, 2004) and HeadStart (Schweinhart, 2006) programs in America, and HIPPIE program (Rooste et al., 2014) in Australia, recognised that parents had an influence on children's education in the home. The aim of these programs was to raise parental expectations of their children's achievements and to increase the frequency of parent-child activities to support children's learning through play (Evangelou & Wild, 2014).

The Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP) conducted in United Kingdom during 2006-2008, recognised parental support as an important emerging theme in research that could inform policy, with the underlying aim of improving children's educational outcomes, particularly children at risk of developmental delay (Evangelou, et al., 2014). The outcome of the ELPP initiative saw that individual programs could be drawn together to share successful practices. There was scope for working together cohesively towards a common goal of increasing parental involvement in children's learning through play (Goff, Evangelou & Sylvia, 2012).

In Australia, the playgroup movement grew from the American, English and New Zealand examples of community-based, self-funded models of playgroup provision primarily managed by volunteers (Plowman, 2006). They began as self-help organisations in the 1960's and have grown to address the need for social contact with families and children in their local community before children attend school. Playgroup programs have received funding from the Australian Government since 1975. The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) provides funding for community-based projects to provide a strong and fair society for all Australians by increasing social and economic participation and by strengthening the resilience of families and support better parenting skills (FaHCSIA, 2014). Playgroups are now conducted in many countries including Australia, United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand and in Europe.

In Australia, the term playgroup describes parent-child groups who meet on a regular basis for the purpose of social activities and play (Dadich and Spooner, 2008; Handcock et al., 2012; McArthur et al et al., 2010). Families gather in their local area to attend a playgroup, generally with children who are below pre-school age. The establishment of different types of playgroups aimed to meet the diverse range of participants (Dadich and Spooner, 2008).

Some of the playgroups to suit varying populations in the community are, playgroups for mothers, fathers, grandparents, Koori, migrants, refugees, Steiner and Montessori playgroups, as well as supported early intervention groups. These groups are all local and community-based. They provide a venue for parents and caregivers to meet, help reduce social isolation and increase the resources for children's play that may not be provided in the home (Jackson, 2006, 2013).

The latest annual report for Playgroup Australia NSW (2014) indicated that the Federal government was putting significant funding into playgroup development to fund resources and services in NSW as it is one of Australia's largest and oldest playgroup providers. The aim of this funding was to provide support to boost community playgroup participation, particularly in remote and rural areas through improving services in regional areas and streamlining maternal child health services, playgroup and kindergarten services. This report indicated that playgroups play a significant role in communities in supporting children and families. Playgroup Victoria's latest Annual

Report to date is 2013. This report has also stated that significant funding should be provided for playgroup provision. For example, in the small rural town of Warracknabeal, North West Victoria, funding was used to provide supported playgroup sessions that were run from a room under the grandstand at the local Anzac Park. This group gained recognition from Playgroup Victoria in the form of the 'Playgroup of the Month' award in May 2012 for providing a valuable service in the town. Funding has also helped Playgroup Victoria to develop websites incorporating PVTV, (Parent Victoria TV), an online channel providing playgroup members with training and information about products such as PlayMap, (Playgroup Victoria) an online interactive tool to help parents plan play activities to promote children's learning and development and enhance the parent-child relationship.

2.3 Types of playgroups

The Playgroup Program is part of Council of Australian Governments (COAG), who put forward the National Early Childhood Development Strategy, *Investing in the Early Years*, (COAG, 2009) and focused on improving services for early childhood development and parenting outcomes. The program uses different playgroup models including:

1. Community playgroups
2. Supported playgroups
3. Intensive Supported playgroups
4. PlayConnect; Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) playgroups
5. Mobile Playgroups

Community playgroups are self-managed, organised and led by parents or caregivers who attend the group. The size of the playgroup is determined by the size of the meeting place. It is the responsibility of each member to contribute to the operation of the group. Parents attend community playgroups for a variety of reasons, usually to socialise in a safe and supportive environment (Dadich & Spooner, 2008). Community playgroups provide children under the age of five with a low cost early childhood education service prior to attending school. Unlike childcare or kindergarten, caregivers are responsible for the child and the provision of play-activities for the child during the session. This makes

community playgroups different from supported and intensive supported playgroups where there is a trained coordinator running the group.

Supported playgroups aim to engage families with under school age children who find it difficult to access community Playgroups. They target culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families, indigenous families, families with mental health or disability issues (either parent or child), those at risk of drug and alcohol abuse, teenage and young parent families, and families who are socially isolated or disadvantaged and refugee families.

Supported playgroups are funded by Australian and State government agencies, such as the Department of Social Services. They are led by a paid, trained early childhood playgroup coordinator who plans and implements the play-based activities while the parents remain with their children for the duration of the session. The supported playgroup model offers parents opportunities to meet and share their experiences, with like-minded people, and they provide children with opportunities to play learn and socialise.

Supported playgroups have a focus on high-quality learning, enabling children to fulfil their potential, regardless of their background or circumstances (Jackson, 2011a, p.1). Play-based learning, socialisation, peer support and positive modelling are the primary outcomes from a supported playgroup. Supported playgroups are: “an effective means to support the parenting role and promote children’s developmental outcomes despite a limited evidence base” (Jackson, 2006, p. 167). Supported playgroup providers are expected to build partnerships with local early childhood services and community organisations to assist with long-term transition to a community group (Plowman, 2009).

In 2001 to 2002, a project was undertaken by Playgroup Australia to trial a supported playgroup model. The primary function of the coordinator in these playgroups was to empower families through the use of modelling aimed at increasing the capacity of parents’ to engage with children by building parent support and confidence in informal social networks (Plowman, 2009). The outcome of this project indicated some success with thirty-six of the fifty-four groups moving on to operate their own community playgroups after the project. This suggests that the presence of a playgroup coordinator

in a supported playgroup is potentially beneficial in helping parents transition to a community playgroup.

Intensive Supported Playgroups (ISP) are funded by government agencies and aim to promote positive early childhood development and to contribute to increased child safety and well-being for vulnerable children and families (FaHCSIA, 2014). In these playgroups, a playgroup coordinator, family support worker and peer support person, provide extensive support to assist often isolated and disadvantaged families to build linkages to community services (Plowman, 2008). An example of Intensive Supported Playgroups is the mobile service named PlaySpot. These mobile children's services provide services to communities rather than the traditional service delivery being located in a fixed location. The advantage of mobile services such as PlaySpot is that as the location of families needing services changes the level of demand the service is able to easily relocate.

PlayConnect Playgroups are funded by Playgroup Australia who is the national provider for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and work in partnership with local organisations throughout Australia. These groups are specific to children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. PlayConnect playgroups are an intensive supported playgroup offering play-based opportunities for children with autism and social support networks for families and carers of these children.

Mobile Playgroups offer serves to remote areas of Australia.

2.4 Benefits of playgroups

Many developed countries have some form of playgroup in relation to early childhood education (Melhuish, 2011) by offering sessional groups that are run by parents on a voluntary basis. Previous research reviewed by Lloyd, Melhuish, Moss Owen, (1989) indicates a variety of differences in the way playgroups are conducted due to the organisation and funding bodies responsible. Lloyd et al. (1989) says "many playgroups are independently run by voluntary groups or by individuals" (p. 77). There appears to be a large diversity in the way the groups are organised and named making it difficult to document (Lloyd et al., 1989). Playgroups in Australia and New Zealand have organising bodies, as well as Ireland and the Netherlands who have forthcoming playgroup

movements (Lloyd et al., 1989). North America has a large research contribution to other types of preschool services, but not relating to playgroups.

Playgroups are viewed as a major form of pre-school provision (Lloyd, et al., 1989). From the parents' perspective, one benefit of pre-school experience is to ease the transition into the school environment (Sylva et al., 1980). Parental involvement appears to be higher in playgroups than any other pre-school provision, but it has been noted that some parents appear to have little knowledge of how to interact and increase children's cognitive development during play (Sylva et al., 1980). This meant there was opportunity in a supported playgroup environment to foster parenting skills and knowledge of child development in the early years through social interaction, sharing and modelling of knowledge.

Evidence from the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) longitudinal project of intellectual and social behaviour from age three upwards conducted by Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, (2004) indicated that children's learning can be extended through participation in learning environments that are instructive and encourage sustained shared thinking (Sylva et al., 2004). Findings from this project also indicated that learning goals and carefully planned activities supported children's social development and contributed to better educational results.

In other research conducted as part of the Oxford Preschool Project in the United Kingdom it was found that children in playgroups spent more time with an adult than children in nursery schools (Lloyd et al., 1989). Even so, the quality of play in the nursery school demonstrated more complex play in relation to the children in playgroup where adult-child interaction was lower. These findings indicated that the quality of play for children was influenced by the quality of adult involvement.

Studies in the United States (Gormly, Phillips & Gayer, 2008; Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004) identify benefits of successful pre-school programs, including a reduction of socioeconomic inequalities (Christelle & Arnaud, 2010), through improved school success and higher wages in the labour market. A growing body of evidence internationally and in Australia indicates that positive and active interaction with children supports their early development and sets the future outcomes of a child's later adult life. The literature would suggest that the benefits of playgroups are recognised for

encouraging families to interact with their children during play. This is because the benefits of play are an integral part of early childhood development. Playgroups are nationally recognised in Australia as an Early Childhood Service that is increasingly understood as an important way of meeting children's needs (Oke et al., 2007). The Australian Office for Children (2005) recognises the benefits of playgroups to include opportunities to enhance parenting skills and the understanding of children's developmental needs, facilitation of friendships, encouragement of social development of parents and providing a place to facilitate community connectedness by creating links to other services. Playgroups form an important bridge between the Maternal Child Health system and children's later attendance at preschool. Research has shown that the investment in the early years in the form of preschool care and education services can have a positive effect on children's longer term developmental outcomes (Victorian Government Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training, 2006).

The National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (2009) reported that since 2009, significant reforms have occurred in Early Childhood Education and Care. The introduction of the New National Law, Regulations, Standards, Learning Frameworks and a new rating assessment system has been implemented. The purpose is to advocate for the rights of children and improve the quality of children's services and early childhood education. Playgroups are seen to benefit both children and parents by positively promoting early childhood development for children under school age by improving parenting knowledge and skills to sustain a family's wellbeing. Playgroups provide opportunities for: "reducing the impact on health, social and other issues on children's development through prevention and early intervention strategies" (Plowman, 2008, p. 5). Playgroups provide a low cost service of support for families. The Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) mission is to ensure a high-quality and coherent birth to adulthood learning and development system to build the capacity of every young Victorian. Playgroups provide an important bridge between the Maternal Child Care service and the kindergarten. Research on the benefits of playgroups talk about the importance of play for stimulating early learning and social supports for families and an important way of providing for children's needs (Dadich & Spooner, 2008, Oke, Stanley et al, 2007).

At present there is limited *educational* research on the benefits of playgroups for stimulating parent interaction and learning with children in the home environment, and in the playgroup setting itself. In 2009, the Victorian Government program promoted the Supported Playgroup Initiative (SPPI), which aimed to improve outcomes for children by increasing parental confidence through establishing social networks (Plowman, 2009). To achieve these results Playgroup Victoria took a child-centred, family focused approach to service delivery. Playgroup services are now seen to work alongside parents and children acknowledging parents as the first and most influential educator of their child.

The program in Victoria supported families by providing active modelling of play-based activities to provide optimal home learning and playgroup experiences for children. However, there is limited research providing insights regarding the transference of these learning experiences into the home learning environment by parents for the benefit of children.

The Victorian Government's *Best Start* Initiative (2007) emphasised early intervention programs to improve health, development, learning and wellbeing of all Victorian children by supporting local communities, parents and service providers to improve universal early years services. *Best Start* partnerships have improved availability of playgroups in local areas and have shown that young children develop through their relationship with others (Plowman, 2009). The initiative aimed at improving outcomes for children and parents, particularly parenting capacity and social inclusion (Plowman, 2009), and there is some evidence that this has been the case (Victorian Government Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training, 2006).

In recent years, supported playgroups have been seen as a form of early intervention by enabling parental education to support young children's play and learning. Recently there has been growing research to indicate that helping parents understand child development and children's play at home makes a positive difference to children's later achievement at school by reading books regularly to children (Epstein, 2011). Jackson (2011b) reported that supported playgroups play a critical role in government strategies aimed at increasing effective early intervention and prevention services for families with young children. The importance of the quality of care children receive, particularly in the first three years of life within the community and in the family home affects children's

learning and development (Jackson, 2011b). Other research supporting this claim is evident in the work of Plowman (2006), McArthur et al. (2012) and Oke et al. (2007).

Evidence from Desforges and Arbouchar (2003) found that consistent '*good home parenting*' including the "provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, positively influences educational outcomes regardless of social or economic disadvantage" (p. 6). This claim is further supported by findings from the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) research conducted in England by Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blachford and Taggart (2004) who revealed that what parents do with children in the family home in regard to supporting children's early childhood development through play, is more important than who parents are in terms of their social and/or economic status. Supported playgroups help parents learn how to provide '*good home parenting*' associated with supporting children's play in the home where they may not have been able to learn these play skills elsewhere.

Social support for families is a significant reason for providing supported playgroups as the role of extended families, and traditional neighbourhoods have changed during the last three decades. Changing parental work patterns see some parents both working long or non-standard hours, or their economic needs mean they need to return to work soon after a baby is born. Families on low incomes are reported as socially isolated, especially migrant families who have arrived in Australia without extended family support (Freiberg et al., 2005). It is recognised that social isolation has a negative impact on the quality of parental care children receive and social supports can have a lasting influence on children in later life (Freiberg et al., 2005). Social interaction assists in the reduction of parent and child social isolation and contributes to the parent's sense of wellbeing, confidence and ability to support others (Jackson, 2011b), and hence it may be that supported playgroups play an important role in enabling this social interaction and education of parenting skills to occur.

For this reason, the benefits of playgroup participation for families and children include a reduction in social isolation through fostering social interactions and improved interpersonal relationships for individuals and the broader community (Moore, 2005). This is particularly evident in recent studies conducted by Jackson (2006), Oke et al. (2007) and McArthur et al. (2012), who indicated there were positive social outcomes for the adults who attend playgroups with children. Supported playgroups in schools or community

hubs may also provide a one-stop education service that could help parents juggle the needs of children of numerous ages attending different services.

2.5 The SPinS model

Supported Playgroups in Schools (SPinS) are playgroups located on primary school sites and led by a playgroup coordinator who is employed by an agency or community group (McLean et al., 2014). In this model the playgroup coordinator usually plans play activities for children and parents to engage in, with the intention of encouraging parent participation in children's play. The sessions usually run on a weekly basis for two to three hours and offer a range of free play and structured activities such as music, singing and story time. Research into the SPinS model suggests that SPinS participation supports families to develop social connections through enabling parents and children to interact socially with others (McLean et al., 2014).

Like other playgroups, a key aim of Supported Playgroups in Schools (SPinS) is to encourage families (McLean et al, 2014) to access high-quality parenting support and integrated learning in one location. The sharing of parenting experiences with others at playgroups like SPinS may provide for learning through a "bi-directional approach" (Evangalou and Wild, 2014) where parents and leaders are valued as partners in children's learning and development. In the SPinS model the potential exists to build strong links to local education services and provide quality resources that can be easily accessed by families. The few studies conducted in Australia by McArthur et al. (2012), Jackson (2011b) and Oke et al. (2007) suggest that rich social support networks are available to parents through supported playgroups, and that these networks have increased families' ability to access information and resources.

Government reviews regarding playgroups (but not necessarily SPinS) can be found in the Australian Productivity Commission Report into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning (Productivity Commission, 2014), where the opportunity for children to develop the necessary social and educational skills to transition well into school environments also provides opportunities for flexible and affordable participation in local communities (p. 68). Further support for these claims can be found in a longitudinal study of Australian children (Hancock et al., 2012), which identified that children who go to a supported

playgroup, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, start school with social and emotional skills that enable them to learn.

The influence of early childhood parental support is well documented showing that it is not just the quantity of time a child spends with the parent but it is also the quality (Plowman, 2002). Literacy and numeracy outcomes in school are closely linked to stimulating family interactions and home environments before children go to school Jackson (2012).

The research in this area indicates that early childhood programs are effective when they support parents' active participation in children's early learning and development through play, as well as providing regular and consistent opportunities for guided interactions and play with other children (Plowman, 2006). Playgroups have been reported as offering a model aimed at supporting parents to actively engage in their children's learning and development through play (Fawcett, 1979, Needham & Jackson, 2012, McLean et al. 2015).

McArthur et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of the provision of quality early childhood services for families. McArthur et al. (2012) found while researching playgroups that the parents who regularly attended supported playgroups, showed an improvement socially when connecting with others. Therefore, this indicated that supported playgroups had an impact on social outcomes and reduced feelings of isolation for some families by assisting families to form new friendships.

Theories reported by Rogoff (1998) argue social interaction has an influence on learning because a child's thinking is transformed through guided participation. In the context of supported playgroups, playgroup coordinators are able to transform parents learning regarding the value of play for their children through collaboration and guided participation in the social setting.

2.5.1 The role of the Playgroup Coordinator

McArthur et al (2012) review on supported playgroups suggested that to achieve positive outcomes for parent-child relationships, the presence of a qualified early childhood

coordinator, along with regular attendance by parents and families is necessary. This is because the playgroup coordinator can support and foster the interaction of the parent and child. In the SPinS context coordinators can provide positive role models to families as well as building trusting relationships (McLean et al, 2014). When viewed in this way SPinS may provide support and encourage a shared approach to learning from early childhood to primary school educators.

In supported playgroups the playgroup coordinator usually prepares play-based learning activities allowing for the opportunity for a parent to engage with their child. This is because it is important in the supported playgroup environment for coordinators to “build on the parent’s ability to support their child’s health, development, learning and wellbeing” (Jackson, 2011a p. 1). It appears that in the most efficient early childhood programs the playgroup coordinator supports parents’ active participation in children’s early learning and development through play.

The playgroup coordinator plays an important role in influencing the value parents derive from their participation in supported playgroups. Playgroup coordinators can provide links to other services in the community with families at risk, who are facing isolation or parenting difficulties by promoting quality service and experiences for children through supported playgroups (McArthur et al., 2010, p. 38). In a reported study by Moore (2005) it was found that when social isolation is improved through inter-personal relationships, that positive impacts are seen in the increasing confidence of the parent and child.

Jackson’s (2009) research on the role of supported playgroups in creating responsive, social spaces for parent-child wellbeing suggests that supported playgroup environments encourage collaborative interactions with playgroup coordinators. Jackson (2009) suggests that in their role the playgroup coordinator usually supports families to feel welcomed and to develop a sense of belonging to the playgroup. When family practices, beliefs and values are respected within the early childhood setting, children and parents feel a sense of security and belonging (Jackson, 2012; McArthur et al, 2010).

Supported playgroups offer opportunities for parents to meet and share their experiences while their children have opportunities to play, learn and socialise (Jackson. 2011b). It would seem that playgroup coordinators play an important role in helping to stimulate children’s development through the provision of play-based activities to young children

(Dadich & Spooner, 2008). Hence, parents attending supported playgroups are afforded the opportunity to increase their knowledge of parenting and children's play, facilitate social networks and access information and resources about their child's development and play that they may not have otherwise received.

2.5.2 Consequences of the playgroup experience

While the benefits of supported playgroups for children and families from a social perspective are well established, not as much is known about how the engagement of parents with children during play influences the extension of learning in the family home and within the playgroup itself. This suggests that further research is needed to examine the extent to which participation in supported playgroups influences parent-child interactions that foster children's learning outcomes through play, particularly in areas such as literacy and numeracy.

International experiences of providing early intervention programs to parents confirmed that strong and effective partnerships between families and service providers are essential for children's educational success, particularly at a local level (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, Plowman, 2003, McArthur et al., 2011). It is important for research in Australia to be undertaken to identify whether SPinS may provide parenting skills in the home to support children's later educational success at school.

Locating early childhood services on school sites is one way that local governments aim to provide support for integrated learning. In this model professionals across the early childhood and primary education sectors work collaboratively together to enable communities to shape services to meet local needs. A further aim of this model is to provide effective prevention programs for vulnerable children with a disability or developmental delay (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, Plowman, 2003, McArthur et al, 2011).

In recent years this approach has seen playgroups, kindergartens and early childhood education services attached to school settings. The provision of early childhood services on school sites offers children and families the opportunity to feel a part of the school community before their children commence formal education. The key initiatives of the Early Years Strategic Plan (DEECD, 2014) indicate that each stage of learning can build

on what has come before, enabling children and families a smooth transition, without the need for doubling up on services and therefore being more cost effective. Seamless learning experiences are reported in the Victorian Government's Early Years Strategic Plan (DEECD, 2014) where the Victorian Government outlines directions and actions to support parents and communities to give children the benefit of high-quality learning. The plan recognises the importance of seamless learning between early education and primary school, improving the ability for communities to shape service needs to meet local needs, supporting vulnerable families with earlier and improved services (DEECD, 2014.p. 4).

The Price Waterhouse and Cooper report (2014), *putting a value on early childhood education and care in Australia*, found strong economic evidence internationally, that investing in the early years proved a sound investment and has a lasting impact on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Supporting families in their parenting role with children therefore recognises that parents have a significant influence on their children's wellbeing and learning. This is important given research shows that the home environment is a significant predictor of young children's educational and learning outcomes. Participation in SPinS may be one way of promoting parenting skills:

The best practice playgroups are the ones that provide opportunities to build friendships and social support, help children learn through play, take responsibility and work together, provide a safe and supportive environment and exchange ideas about parenting (Plowman, 2006, p. 11).

2.6 SPinS and learning transference

Jackson's (2011a) research into supported playgroups, suggests that a qualified playgroup coordinator might provide support to parents in their parenting role through the provision of modelling how to interact with children during play-based activities. Jackson's (2011a) research also found that the routine and structure to the session created familiarity and confidence for both parents and children during play sessions.

Playgroup coordinators, facilitating supported playgroups, may also assist parents to understand the value of play for their children's learning and development as they engage in play-activities with their children. Playgroup coordinators were also seen to help parents to use household items in the home to support children's play, rather than buying expensive toys. The potential benefit of attending a SPinS is to encourage parents to incorporate new learning and to interact with their children at home, a place where the child spends significant time playing. Play-based activities can be encouraged with little expense for parents, such as making play dough, singing, dancing, reading and providing art and craft materials for creative endeavours. Modelling time spent with a child reading, talking, sharing, creating, listening to each other to develop language and literature skills is important to a child's future education (Brown, 2007).

Munford and Saunders (2006) see the need for parents to have experienced supportive relationships themselves in order to provide play experiences for their children. The importance of educating parents in regard to young children's play in a supportive context is documented well in the United Kingdom through the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) program. This program demonstrated that parents engage in shared learning through a bi-directional approach (Evangelou & Wild, 2014). This approach noted that parents and coordinators are valued as partners in children's learning. Parents are free to give suggestions and try things for themselves and the educators work alongside parents and respect that they know their child.

A longitudinal study of Australian Children (Growing up In Australia, Hancock et al., 2012) examined the associations between playgroup participation and the outcomes for children aged 4 to 5 years, and found that learning competence for both boys and girls was higher than those who did not attend a playgroup during the early years. The study provided evidence that continued participation in playgroups is associated with better outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged families. SPinS may provide a significant context for parents to learn parenting skills on providing opportunities to continue activities in the home. SPinS being a play-based program has the ability to support parents to learn alongside their child.

However, given that the SPinS is a relatively new form of project provision, little is known to what extent participation in a SPinS is likely to influence parental perspectives on children's play in the home and in the playgroup.

2.7 Children's play and the value of play for learning

Children's play is important to early childhood education because it is believed that children learn by being actively engaged in play activities (Wood, 2013). There is no universal definition of play. Research studies talk about play functions, behaviours and characteristics of play to understand what play is and what play does (Wood, 2013). "Play does not take place in a vacuum: everything that children play at, or play with, is influenced by wider social, historical and cultural factors and contextually situated processes" (Wood, 2013, p. 8).

However, some definitions for play in early childhood education suggest play is: "absorbing activities in which healthy young children participate with enthusiasm and abandon" (Scales, et al., 1991, p. 15). Other definitions of play talk about play as a freely chosen and non-literal activity (Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg, 1983). Smith and Vollestedt (1985) say it is not useful to try and define play, and that researchers should think instead about the different characteristics of play, such as motivation to play, flexibility in thinking during play and positive emotions experienced during play (p.1042). The field of play is broad; therefore many scholars have focused on the types of play to understand learning (Wood, 2013).

While the definition of play is hard to establish, the purposes and value of play for young children is also continuously debated. An understanding about children's play comes from a range of theoretical and philosophical perspectives. For example, Froebel (1852), Freud (1909), Erikson (1950) and Piaget (1964) who influenced developmental theories of play. These perspectives on play highlight the role of play in supporting children's development in different areas, such as social and emotional development, moral development or cognitive development. Developmental theories of play have been influential in many Western-European communities where they are used to inform early childhood education (Rogers, 2011).

Theories of play have changed over time and there is a different emphasis in each theory according to the focus of play research and whether this is mostly psychological, biological, sociological, anthropological and/or educational (Wood, 2013, p. 22). In the field of educational research, play has been linked to disciplines such as literacy and

numeracy. This is because it is often argued that when children play they experience opportunities for learning about concepts related to literacy and numeracy.

Sociocultural understandings of children's play in early childhood education became popular because sociocultural theory responded to concerns that children learn by developing ideas of the world around them through participation within an activity and how this participation transforms during the course of the activity (Edwards, 2009). Understanding the process of play and learning from a sociocultural perspective draws on theories of Vygotsky (1978), Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Rogoff (2003) all of whom focused on the changing environment of the child having an impact on their play.

Vygotsky (1978) has been the most significant theorist for understanding the relationship of learning and development through play. He proposed that play facilitated children's cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) saw children learning new knowledge when they interact with others, such as when the child engages in pretend or imaginary play. Play as a leading activity sees the relationship during the play process (language, pretence, narrative) as a way of transforming skills in the symbolic form of pretend play to written language (Pellegrini, 1991). The interaction between the child, peer or adult during these activities supports learning through social practices of scaffolding (Bruner, 1976). Scaffolding in a play situation allows children to build new competencies (Berk & Winsler, 1995). This is because more competent players can help children learn new play skills. Rogoff (2003) also acknowledged the importance of social experiences of play influencing a child's thinking. She reports that children learn from others by observing, engaging socially and experiencing activities with adults.

Play is considered important in early childhood education because it is connected with children's learning. For this study, play is based on sociocultural perspectives reflecting that children are ready to learn and are able to learn from everyday activities and interactions with people, places and things around them (Wood, 2013). This learning includes knowledge being constructed as a result of the interactions between the child and the social environment (Rogoff, 2003). Play provides children with opportunities for exploration, experimentation and manipulation that are essential for constructing knowledge (Wood, 2013). Learning is motivated through observation and participation in a range of real-life experiences valued by the family and community (Rogoff, 2003). These experiences are argued to benefit children's intellectual, social, emotional and

physical development (Nolan & Kilderry, 2010; Wyver, et al., 2010). There is substantial evidence that different forms of play extend children's skills in the learning process. For example, cooking or building a cubby house from sticks involves social cooperation. Constructive play with blocks involves mathematical concepts of length and width, while cooking involves measurement, time and preparation, sand and water play provide an opportunity to learn scientific concepts of floating and sinking. Play is "varied and complex" (Wood, 2013, p. 10) because what adults choose to see in children's play may not be consistent with children's purposes and meanings. This is because play takes place in the child's mind and children use symbols in their imaginative experiences that are not visible to adults. This also takes into account that children also have their own definition of play, which is different from adults. Generally, from a child's perspective, play focuses on the child's choice in what to do and not what the adult chooses.

In early childhood education, play is often understood as a: "dominant pedagogy of choice" (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, & Fler, 2009, p. 50) because it reflects principles that practitioners can use to plan and develop their practice. For example, if play is understood to help children reflect their cultural experiences educators can provide activities for children that match these experiences. In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework or the 'EYLF' (DEEWR, 2009) reflects the role of play in the curriculum. This document suggests that teachers can use children's play to foster and support learning. Recently research has looked at how using play to support learning works in early childhood settings.

Wood (2013) talks about pedagogical play; children need a mixture of different types of play to help them learn. This can be structured, intentional teaching activities with adults, such as cooking or free play that children choose. Free play may include only the children without the interaction of an adult. If there is no interaction from a more experienced peer or adult, the play may over time not advance in context. Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2012) found that children's play also needs to be directed by a purpose to support learning. They suggest that this occurs when play activity has been connected to a learning outcome and designed by the educator to scaffold learning. Siraj-Blatchford and Woodhead's (2009) work also indicates that adult interaction and support is necessary to bridge the gap between the play experiences and the construction of actual knowledge and understanding.

The value of play for learning is evident in early childhood curriculum documents such as the Early Learning Frameworks (EYLF) in Australia (DEEWR, 2009); the New Zealand *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996); the Developmentally Appropriate Practice Guidelines (DAPG) in the United States of America (Bredekamp & Copple 1997); and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in the United Kingdom (Department of Education, 2012). In each of these documents, play is described as the forum for children's learning. For example, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) advocates for open-ended play-based learning where children interact with materials in the environment provided by the educator, who goes onto scaffold children's interactions through play to support learning (p. 26). Scaffolding supports the child to higher order thinking by asking questions.

Other documents that value play for children are the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (2006). These documents are consistent with early childhood research into the value of play for young children. The documents help to support children and families throughout the early years, and also give educators a foundation to build on children's learning and development to support high quality programming that can be transferred across services. Curriculum frameworks and other documents such as the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child are useful for families and educators because they describe the value of play as attached to children's activity. Play allows children to use their creativity while developing imagination, dexterity and physical, cognitive and emotional strength (Gainsburg, 2007, p. 183). Play also allows children to interact in the world around them at an early age. Play allows children to develop new competencies that leads to increased confidence and builds resilience they will need for future challenges (Erikson, 1985).

Undirected or 'freely chosen' play gives children the opportunity to learn self-advocacy skills (Erikson, 1985) and helps children learn to share, negotiate, make decisions, resolve conflicts and practice decision making skills (Pellegrini, & Smith, 1988; Gainsborough, 2007). When play is allowed to be child-driven, children can move through activities at their own pace and discover areas of interest and engage fully in the passion they wish to pursue (Erikson, 1985; Hurwitz, 2003).

Play can involve adults and adult interaction, however if adults overly control play, children lose the ability to be creative and follow their own interests and this can lessen children's ability to develop leadership and group skills (McDonald, 1993). When parents are fully aware of the role of children's play in their learning, the interactions they have with their children through play can occur build enduring relationships that help to develop vital communication links between the parent and child (Gainsberg, 2007). The deep connection the parent develops with the child when they engage in play, indicates that play is an ideal venue to develop these relationships. Parents playing with their children also provide children with a model for play that can increase the complexity of children's play. However, it is not always easy for parents to know what and how to play with their children. Parents need to feel supported to understand what type of quality play activities enriches their children's development and to understand play as a healthy part of childhood.

There are many cultural expectations regarding play (Gaskins, 2014, p. 35). Cultural differences are seen in how closely the adults should monitor play. Play that is not monitored is seen as being more child-driven (Gaskins, 2014, p. 35) and often the line between play and other activities is not clear (Gaskins, 2014).

Even though play is considered important for children there is some concern that children's levels of free play may have decreased over time (Clements, 2004). Several key factors for explaining this reduction in children's free play include: families having two working parents, single families, and fewer multigenerational households where grandparents and extended family help with child rearing and playing with children. (Jackson, 2011a; McArthur et al, 2012). Another factor that may decrease free play is explained through children being passively entertained by television and computer games (Zimmerman & Christakis, 2005). This can include children's play being influenced by working parents, or the impact of technologies on play.

In the playgroup movement, play is also valued for the benefits that it has for children, as well as for parents. Play offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children. "Play is not a spontaneous, natural activity but a culturally influenced social practice: most children learn how to play with the support of skilled peers and adults" (Wood, 2013, p. 98). The experience of play with children at playgroup, enhances children's play skills, increases parenting confidence, and builds relationships in a

supportive environment (Huffman, Melinger & Kerivan, 2000). Early childhood education traditionally values play because it helps adults to provide: “environments that are provocative, open-ended and rich in possibilities, and which encourage collaboration and reciprocity” (Warden, 2005, p. 3). Early childhood education therefore regards play as an essential element for learning and development (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

2.8 Parental involvement in play, parent interventions and the role of the Home Learning Environment

Research on the benefits of home learning for a child at school entry has been internationally documented as having positive effects on young children’s educational outcomes. A longitudinal study conducted in the United Kingdom by Sylva et al., (2004) regarding the importance of the Home Learning Environment (HLE) on children’s educational outcomes indicated that: “what parents do with children is more critical than who parents are” (p. 14) in terms of their social and economic status. This means that increasing parent-child interactions in the home and the provision of play-activities to children is an important aspect of reducing social and educational disadvantage for young children.

Roberts (2010) identified that children’s early environments and relationships have a lasting impact on children’s long-term development. Sylvia et al, (1980) compared children’s experiences at pre-school to the start of infant school and found that there were marked differences regarding the impact on later development with children who had the opportunity to experience adult- child attention. Roberts (2010) also noted that, “experiences and relationships in the home make the most impact on children’s development (p. 5).

Research indicates that play-activities have a significant impact on the child’s language and literacy skills (Sylva et al., 2004). Key factors influencing development reported by Sylva et al., (2004) were: “providing a rich home environment through language and literacy, quality and quantity of cognitive stimulation, parental sensitivity and child-centred emotional support, and an emphasis on the value of education that begins at home” (p,18).

Eyberg's (2008) study of behavioural-parent training involved parents being able to interact positively with their children by giving praise, imitating and providing enthusiasm for appropriate behaviours during play experiences. This study showed there was significant increase in children's responses to learning "when the adult connects with the child, the relationship is enhanced and the potential for learning is greater" (p. 8). Evan's (2006) also stated that high quality early intervention programs gave parents information and support in their parenting role and "can make a significant change in a child's life course" (p. 3).

SPinS may be a program that has the potential to support parents to understand the opportunities of parent-child interaction to enhance children's learning through play. Research into SPinS is important because there is a need to examine if there is an impact on parent-child provision of play activities in the home after parents participate in a SPinS program.

The important role parents' play in influencing their children's life outcomes is a lifelong investment in education of a child's varying ages and stages. There is growing importance placed on the role of parents in supporting early learning in the home through play. Evangelou & Wild (2014) mention that: "supporting parents in their role as the main educators of their children during the early years, and encouraging early education and care services to work in close partnership with parents, families and communities, in order to increase awareness of the opportunities offered by early childhood education and care and of the importance of learning from an early age" (p. 379). The early years have been identified as vital for children's learning and wellbeing.

The impact of the early years has found skills related to attention to be the most important factor for later success in education (Feinstein and Duckworth, 2006, p. 6). The relationship between the parent and child has a vital influence on learning, particularly reading and writing skills (Zarb 2012). There are a number of factors identified in the literature that have a strong impact on children's early development. These include parental education, home learning environment, and quality pre-school education to name a few (Johnson & Kossykh, 2008, p. 8). The role of parents in shaping young children's development in the early years therefore has an economic benefit because it reduces long-term costs associated with poor educational outcomes (Evangelou et al. 2014).

The Victorian Government has recognised the importance of early home learning for children's futures in the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (2009). The details of the report included a five year reform agenda that looked at improving outcomes for young people. The focus was on providing benefits to early childhood education and care by fostering partnerships with families to build a collaborative approach with parents. This includes helping parents better understand the role of play in their children's learning.

There is a range of research that has been undertaken in different early childhood contexts that suggests that the quality of the Home Learning Environment experienced by children in the early years contributes to broader developmental and education outcomes. For example, research by Jackson (2011b) suggested parental involvement in early learning had a significant impact on children's wellbeing and achievement. Research conducted by Hunt et al. (2010), Gutman & Feinstein (2007), Sylva et al., (2004) and Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) also suggested parental involvement in early learning has a greater impact on children's well-being and achievement than any other factors, such as income, parental education or school environment. Hunt (2010) reported on provider influences in the home learning environment and talked about supporting parents to help their children by providing age appropriate play-based activities. This is considered a vital part of improving educational outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (p. 6). Findings from Hunt's (2010) study on parental involvement with their children at home indicated parents were keen to help their children learn and wanted more information on how to support their children's learning. Also noted was the fact that when parents put their child in funded childcare settings and were not in employment, they did less in the home learning environment in regard to interacting and providing play-based activities for the children. Parents assumed that early childhood settings provided for the children's education, and their role was therefore not as vital in extending learning of their children.

There seems to be scope for further early childhood support programs to work with families raising awareness of the importance of quality play-activities for children in the home by providing social settings where families can engage in learning together. A focus of these programs could be on helping parents understand the role of interactions with children in fostering language development and/or the role of children's play for learning and development. This is because a key factor in home learning is parental involvement.

Feinstein (2004) points out that when parents are involved in home learning children achieve higher scores on child development measures. The significance of the Home Learning Environment (HLE) is highlighted in Sylva et al., (2004), Sammons et al., (2007) and Desforges (2003).

These reports support positive child outcomes when parents engage in activities such as: reading, library visits, playing with letters and numbers, painting, drawing, teaching nursery rhymes and singing. “The effects of a positive home environment are important and lasting” (Evangelou & Wild, 2014, p. 380). Parental involvement also relies on the parents feeling they can make a difference (Deforges, 2003, p. 45).

International findings have a relationship with the work reported in Australia by Saunders, Naidoo and Griffiths (2007), who pointed out that when interventions seek to support parents to enhance parenting skills, they support social inclusion and the parents’ ability to understand the importance of their input to their child’s education at home. Supporting parents to enhance their children’s learning through play at home would maximise their children’s educational opportunities by promoting school readiness. Similar views are described by Evangelou and Wild (2014) who emphasise the important role that high-quality early intervention programs play in providing parents information and support in their parenting role.

The Parenting Support Strategy (2014) sets out the actions of the Department of Education and Training (DET) Victoria to develop programs that enable parents to benefit from high-quality early childhood services. It is committed to supporting all families to raise their children to reach their full potential (DET, 2014). The aim is to promote many ways of implementing this education by providing a safe, loving and predictable home environment, supporting a healthy lifestyle (including healthy eating), good oral hygiene, immunisation and exercise, reading to children every day, singing and using rhymes and poetry in everyday interactions to promote language development and comprehension, playing enjoyable games with children to promote the development of social skills, literacy and numeracy (p. 5). This program also advocated providing children with new experiences that excite and challenge them and promote their curiosity such as visits to libraries, parks, sporting events, zoos and museums. Forming relationships and working in partnership with the services that are also supporting children such as the Maternal and

Child Health Service, early childhood services and schools. It is too early to report results of this strategy or the programs associated with its implementation.

Results from the ‘Small Talk’ (Parenting Research Centre, 2015) study, funded by the Victorian Government and delivered in collaboration between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Parenting Research Centre also suggested children’s language development and early learning is shaped by the frequency and quality of interactions children have with their parents in the early years. This is combined with the level of stimulation in the home environment. Studies by Shonkoff and Phillips (2000), suggested when families have strong connections within the family, and with other community services, the child has opportunities to engage in learning that provides support for school readiness. SPinS is potentially well situated to provide these quality interactions to benefit families.

Research related to home learning programs generally tend to report on the outcomes of funded early childhood intervention programs that attempt to strengthen parenting resources to help parents nurture the development of their young children. These programs looked at enhancing family functioning, particularly in families with multiple risk factors, such as family violence, disability or developmental delay (Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Intervention programs vary considerably depending on their intent. However, they all acknowledge children’s early years are crucial and that child development is optimised within the context of supportive and engaged relationships with children in the family home (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). SPinS is also a service that acknowledges the importance of parents understanding how early childhood education supports families to understand the significance of positive interactions with children reduce risk factors for later education.

The Council of the European Union on Early Childhood Education and Care (2011) also endorsed the significant role of parents in supporting their children’s learning and development. The Council highlighted the importance of supporting parents in their role as the principal educator of their children during the early years, and encouraged early childhood services to work closely with parents, families and communities to increase awareness of the value of early learning in the home for children’s later learning outcomes (Evangelou & Wild, 2014, p. 379).

However, despite considerable research indicating that positive home learning environments are valuable for children's learning, and parenting intervention approaches focussing on child development increases the quality of play-activities in the home, there is little research available that determines the effectiveness of these programs when it comes to understanding how parents are actively engaging in learning alongside children and achieving these outcomes. The most comprehensive Australian evaluations to date seem to be from Dianne Jackson (2011b) and Morag McArthur et al (2012).

However, as yet there is little research on Supported Playgroups in Schools (SPinS) and the value of supported collaborative learning in SPinS. Existing research is focussed on supported playgroups in general, and not those necessarily co-located with schools. Additional research is therefore needed to understand in what ways parents are learning to understand children's play in the context of SPinS, and whether this learning transfers to the home learning environment. This thesis is orientated towards addressing this gap in the research literature and is therefore focussed on ways to:

“Understand the influence of parental participation in SPinS on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in the playgroup setting”

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the literature on playgroups and the development of the playgroup movement internationally and in Australia. It considered the benefits of a variety of playgroups, particularly supported playgroups for children and families. In this chapter the concept of a supported playgroup model in schools (SPinS) was outlined and discussed in relation to how this model links to engaging parents to be involved with children's learning at home. Children's learning through play and the importance of home learning was discussed with reference to the role of parents as principal educators of supporting children's development. The role of the playgroup coordinator in developing programs to engage parents in play with children to support positive parent-child interactions and lifelong learning for children was also described. Research has shown that what parents do is highly significant for children's future learning outcomes. The focus of this thesis is therefore on understanding the influence of participation in a SPinS on parental perspectives on children's learning through play at home and in a playgroup setting. This is because there is a lack of research focussed on the use of playgroups as a

parenting support or intervention aimed at fostering parental understanding of children's play and its provision in the home. There is also a lack of research focussed directly on the participation of parents in SPinS as new model of playgroup provision. The next chapter of this thesis will describe the theoretical framework used to conduct the research.

Chapter Three: Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines significant models of learning instruction and describes a school community of learner's research conducted by Rogoff, Matustov and White (1996). This is followed by a brief history of sociocultural theory where Vygotsky's significant contributions to knowledge are acknowledged. The significance of sociocultural perspectives on learning in communities provides insight into how parental education was supported in a community of learners. Vygotsky's (1978) views of interaction forming learning instruction is discussed in relation to this study, which leads into a discussion of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological approach where people are seen to change because of the effect of the surrounding environment. Finally, Rogoff's (2003) work describing her use of transformation of participation to understand that learning occurs when people participate in shared endeavours with others is outlined in the context of this study.

3.2 Models of learning instruction

Learning occurs in many situations, however there are different styles of instruction to inform learners. Learning in a community process of *transformation of participation* (Rogoff et al, 1996) during social activities highlights how active involvement promotes learning from others who are more skilled. Theories of instructional models for learning such as transmission of learning by an adult, or acquisition learning by children are referred to as one sided action (Rogoff et al., 1996). These models are described to understand the contrast with Rogoff's (1996) community of learners model.

Differences between the models of instruction are not so much described in terms of how capable the academic learner is, but how the learner participates. All instructional models stimulate learning, however, it is the way people learn by being active participants in shared endeavours which set apart Rogoff's (1996) community of learners model from others.

In adult-run models, learning is a process managed by experts (teachers) who transmit knowledge to learners. The learner is then asked to recall the knowledge imparted through doing a test or examination. The acquisition model sees children learning as "a product of

discovery of knowledge by oneself or with peers” (Rogoff, 1994 p. 210) as they play in an enriched environment set up by adults who do not interact with the child to extend learning. A Community of learners model involves active learning with more skilled partners who provide leadership and guidance in a collaborative endeavour (Rogoff, Matustov and White, 1996). The Community of learners model was based on Rogoff’s (1996) philosophy that learning was an active community process of transformation of participation in sociocultural activities (Rogoff et al, 1996). This model considers collaboration of both adults and children contributing support and direction during shared endeavours (Rogoff, 1990). For example, the child learns by observing the adult pound and grind the barley to make flour, then they are given the tools to do this activity themselves. The child’s learning approach was informed when “they participate with others in a community of learners through active observation and intent participation in everyday life in shared endeavours’ (Rogoff, et al 2003 p 185). This type of informal community involvement is promoted in many indigenous communities.

All three models can be examined from a perspective of how the social world relates to learning and development, however, the community of learner’s model involves participation in sociocultural activities assuming people take more responsibility in shared interests with others. This model of instruction informed learning at SPinS because it emphasised the process of active participation.

3.3 Sociocultural theory

The aim of developmental research has historically been to understand the processes and stages of development that children and people pass through over a life-time (Berk, 2012). Sociocultural theory takes a different emphasis from developmental research because it involves the environment and culture of the individual having an impact on learning and development. The focus of a sociocultural perspective understands the role of an adult or more experienced peer as having active participation in social interactions with the learner, and culturally organised activities as also having an influence on the child’s learning.

Vygotsky (1978) placed an emphasis on the interrelated roles of the individual and the sociocultural environment. In Vygotsky’s (1978) view, the child can only develop with social interactions within his immediate family and community (Fall, 2011). These ideas

have contributed to a focus on the inter-relationships of language and thought as a learning process in Russia, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America. Vygotsky's (1978) theory lies in the understanding of human cognition and learning as a social and cultural, rather than an individual phenomenon. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) vast knowledge in many domains of the psychological development of a person Vygotsky (1978) viewed the social and cultural aspects that surround the person as an aspect of learning:

Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and with his peers.... learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90).

Vygotsky's (1978) perspective on teaching and learning proposes a perspective on collaborative problem solving. This could be used in the home with children. For example, two children are washing the dishes and the older child asks the younger child to categorise the objects and make a game of the task.

This is important for this study because from this perspective, the parents and child are participating in a range of joint activities together at SPinS to acquire new knowledge and strategies about children's play. Learning is acquired between the parent and playgroup coordinator, as they bring their own knowledge and experience to the play-based experience through the effort of working together. This knowledge is shaped by the individuals own culture and historical setting from which they come. Attending a SPinS program, the parent and child together learn new knowledge from SPinS to add to their previous experiences and knowledge. Vygotsky's views also demonstrated how interaction during social relationships is the primary influence forming learning.

3.4 Some core ideas about learning in a community from a sociocultural perspective

One of the goals of education is the transmission of culture from one generation to another (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). The sociocultural perspective on learning helped to frame how the parent was learning by participating in socially organised cultural activities of SPinS. Learning and development in terms of education suggests that there is a substantial change of ideas to lead to new understanding. Learning implies that there is a transformation process taking place or a process of inquiry (Vygotsky, 1987; Rogoff, 2003). Development is seen as an internal or mental process that occurs during the social interaction where the child changes their perception (Vygotsky, 1988).

Sociocultural perspectives on learning in a community suggests two streams of thinking were useful for this thesis. The first is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological approach to human development, followed by Rogoff's (2003) argument focusing on the roles that participation in social interactions and culturally organised activities play in influencing development.

A sociocultural perspective puts a focus on the role of the parent's social interactions as they actively participate in a SPinS program. It recognises that learners with different skills and backgrounds use "language to understand, relate and negotiate through interaction in everyday events" (Vygotsky, 1978, p 287) to arrive at a shared understanding of a subject or project. The fundamental concept is that higher order functioning develops from social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). For example: "learning happens when the child interacts with people, objects and events in the environment" (Vygotsky, 1978 p. 287). When the child engages in play-based activities, there is room for new learning to occur when the child interacts with a peer or adult. This may happen when the adult asks the child to find another way to use the wooden block he is playing with. The child playing alone may not realise that there are other possibilities and uses for the block, such as interlocking the blocks together to make a cage for the zoo animals. For the parent the learning is likely to occur as they engage with their child in the play activity.

Leont'ev (2003) who studied Vygotsky's (1978) ideas, talks about the importance of sociocultural forces in shaping learning and development. He looked at "the crucial role

played by parents, teachers, peers, and the community in defining the types of interaction that occurred between children and their environments” (p. 9). Leont’ev’s (2003) interest in the types of interactions that shape learning and development influenced Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory. In his work Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorised that a person’s development is affected by their social relationships and affected by everything in their surrounding environment. This can be viewed as an extension on Vygotsky’s (1978) work because of the importance of sociocultural forces in shaping learning and development and has relevance to research in community sites such as playgroups because social relationships are believed to shape learning from a sociocultural perspective, Bronfenbrenner (1997) also reflects on how working with Leont’ev in Russia, he was able to understand the child in a cultural context. This then influenced his own thinking about the child within a social-ecological system.

Another key aspect of Vygotsky’s (1978) work is his contention that: “learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and his peers” (Vygotsky, 1978. p. 90). Through a sociocultural theoretical lens Vygotsky’s (1978) focus on interactions in the environment is significant for understanding how children learn because it explains that shared endeavours influence a child’s development by building and extending on the child’s understanding.

Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning occurred on two levels. First, through interaction with others, and then integrated into the individual’s mental structure:

Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an *interpsychological* category, and then within the child as an *intrapsychological* category (Vygotsky 1978, p. 57).

Vygotsky (1978) saw the child progressing through these two planes. However it is important to remember that it is through a relationship with the adult (or more experienced peer) interacting with the child (or learner) that knowledge can be internalised. Therefore, children learn or acquire knowledge by engaging in social practices (Edwards, 2009).

A further element of Vygotsky's (1978) theory into learning relates to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD relates to "the distance between the actual development level as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1987, p 86). The ZPD is significant during parent child- interactions because the parent is actively able to support the child to develop mastery of an activity with guidance. An example of this would be supporting the skill of using a ball for throwing, kicking or catching. The ZPD allows for the learning potential of the child: "what a child can do with assistance today, they will be able to do by themselves tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 211). The role of social interaction was seen by both Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1986) as being crucial to cognitive development to support children to succeed with difficult tasks and build new knowledge. The final aim is to support children in being capable and independent learners.

In this study learning instruction is talked about being an active process. Bruner (1986) provides a theoretical framework that supports the learner to build upon what they have already learned. Instructional scaffolding was a term used by Bruner (1978) to extend the child's language and knowledge. For example, a parent may read a farm story to a child and provide instructional scaffolding through asking a question such as, '*What sound does the duck make?*' or '*What do you think ducks like doing?*' Reading books, conversations at meal time or in the bath offer further opportunities to involve learning with the child. Children's learning outcomes relate to intentional teaching styles (Edwards et al., 2011) and parents are able to help children during age appropriate play activities in the home using the process of scaffolding. Scaffolding involves small steps taken to carry out difficult or new tasks (Wood, Bruner, Ross, 1976).

The concept of scaffolding is relevant to this research in SPinS where parents and children have the opportunity to actively engaging together alongside the playgroup coordinator. This may include modelling, prompting, discussing and questioning activities that are structured around a play activity. The collaborative element of instruction may also include the playgroup coordinator expanding on the parent-child effort as through engaging in a task together.

In this study, the concepts of ZPD and scaffolding apply to the parents as participants in the SPinS program. The playgroup coordinator and pre-service early childhood educators scaffold parents understanding in ways that aim to support parenting skills. The key

characteristic of scaffolding for this study is to maintain the child's interest if the child has stopped the activity or has difficulty, such as completing a puzzle. For example, the playgroup coordinator may support the parent by modelling appropriate language and encouraging the child to continue the task. This is seen as the more experienced peer or adult mediating new learning using scaffolding to enable the parent and child to go beyond their independent efforts. When the child is accomplished in the task, the support is withdrawn (Bruner, 1987). Individual learning and intentional teaching are important, however, social relationships are important to for new learning and growth outside the home.

Another educational theorist Bronfenbrenner (1977), changed his developmental theories after working in Russia, to one of providing a model he called Ecological Systems Theory. This theory understood the child's development was affected by their social relationships and the world around them. Ecological Systems Theory understands children as nested within a series of social and cultural circumstances that influence their learning and developmental trajectory. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory analysed the effects of different environmental systems a person encounters to understand implications for learning and development in the context in which they occur.

3.6 Ecological systems theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory suggested that people change because their surrounding environment has an effect on the individual. The term *proximal process* is used to refer to: "particular forms of interaction between organisms and the environment that operates over time and are posited as the primary mechanisms producing human development" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1988, p. 795). The ecological systems theory posits that the close interdependence of the family, community and school ecosystems shapes a child's development and the cultures of these environments affect beliefs, values, and participation. Bronfenbrenner (1988) said human beings cannot exist in isolation. He talked about child development being shaped by their environment and the relationships they experience in different settings. The ecological systems theory suggested child development takes place through the process of progressively more complex interactions between an active child and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). To be effective, the: "interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended period of time" (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, p.

996). This means that children need nurturing and secure relationships in the home environment. However, Peters & Klein (1981) say that the: “ecological systems perspective does not, in and of itself, bring about or explain development or change” (p.142). Instead it provides a useful framework for acknowledging the dynamic process that exists for a child in the different environments.

Ecological systems theory (1979) analysed the effects of different environmental systems a person encounters. This theory provided an approach to looking at how a person’s environment has an influence on their development. Bronfenbrenner (1988) saw the relationships between a child and their immediate environment (microsystem) and the larger social environment (macrosystem) as a way of understanding how the relationships in this environment affect learning and development of the child. These systems focus on the linkages between the child and external environments. This would include the relations between the child, the family and other childcare settings such as SPinS.

Ecological systems theory proposes five environmental factors that influence growth and development of a person. A child stands in the centre of the microsystem and is surrounded by the five different levels of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The relationships the child comes into contact in the *microsystem*, plays a vital role in how they are treated and how they treat others. This innermost level of the microsystem is closest to the child. The child then has direct contact with the parent, the face-to-face bi-directional relationship where the influences flow back and forth so that the new baby will affect the lives of parents, just as their attitudes will affect the baby (Papilla, Olds & Feldman, 1988). The parent’s knowledge and parenting style affect the child’s attitudes and behaviours toward others. Parenting knowledge is played out and experienced in other settings, such as a SPinS, kindergarten and school. The child is influenced by the reactions of others and the way they are treated in these other settings. It is the microsystem that is of interest to this study because of the parent’s ability to support the child in the home learning environment, and from the parent’s perspectives, the influence of participating in SPinS on their perspective of children’s play.

The second immediate layer is the mesosystem, consisting of the interactions between two or more systems. The mesosystem is situated between the microsystem and exosystem and comprises of interactions and learning, such as that when the parent and

child attend SPinS. This in turn has an influence on the microsystem of the child and the setting at home. The participation in a play-based program (mesosystem) plays a key role in supporting parenting skills to be transmitted into the home. For example, when parents take an active role in their child's life by attending a group such as a SPinS, the connection and influence has a positive impact on the child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1988).

The exosystem is the third layer and refers to the setting that does not involve the child directly, but impacts on development. The system contains the micro and mesosystem, and impacts on the wellbeing of all those who come into contact with the child. The parent's workplace schedule (e.g. shift work) can influence the proximal processes (e.g. level of parent involvement) that occur. The child has no control on the decision making process associated with parental patterns of work experienced within the exosystem. For example, many parents in Australia may take work in the mining industry and can be away for a month and then return home for a week. This can change the child's relationship with the parent and may also cause stress in the family.

The fourth level is the macrosystem. The macrosystem encompasses the culture, values and beliefs of the larger society in which the child lives. The individual may grow up in a third world economy or an affluent economy. Either of these systems can have a positive or negative effect on the individual's development.

The fifth level is the chronosystem. The chronosystem helps to understand the way families handle circumstances and transitions in their lives. This could relate to family members with a terminal illness, which affects the proximal and distal processes of the child. Depending on the age of the child, they may react differently to the environmental changes and need much support to manage the transition and changes in their lives. The environment or culture the child relates to involve the five interrelated systems.

Bronfenbrenner's (1988) ecological systems theory focused on the quality and quantity of the child's environment affecting their development. It understands that children do not develop in isolation but instead focussed on the interactions between the child, parent and community. The interaction in these environments becomes more complex as the child's grows and matures. All the systems have an influence on the child in one way or another.

Rogoff's (1995) work also focussed on the social and cultural aspects of children's learning. She identified a community of learners and the concept of transformation of participation, including: 1) apprenticeship; 2) guided participation; and 3) appropriation as aspects of learning.

3.7 Rogoff's community of learners

Barbara Rogoff (2003) is a significant sociocultural theorist whose work differs from Bronfenbrenner's (1988) ecological system theory because she saw learning in different cultures as having an impact on the way the learning process is acquired. She put forward a theory that human development is a cultural process as opposed to an individual process. Rogoff (2003) said: "people develop as participants in cultural communities. Human development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities, which also change" (p. 3). Rogoff's (2003) research included learning in relation to collaboration with others in a shared community. She used sociocultural theory to argue that humans generate knowledge and meaning by interacting with others. So in contrast to Bronfenbrenner she did not see cultural and community as nested influences on development, but as a site and cause for development.

Rogoff (2003) argues: "the idea of a community of learners is based on the premise that learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavours with others, with all playing active but often asymmetrical roles in a sociocultural activity" (Rogoff, 1994, p. 209). Vygotsky (1978) also said the social situation appears to be vital for development and learning. Children learn with the support of competent peers or adults for their guidance, and new knowledge is acquired with their support, such as learning a language (Vygotsky, 1978). Rogoff's (2003) work extends upon this idea by highlighting the cultural aspect of people learning through observation, collaboration and the role of adults in shared learning (p. 52). She believed these aspects of learning are important to understand because learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community such as gathering and cooking food together (Rogoff, 2003).

Rogoff (2003) saw a shift from human development as being viewed as a transmission of knowledge from others. The learner is seen to gain knowledge through a passive exchange

of information, such as through *observation*. However, the learner needs to be engaged and interested in the learning process to gain knowledge. Rogoff (2003) saw learning as an exchange formed through *transformation of participation* (p. 285). Rogoff (2003) viewed learning happening through *shared exchanges* of information, where all participants have an active input into learning. This is significant in the context of SPinS because it suggests that all participants in SPinS, including parents and children can learn together while being actively involved in a play-based program, collaborating and sharing ideas during activities. This is quite a different perspective to that of Piaget's theories on play. Piaget's explanation of 'constructionism' of adapting to the environment focused on the role that individuals play in their own development (Ginsburg & Opper, 1969). He saw the notion that reality is based on the information from the environment and what is each person constructs as their reality or understanding of the world around them (Papallia & Olds, 1993). In contrast, Rogoff (2003) described human development as: "a process in which people transform through their ongoing participation in cultural activities, which in turn contribute to changes in their cultural communities across generations" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 37).

The cultural process described by Rogoff (2003) sees the individual being a significant part of the social and cultural context that cannot be separated. According to Vygotsky (1978), the activities individuals engage in are part of the culture of the institution they find themselves in such as the family, school, kindergarten, or playgroup, which has its own rules and regulations to suit to group. For example, SPinS values play-based learning because play fosters children's learning. During play, a skilled partner can scaffold learning. Vygotsky (1978) argued that through these interactions children learn to use skills that they may not otherwise acquire. Likewise, parents may learn about children's play from working alongside a playgroup coordinator or pre-service early childhood educator.

Rogoff's (1990) studies of village life and culture found that in daily conversations, parents were involved in teaching skills of the community, such as food gathering, cooking, cleaning and making tools. Children were learning maths skills, such as counting, by helping gather or buy food, read lists or count money for the exchange of goods. This type of interaction involved the child being able to observe and participate in tasks (Rogoff, 1990).

The sociocultural emphasis on learning sees the importance of the learner being actively involved in the learning process, which is different from previous educational viewpoints where teachers would transmit to students what they know. The student would rote learn that same knowledge, for a test or exam. This meant the learner was a passive recipient. A sociocultural perspective, allows the learner to have an exchange of ideas and be part of the learning process. This is important to understand for this study, because a sociocultural approach to learning saw the parent learning about children's play in the SPinS as a community of learners.

Collaborative learning plays a role in fostering a learning community (Rogoff, 2003). This type of learning deepens relationships and understanding when shared roles contribute to knowledge and learning (Brown, 1992). However, the learner needs to have a level of motivation to learn. When learning is gained through active parent participation in sociocultural activities, the learning is more concrete. This demonstrated when parents are motivated and have a purpose to be involved they gain understanding. Motivation is referring to the parent wanting to learn more about the way their child learns through play. This is different from other forms of learning such as transmission and acquisition perspectives (Rogoff, 2003). According to Rogoff (2003), motivation involves keen observation. Sustaining motivation to learn is dependent on the confidence of the learner (von Glaserfeld, 1989). For example, von Glaserfeld (1989) said if the learner is feeling confident and competent they have the potential to solve problems and gain new knowledge. This is important when considering parents at SPinS, because if the parent is open to learning with their child, the learning may be continued and applied into the home environment.

The aim of collaborative learning is to support knowledge and skills of the parent through active practice of shared learning to “transform the learners identity” (Wells, 1999, p. 331). Parents feel confident in their abilities and become self-empowered when they have knowledge, guidance and structure.

3.7.1 Transformation of participation

There is growing interest in studies on how adults can support children learning in a sociocultural setting. Theories around culture and learning understand that humans are social beings who need to make sense of the world (Rogoff, 1997). This means that what

they learn and how they learn depends on what is happening around them and in the culture they find themselves participating (Rogoff, 2003).

Rogoff (2003) argues that individuals develop as participants in their cultural communities by engaging with others in shared endeavours. The sharing of knowledge through the generations is done by guiding the learner. Rogoff (2003) wanted to understand if the adults took responsibility for the learning by structuring teaching situations or whether children took responsibility for learning through observation and through participating in adult activities with parent support. This is of interest in this study because of the collaborative learning about play by parents in the SPinS.

Rogoff (2003) suggests that transformation of participation can be understood by looking at how development is occurring from three main perspectives or ‘foci’ of analysis. These include, looking at the individual, looking at interpersonal interactions between people involved in an activity and the community or institutional setting for the activity. Rogoff (2003) talks about these as being: 1) the first foci is the personal; 2) the second foci the inter-personal; and 3) the third foci, the institution or cultural. Rogoff (2003) said that these levels are all related. One way to understand learning according to Rogoff is to have one level in focus or the foreground, which she terms the ‘foci of analysis’ while keeping the others in the background (p. 6).

Using ‘foci of analysis’ to understand how learning is occurring includes being aware of learning strategies such as: apprenticeship (active individuals participating), guided participation (face-to-face or side-by-side participation), and participatory appropriation (individuals changing through their involvement in activity). Rogoff (1992) referred to these as being: “inseparable, mutually constituting planes, with one plane in the background at any time” (Rogoff, 1992, p. 62). For example, a parent is receiving information about parenting skills with a child when the playgroup coordinator models how to interact with a child to complete a puzzle while in the presence of others in the room. These parents listen and observe skills of interaction and repeat the same strategy with their own child. Together, apprenticeship of active learning from the playgroup coordinator through guided participation and participatory appropriation, supports the parent to build understanding about their child’s play and perhaps change how they provide play experiences for their children. The main foci of analysis might be the parent in the individual plane, but the interpersonal plane involving the parent and the playgroup

coordinator and the institutional plane including the SPinS context are just as important. The different ways of learning, such as apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation are important because they relate to each of the foci of analysis:

1. The *apprenticeship metaphor* looks at the institutional structure of the community of learners. When parents enter a community such as that offered by SPinS they advance their skills and understanding through participation with others (Rogoff, 1990). For example: incorporating new ways of interacting with the child, or using play to support their child's learning after attending a SPinS. Apprenticeship involves explicit teaching through guided participation in a social activity with people who support and stretch understanding and skills. In the SPinS situation it is likely that the playgroup coordinator is able to provide parents with an apprenticeship model for understanding children's play. When people learn together, knowledge is formed and understanding about different ideas and concept is built (Rogoff, 2003).

2. *Guided participation* relies on communication and coordination as key aspects of shared involvement in a cultural activity (Rogoff, 2003). The mutual involvement of individuals with others communicating and participating in sociocultural structured activities includes face-to-face interaction as well as side-by-side joint participation (Rogoff, 2003). *Guided participation* is an interpersonal *process* (Vygotsky, 1978) because participants moderate their perspective as they work together to accomplish a task. These moderations are the process of learning that leads to greater understanding (Wertsch, 1984). For example: the purposeful and focused attention between a parent and playgroup coordinator as they participate in a play-activity with a child.

3. *Participatory appropriation* refers to an individual taking what they have learnt in one context and transferring this learning to another place or context. For this study, this would mean the parents taking their perspectives of children's play experienced according to their participation in a SPinS into the home environment. Participatory appropriation views learning occurring on the *inter-personal plane*, so that people acquire new ideas or information in cooperation with others. They participate in an activity with other people in a

way that helps them to learn or appropriate a skill or set of knowledge for themselves.

Rogoff's (2009) studies therefore found that a transformation of participation perspective is based on the premise that learning occurs as: "people participate in shared endeavours with others, all playing an active but asymmetrical role in sociocultural activity" (Rogoff, 2009, p. 208). Transformation of participation means that when children and adults are motivated to be involved in meaningful learning they both acquire new perspectives (Rogoff, et al., 1993).

To give an example of how transformation of participation works, Rogoff's (2002) study of Girl Scouts selling cookies (biscuits) is useful. This study highlights the role of apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation. Rogoff illustrated that when girl scouts participated in an activity such as selling cookies to raise money that they developed responsibility when actively participating in the activity of selling and delivering the cookies. The girl scouts needed initial support from adults to manage keeping track of orders, payment and deliveries. Over time the girl scouts took over the organising role from the adults in keeping track of progress. The adjustment of responsibility illustrated through shared endeavours and guided participation meant that the girl guides were empowered to become confident cookie sellers. The concept of transformation of participation relevant to this thesis because the parents may have been influenced in their perspectives about children's play through their participation in a SPinS as result of their interactions and experiences with the playgroup coordinator and pre-service early childhood educators.

Lave and Wenger (1991) have found: "learning implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations" (p. 53). In Rogoff's (1994) work the girl scouts developed new learning, becoming a more engaged learner and gaining leadership skills that they could also implement in other situations. Rogoff's (1994) research demonstrated how each person's role was transformed or transforming after becoming involved with others in shared endeavours of a common interest or project. The Girl Scouts example therefore demonstrated that people learn through their participation in ongoing endeavours (Rogoff, 1994). Rogoff (2011) and her colleagues take the perspective that learning is a process of *transformation of participation*. They

argue that people develop as a function of their transforming roles and understanding in activities in which they participate.

This example is important to understand for this thesis because the focus is similar when explaining how parents may have the opportunity of transforming, and therefore developing their perspectives about children's play through their participation in SPinS. Rogoff's (2011) planes of analysis allows for an in-depth consideration of the learning that may be occurring in the SPinS community as parents perspectives about play are possibly influenced by their participation in a SPinS.

Rogoff (2011) understands development as *transformation of participation* rather than viewing development as a transmission of knowledge from others in the form of the acquisition of knowledge. Rogoff (2011) proposed learning is a process occurring when people participate in share endeavours. When people learn together, knowledge is formed and understanding is built. A sociocultural perspective therefore considers how individuals, groups and communities transform as they together communicate and generate new knowledge for future generations.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter models of learning were outlined with particular emphasis on the community of learners' model as being of interest to this study. Key aspects of sociocultural theory were outlined with attention given to the influence of Vygotsky's (1978), Bronfenbrenner's (1979) and Rogoff's (2003) work in this research. The Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) and scaffolding were key concepts for understanding interactions investigated as part of this research. Bronfenbrenner's (1988) ecological systems model further provided a way to think about the interactions of a child in changing environments. Finally, Rogoff's (2003) ideas about community of learners and transformation of participation were outlined as significant for this study because they provided a way to think about how people learn together through participation in communities.

In the next chapter an outline of the methodology used to investigate the influence of parental participation in SPinS on parent's perspectives of children's play at home and at playgroup is provided.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the qualitative methods used for this project. It begins by identifying the qualitative research approach intended to achieve in depth understanding of parents' perspectives of the influence of participation at SPinS on children's play. The chapter begins by providing an overview of the qualitative research method informed by an epistemological, ontological and axiology perspective that values "the meaning of people's lives under real-life conditions" (Yin, 2011, p. 7). The single case study design of the research is described in this chapter with particular reference to the suitability of this research method for addressing the research question, *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?* In the final section of this chapter an explanation of the recruitment process of eleven participants for five focus group interviews is presented. The chapter concludes with a description of how an inductive approach to data analysis led to the generation of three themes and eight sub-themes comprising the findings.

4.2 Research approach

There are many methods of research that offer the researcher a way of gathering information or gaining insight into education issues. Research methods are viewed as: "the techniques or procedures used to collate and analyse data" (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8). Although research methods vary, the goal of research is almost always the same: "to answer a question or group of related questions, to collect and analyse data and to increase the validity of findings" (Rossman & Rallis, 2012 p. xv).

In this study the methodology provided the basis for understanding the views of participants in the real-life setting (Flick, 2007). The study's aim was to understand *the influence participation in a SPinS has on parents' perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting*. Social research methods in education can use quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection. A qualitative research paradigm was the chosen method of collecting data because it focused on social science perspective of studying the

meanings participants make while participating in a social setting (Denizen & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research produces findings that are not predetermined in advance. For this reason the qualitative approach used in this thesis was useful in obtaining information specific to the perspectives of parents regarding their participation in SPinS.

4.2.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research provides a more interpretive approach to research than quantitative research, and is focussed on research conducted in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this study, the field comprised the SPinS or the supported playgroups co-located on five primary school sites. As qualitative research is a social science discipline, this type of research will be useful in establishing: “elaborate and detailed understandings of the research” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40) – or in the case of this thesis, on perspectives of the parent participants in their everyday practices and everyday knowledge of participating in a SPinS (Flick, 2007).

A qualitative approach to research was used in this study because it was considered appropriate for providing descriptions of parents’ participation in a SPinS and the influence of this participation on their perspectives of children’s play in the home and playgroup setting. The approach required the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews to understand the parent’s perspectives so as to seek “depth” rather than breadth of response to inform the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 9). It was therefore considered important to allow the parents to share their stories, hear their voices and take a subjective stance when exploring the human element of the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Yin (2003, p. 7) suggests that there are five main features of qualitative research. These are:

1. Studying the meaning of people’s lives, under real-world conditions
2. Representing the views and perspectives of the people in the study
3. Covering the contextual conditions within which people live
4. Contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behaviour
5. Striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone

These five features of qualitative research were important considerations in this study to gain an understanding of the meaning of people's lives in natural settings. This was essential to seek insight in the research question informing the study: *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?* These five features suggest that three elements of qualitative research should also be considered and defined. These elements include the ontology, epistemology and axiology of the informing approach.

4.2.3 Ontology and epistemology

Ontology and epistemology are taken into account when designing a research project because data collection methods, data analysis tools and interpretation methods stem from the ontological perspective of the researcher.

To understand the nature of the research and to establish a research strategy it is necessary to examine the ontological and epistemological perspectives held by the researcher (Mason, 2002). These perspectives set parameters regarding perceptions, beliefs, assumptions and the knowledge of what reality is that are likely to shape the research design (Blaikie, 2000). That is, how the researcher understands the construction of knowledge and the nature of how 'reality' can be understood and constructed. That is, the reality of the parents who attend SPinS and their experiences.

Ontology is defined by Denzin and Lincoln (1998) as the worldview and the way of a constructing reality or "how things are" and "how things work" (p. 201) held by the researcher. Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) describe ontology as, "*what is really going on, or what does the author think is going on*" (p. 1). This is understood as determining the reality of what is really going on, or existing a parents experience SPinS.

Reality, according to Pring (2000) is understood as something people construct together as they talk and share meaning about their lives. In this study it was the unique perspectives of the parents that were seen as important to understand in order to understand how their participation in a SPinS influenced their perspectives on the children's play. Blaike (2009) referred to this process as: "the social reality of the participants as they go about their everyday lives" (p. 93).

Epistemology considers views on the most appropriate way to enquire into how knowledge is viewed as being constructed. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) described this as: “what was the theory of knowledge and what are the sources and limits of knowledge” for the conduct of the study (p. 2). Epistemology is widely referred to in terms of what constitutes valid knowledge and how this knowledge is obtained. Epistemology is a method of knowing what representations of knowledge or evidence was appropriate in order to understand the research study inquiry. In this study, the sociocultural framework described in the theory chapter informed the epistemology. Knowledge was viewed as socially constructed by people and not as a directly observable or accessible artefact.

This epistemological perspective is highlighted in Blaikie’s (2009) description regarding the design of social science research which emphasised the importance of people making: “sense of their encounters with the physical world and other people, and social scientific knowledge” (p. 95). For this research it was important to establish the epistemological basis of the project because it showed that the consequent methods to generate the data were related to how I understand the construction of knowledge.

It was important to establish the epistemological and ontological basis of this research because epistemology showed what constituted valid knowledge with respect to the selected methods, while ontology considered how the reality of SPinS for the parents was experienced.

4.2.4 Axiology

Axiology values the complex understanding of a participant’s reality and refers to the ethics of working with, or researching with participants. It is important to consider axiology in the conduct of a research project because how the project is conducted connects with the ethical stance of the researcher and informs the methods used. In this study, the methods relied on personal interactions when interviewing parents rather than collecting survey data where personal contact is not required. In this study I followed two main axiological principles. These were:

- 1) Valuing all parents to have a voice in the conduct of the research
- 2) My professional conduct in completing the research

In addition to following these two principles, I also considered the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Australian Government, 2007) and the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (2006). The code of ethical issues is helpful for describing values that are important to lead people's interactions to others (Torda, 2004). The interaction for this study is constructed between the researcher and the parents. I followed these because a code of conduct or ethics is considered to help: "clarify and define the values that are important in guiding the behaviour of a particular group, particularly in relation to participant interactions during interviews" (Torda, 2004, p.15). In relation to myself as a professional, I wanted to seek and build collaborative professional practice. This was important to the conduct of this study because the data was collected from parents during interviews.

The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Australian Government, 2007) reports that there is no agreed definition of research. It is understood to include at least investigations undertaken to gain knowledge and understanding or to train researchers. Conducting research requires a set of guidelines that considers whether the potential benefits of the research justifies the risks involved. This balance was achieved in this study by informing interested parents on how their voluntary involvement in the project would benefit overall research into parental participation in playgroups and the potential benefits of this participation for children.

The Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics was developed in 1990. For this thesis, the Code of Ethics provided me with a framework for reflecting on my ethical responsibilities when working with families and children. The code argues that early childhood communities ought to be places and spaces where practices such as responsive listening and dialogue can create connections and relationships that support and advance individual and collective wellbeing. Inherent in this code is the belief that children learn through their family and community groups, bring rich knowledge, the diversity of experiences and identities to their learning (Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics, 2006, part vii). This belief connected strongly with the ontological and epistemological perspective used in the conduct of the research. This was especially so regarding the use of a sociocultural perspective in which knowledge was understood as socially constructed and developed. In practice, this commitment to children and families was realised when carrying out the research in a social setting with the parent participants.

Roberts-Holmes (2005) argues that research: “ethics is centrally concerned with the attitudes of the researcher” (p. 55). Hogue (2011) also discussed how our values affect the way we do research. The inherent worth and dignity of parents involved in the research was a priority to me as well as making sure that the social and cultural differences of the participants were accepted and appreciated. These values support my position as researcher and advocate for early childhood research through the acknowledgement that parents are the child’s first teacher, and therefore my focus on interviewing with the parents and finding out about their perspectives.

This study had ethical approval from the Australian Catholic University, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Catholic Education Office Ballarat for the conduct of the research (Appendix One). In conducting the research I also attended to four main aspects of ethical conduct. These were:

1. Voluntary involvement of participants: The parent involvement in the research was voluntary. It was anticipated that some parents would not wish to participate in the study. This was addressed via the playgroup coordinator who had weekly contact with the families at each of the SPinS and provided the parents with initial information about their potential participation. Parents were able to refuse participation in the study and still continue their involvement in SPinS. Written and verbal explanation of the study was provided for each voluntary member before the research began. A requirement for Ethical Conduct in Human Research was to inform parents they could withdraw from the research project at any time without giving a reason for their decision. Copies of all information letters and consent forms provided to participations are provided in Appendix Two.
2. Respecting participant confidentiality: The right to confidentiality and anonymity was protected during the process of the data collection, data analysis and research publications. Parents were informed their identity would be kept anonymous and each parent was assigned a pseudonym. The names of the schools reported in the research have also been changed.

3. Building trust with participants: The Early Childhood Code of Ethics (2006) argues that researchers need to model high-quality professional practices and develop positive relationships based on mutual trust and open communication. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also indicate that: “qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality and the intimate relationship between researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape the inquiry” (p. 10). Due to the intimate nature of getting to know the parents, a professional presence was required. One way to establish trust and rapport with participants in this study was to visit all five of the supported playgroups for an hour and a half each before beginning the interviews. This was important because it helped to understand the setting and for me to get to know the participants. It also helped me to gain insight into the dynamics of the group. I was introduced to each school Principal and the playgroup coordinator by one of the Chief Investigators on the broader project. I was then able to interact informally with parents and children during their participation in the SPinS in the introductory phase of my research with the parents.

4. Attending to potential bias: Qualitative research can be challenging for the researcher because their values and bias can become embedded in expectations about the findings. Awareness of any potential personal bias I might have about the findings was required to prevent becoming overly attached to the study outcomes. There was a need to listen actively to the parents when interviewing them without too much comment or body cues. I needed to listen for a deeper meaning of what was being shared (Seidman, 2013) by the parents. It was also important not to respond to the influence of participant responses in terms of my own views about the findings. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a professional transcribing organisation to help provide accuracy in the wording of statements made by participants.

4.3 Method: case study research

There are many methods of research which offer researchers a way of gathering information or gaining insight into a particular problem in education. Case study method

was chosen for this study for the affordances it provides to understand the research question: *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?* The case study method was selected because it was considered appropriate for drawing out the detail and complexity of intricate social relationships within SPinS (Roberts-Holmes, 2010).

Case study research is a form of social inquiry that investigates the social human experience where the researcher is seeking to understand particular social issues or concerns. In this study, the social connections were focused on parental participation in SPinS. It is expected in case study research that: “previous unknown relationships and variables can emerge, leading to rethinking of the phenomenon being studied” (Merriam, 1988, p. 30).

Yin (2003) defines a case study as: “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). Case study research is therefore a method to ‘enlighten’ the situation in which the research investigation is exploring, as there is no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2003). Case studies are flexible and have the opportunity of introducing new and unexpected results that may lead the research in taking new directions.

There are two types of case studies, single and multiple case studies. This study used a single-case study design because there was only one unit of analysis or phenomenon that was being examined. This was: *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?*

Single-case studies can be an important source of information regarding the behaviour of individuals. This study used single-case study design to look at the cause and effect of parents attending a SPinS session. However, generalisations are made causing limitations to the data. This could be overcome by extending the time to analyse changes and interpret learning to other situations such as the home environment. This would further provide rich practical information for understanding SPinS provision.

Darke, et al., (1998) also suggested the use of single-case study research is useful in newer, less well-developed research areas, particularly where examination of the context

and the dynamics of a situation are necessary (p. 260). This was the situation in this thesis where existing research into SPinS is very limited due to this being a relatively new model of playgroup provision. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, the research method followed Yin's (2003) case study approach as it was seeking to explore and provide an in-depth understanding of the parents' experiences in the real-life situation during their participation in the SPinS. This single-case study was an interactive process in which the participants studied talked about their day-to-day perspectives of children's play experiences at home and in the playgroup setting. The participants in the program provided a like-minded community that could be interviewed in focus groups.

In this research, the single-case study method contributed knowledge of understanding parent's perspectives on children's play according to their participation in SPinS. Therefore, case study method is useful for this project because it was a way for parents to explain their perspectives providing: "rich and significant insights" (Yin, 1984, p. 14) into events associated with their participation in SPinS.

4.3.1 Research context

This project is conducted as part of a broader project examining the efficacy of SPinS in promoting parental participation in playgroups and building community connections to the schools. The larger project was located in a regional city in country Victoria. The larger project involved a Playgroup Coordinator, and several early childhood pre-service educators from a local University completing their practicum studies in playgroups. Each supported playgroup operated on a local primary school site that were situated in communities identified as having socially vulnerable families (McLean, et al., 2012) according to data from the Australian Early Development Index (Centre for Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009), Best Start atlas (DEECD, 2009) and the Early Childhood Community Profile (DET, 2014). Local families were invited to attend the SPinS for two hours, once a week during the Victorian school term. Within the context of this larger study, the research for this thesis focused solely on: *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?*

4.3.2 Participant Sampling

Purposive sampling was chosen for this study because it required the identification and selection of information-rich cases for an in-depth study and was for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). As a valid form of sampling purposive sampling was used to learn more about “issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry”, (Patton, 2002, p. 230), which in this case was the perspectives of caregivers who participated at SPinS.

Purposive sampling enabled groups and individuals to be identified within SPinS sessions who attended on a regular basis and hence had knowledgeable experiences relevant to the problem under investigation. These participants actively participated in the SPinS session and were able to communicate experiences and opinions in a reflective manner (Bernard 2002, Spradley, 1979). This approach to sampling was necessary to obtain an understanding of parents’ perspectives of their interaction during children’s play in SPinS and at home due to their active participation with their children. When viewed in this way purposive sampling helped to generate data and information that would provide results by answering the same questions (Palinkas et al 2011a). This involved asking the questions in a systematic and consistent order (Berg, 1998, p. 61) to enable all participants to explore the issue under investigation.

For the purpose of data collection for this study, *eleven* participants across *five* different SPinS groups were involved. For this study the term ‘parents’ was used to include all caregivers attending the SPinS. Parent’ participants included: six mothers, two fathers, one aunty, one grandmother and one Family Day Care educator. Focus group interviews were conducted on five different school sites where SPinS sessions were taking place. In total eleven participant voice recordings were chosen from the group of volunteers and used in the data collection. The researcher formed a circle of chairs for parents in the playroom alongside where the children played. Each group had one to four participants. The researcher began by introducing herself and thanking participants for their cooperation. The interviews were voice recorded for ease and convenience to interact with the group and hand written notes taken.

Table 1.0 summarises the 11 participants according to the school at which their SPinS was located and the age of the children attending SPinS. The children of the parents ranged in age from seven weeks to five years.

Table 1 Summary of participants

| School at which SPinS was located | Parent name (pseudonym) | Parent type | Children |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--|---|
| Mountain Ash | Mary | Mother | Twins aged four years |
| Flowering Gum | Deb | Mother Family Day Care (FDC) educator | One child aged two years Three children aged three years |
| Wattle | Joe | Father | Baby aged eight months and one child aged three years |
| Grevillea | Frank | Father | One child aged three years and one child aged four and half years |
| | Nancy | Aunty | One child aged four and half years |
| | Sandy | Mother | Baby aged six months and one child aged three and half years |
| | Sally | Mother | Baby aged twelve months and one child aged three and half years |
| Acacia | Tara | Mother | One child aged two years and one child aged four years |
| | Candy | Mother | One child aged two and half years and one child aged four years |

| | | | |
|--|----------|-------------|---|
| | Tamara | Mother | Toddler aged eighteen months and one child aged four year |
| | Rochelle | Grandmother | One child aged three years |

As well as summarising the participants, the average numbers of attendance for each SPinS was also recorded for Term 1, 2013. This was the period of time data was collected for this thesis. This information is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Average attendance for each SPinS in Term 1, 2013

| SPinS | Average attendance |
|---------------|--------------------|
| Acacia | 17 |
| Flowering Gum | 6.4 |
| Grevillea | 10.6 |
| Mountain Ash | 7.3 |
| Wattle | 2 |

4.3.4. Recruitment

The playgroup coordinator was responsible for recruiting the parents into the research project as she had an existing relationship with attending families. Parents were invited to engage in the data collection processes associated with the research via an information letter distributed a month prior to data collection. Parents who volunteered then provided written consent for participation using appropriate consent documentation (see Appendix 2). The names of all schools and participants were changed according to the ethical protocols regarding anonymity.

4.4 Data collection

Qualitative data collection methods were used to allow for descriptive and interpretive analysis of individuals and their perspectives about children's play to be obtained. The data for this study used semi-structured focus interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcription company (SmartDocs). The

focus group interviews were held on each SPinS site with children in attendance. This was because this was the most accessible and convenient way to involve all participants.

4.4.1 Focus group interview

Five focus group interview groups were conducted across each of the five primary school settings in which SPinS sessions were being conducted. Focus group interviews are a popular tool for social and educational research. The focus group interviews were conducted over two months prior to the end of the school year. Focus groups are dynamic group discussions used to collect rich information (Harrell & Bradley, 2009 p. 6) and were conducted to discuss parent participation during children's play. According to Masadeh (2012) focus group interviews are defined as: "a structured discussion with a small group of people, run by a facilitator to generate qualitative data on a precise topic of interest, using open-ended questions" (p. 63). The advantage of using focus group interviews in this study was that it reflected the ontological and epistemological framing of the qualitative approach. This was that knowledge and reality was understood to be socially constructed and generated. Focus group interviews provided the opportunity for participants to share and talk about their experiences and perspectives of their experience while attending SPinS.

SPinS provided an established social setting where participants had time to build a trusting relationship. An additional advantage of focus group interviews according to Barbour (2007) is that they capture verbal real-life data in a social setting. Barbour (2007) also mentioned that focus group interviews are useful when asking research questions that relate to the interaction of a number of people about similar issues. Shrimpton (2013) explained that focus groups capture the range of views within a group, and also reveal the reasons underpinning beliefs held by group members. In this study, the aim of using focus group interviewing was to: "ask questions of the participants, be a moderator of their responses, to listen and observe in order to promote purposeful dialogue and to allow the subject matter to be more personal" (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5).

Focus group interviews were chosen as they provided an efficient avenue of inquiry to understand the participant's experiences that also included social interaction of the group to generate deeper and richer information (Thomas, et al., 1995). It also provided a more natural environment for the parents to discuss their perspectives regarding their

participation in the SPinS (Krueger & Casey, 2000). As the group shared the same common bond, contributions from parents in the focus group provided stimulus for responses from other group members to share opinions, attitudes and values. Lederman (1990) mentioned that: “as the members of the group understand and feel comfortable with each other, and so they can draw strength from each other” (p. 120). SPinS had been running long enough for participants to build a rapport. The five focus group interviews that were held during playgroup sessions on the school sites, provided detailed examples of children’s play interests and parent engagement.

Limitations when conducting focus group interviews include: 1) parents are not anonymous to each other, and may not always share their views in the group situation for fear of being judged by the other parents; 2) parents may feel they should give socially acceptable views; and 3) some parents may not give accurate accounts due to peer pressure (Kitzinger, 1994). It was suggested by Krueger (1994) that the optimal numbers for a focus group interview is five to six people. In this study, groups of three to five people provided a greater opportunity for an in-depth discussion. Conducting the focus group interviews at each SPinS location was ideal because parents and children attended the SPinS weekly and were therefore not inconvenienced in time and travel for their participation. Each parent was encouraged to speak during the interview, creating a natural flow of conversation.

A semi-structured format for focus group interviews was adopted as the primary data gathering method to collect information from individuals in regard to their parenting practices. For this research an advantage of using semi-structured interviews in a focus group was that it provided a guide to stimulate discussion about the topic. This allowed for the researcher to delve into the topic of parental engagement in children’s play. The researcher also had the advantage of having the opportunity to probe a little further the initial answers to obtain richer data and this would help participants to share new insights.

Semi-structured interviewing was considered an appropriate form of data collection for this study because Lichtman (2013) pointed out: “dynamic conversation acted as stimulus to draw responses from the group and allowed for new information to be collected” (p. 207). This choice was determined by the need to understand parent perspectives within their experience of SPinS because there was a need to understand the real-life situation

(Yin, 2003) in which the parents were involved. This method also helped the interviewer to probe further into the question to elicit additional information or clarify a response.

4.4.2 Interview session

The protocol began with an introduction of the researcher introducing herself and the organisation, the purpose of the research and the reason why the participants have volunteered to participate in the interview. A discussion regarding confidentiality and the right to opt-out of the interview at any time pointed out.

The interview sessions were approximately thirty minutes in length. The overall duration of the interviews depended on many different variables of each group. This was because the children were in the same room where the interviews were taking place. Each SPinS visited had a mix of gender and ages. In total two visits were made to each of the five SPinS to gather data. The interviews began with an introduction and a reminder to the group of the confidentiality, goals and the length of time interviews would take.

The use of semi-structured questions prepared ahead of time provided an opportunity to explore parent perspectives on their engagement of children's play experiences in the home learning environment well as during participation in SPinS setting. This process involved asking the questions in a systematic and consistent order (Berg, 1998, p. 61). This meant that there was consistency of the type and number of questions asked during each focus group, but enough flexibility to explore participant's views in response to the questions when needed.

The interview questions included:

1. What type of activities does your child engage in at playgroup?
2. What type of activities do you engage with your child at playgroup?
3. What type of activities does your child engage in at home?
4. What type of activities do you engage in with your child at home?
5. Why do you prefer to attend a supported playgroup in a school?

Semi-structured interviews were preferable to working with small groups and useful for gaining insight into the SPinS through the perspectives of participants. Field notes were also maintained during each interview.

4.5 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection to generate an emerging understanding about the research question. The data analysis was conducted using an inductive approach. This was because the study was concerned with generating new theory emerging from the data (Lauri and Kyngas, 2005). This approach uses existing theories to position the new theory within the discipline to answer the research question. Prior to this study, there was little documented evidence regarding the provision of SPinS and parental experiences of SPinS. The raw data is organised and coded into headings and knowledge is generated to understand the material. Creswell (2007) explains that the process of data analysis is to: “pull the data apart and putting it back together in more meaningful ways” (p. 163). Inductive thematic analysis is probably the most common qualitative data analysis method employed in the research involving the collection of interview data (Grbich, 2007). Inductive analysis was used for this study because it: “seeks to find common patterns of meaning through preliminary data analysis and thematic analysis” (Grbich, 2007, p. 9). The underlying purpose of an inductive approach has three outcomes (Thomas, 2003, p. 238) including: 1) condense the raw textual data into a brief summary format; 2) develop a framework for the experiences evident in the data to produce reliable; and 3) establish clear links between the research question and summary of literature, theory and findings. These three outcomes were used to frame the analysis of data in this thesis. First, the data were condensed through an initial process of categorisation, then a framework of experiences for parents was developed by generating a table that explained their perspectives on play and finally, in the discussion links were established between the research question, literature, theory and findings.

4.5.1 Phases of data analysis

There were three phases of data analysis:

Phase one- involved hard copies of the interview transcripts being read several times by myself as the researcher to identify categories and themes. A colour coding system was developed to highlight the parents’ responses to the five semi-structured interview questions. Labelling of categories according to this coding system was then divided into

the settings of *home learning and playgroup learning*. Activities experienced in each of these settings were highlighted separately. A copy and paste method was used to mark text segments into categories. The transcripts were printed and the categories of marked text were physically cut out and placed into piles.

Phase two- The categories were refined as the transcripts were repeatedly read. Each category (e.g. home learning or playgroup learning) was then grouped into themes (e.g. painting, craft, puzzles or playing with balls at playgroup or home). A considerable amount of the text was not assigned to any category, such as general discussion that was not relevant to the research question. Following this coding and categorising process a table was created to illustrate the activities provided in the home and the play activities described in the playgroup (Thomas, 2003). This table was then used to compare perspectives of play in the home and with perspectives of play in the playgroup.

Phase three- Data categorised as home and/or playgroup play was then further categorised to identify sub-themes. A third theme, not related to perspectives on play was generated. This theme was about playgroup as a site for social interactions. This meant that coding process generated three main or overarching themes with a total of eight sub-themes.

4.6 Limitations and issues

With every research study there are limitations imposed by the nature of the research design and data collection. This study was limited to a regional city in Victoria and the sample size was relatively small. Only eleven parents were interviewed from a group comprising over sixty families who participated in the five SPinS over the course of a year. However, focus group data cannot be generalised to the broader population (Grbich, 2007).

There are limitations associated with having used only a semi-structured focus group interview with the parents. In a focus group session, researchers can never know how one respondent may influence another with their answers. This was a limitation in this study as it represented the only one type of data collected. Also, the play space where interviews were conducted was often noisy and participants were at times distracted by their

children. This proved difficult in some focus group interviews, to hear answers and listen to the discussion.

A limitation of using semi-structured interviews is that they can be subjective, which represented the parent's perceptions (what they think or wish) but may not have been an objective reality of what they did because of the public nature of focus groups (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This may not have represented the objective reality of what parents really did. This may have been addressed by using other types of data collection, such as observations, video or photographic journals. This would have increased the range of data available for crossing checking the identified themes. Video recording of participants interacting at SPinS may have provided immediate visual information of parent-child engagement during the play session.

A further limitation of this research was that it only indicated the perspectives of parents in the five SPinS group, in that time frame of the year it was researched. A repeat of the data collection would indicate whether the raised awareness and change in attitude of parents engaging with children still existed. Perhaps combining different methods of qualitative and quantitative methods may result in gaining the best from both research data once the insights from participants has been identified.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodology used to conduct the study. It outlined the study as a qualitative, case study that is informed by a sociocultural theory embedded in the epistemological, ontological and axiological perspective. The chapter described how a single case study design was used to examine the research question: *“What is the influence of parental participation in SPinS on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in the playgroup setting?”* The chapter provided an explanation of methods recruitment for participants and the case for purposive sampling. The research methods have been described with the semi-structured focus group interviews identified as the method of data collection used in this study. The data analysis process showed three phases of identifying themes, which were used in for thematic analysis. The chapter concluded with limitations and issues of the study. In the next chapter of this thesis, the findings generated by the data collection and analysis process are presented in detail.

Chapter Five: Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings which address the research question: *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?* The chapter begins by describing the three main themes that were generated from the analysis of the data. There were the sub-themes relating to each of the main themes and these inform understanding about how parental participation in SPinS influenced parents' perspectives of play at home and at playgroup. Each theme is discussed in detail with quotes and tables.

5.2 Main themes

Three main themes were generated from the analysis of the qualitative data regarding parent perspectives on children's play experiences in the home learning environment during participation in a SPinS. The themes were:

- 1) Experiences of play at playgroup
- 2) Parent inclusion of play at home
- 3) Playgroup as a site for social interactions

Main themes one and two comprised two sub-themes each. Main theme three comprised four sub-themes. A summary of the Main themes and sub-themes is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Main themes and sub-themes associated with parent perspectives on children's play experiences at home during participation in SPinS

| Main themes | Sub-themes |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Experiences of play at playgroup | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Activities: parents value enriched experiences offered (e.g. messy play)2. Routine and structure: parents value opportunities for interaction with their children supported by routine and structure |

| | |
|---|---|
| Parent inclusion of play at home | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Indoor play: parent provision of indoor play at home including reading stories, singing, cooking and puzzles 2. Outdoor play: parents participate in ball games with children at home |
| Playgroup as a site for social interactions | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SPinS as a social setting for parents 2. SPinS as a social setting for children 3. SPinS supporting a social connection with pre-service teachers 4. SPinS supporting a social connection with the school community |

Each of themes is now presented in more detail.

5.3 Main theme 1: Experiences of play at playgroups

Findings from the data suggest that parents valued the experiences of play provided at the supported playgroups because these experiences were different to those they were providing for children at home. The experiences parents valued at playgroup were associated with two sub-themes: 1) Activities; and 2) Routine and structure

5.3.1 Activities

The format of the weekly program was similar in each of the five SPinS. Families would enter the school grounds and sign in for the program. Each school provided a variety of rooms for the participants to meet, which varied from a single classroom with tables to a space in the gym that had blankets on the floor to define play spaces. The rooms were set up and packed away each week because of their multiple uses in the school. This preparation was carried out by the playgroup coordinator and pre-service early childhood teachers.

The data indicated the parents valued the planned play-based indoor activities particularly, the messy play involving painting, slime and play-dough. Less messy play such as reading books, singing and the soccer clinic were also valued. Parents described engaging with their children in a variety of activities at SPinS such as craft activities, blocks building, puzzles, cars, as well as joining in with group singing and dancing.

Outdoor play was not really planned for in each SPinS, with the exception of a soccer clinic. This was due to the primary schools not having provision for outdoor activities for children under five. It is to be noted that more activities were implemented in the playgroups than are reported in the findings. What is discussed are only those activities indicated by parents during interviews. Table 4 summarises the play-activities parents described as valuing during their participation in the SPinS according to each group

Table 4 Play-activities parents described as valuing during their participation in SPinS

| SPinS | Indoor play-activities | Outdoor play-activities | Parent perspective on parent-child engagement | |
|---------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---|---------|
| | | | Indoor | Outdoor |
| Mountain Ash | Activity Table | | ✓ | |
| | Pasting | | | |
| | Painting | | | |
| | Threading | | ✓ | |
| | Slime | | | |
| | Story Time | | ✓ | |
| | Singing | | ✓ | |
| Flowering Gum | Activity Table | | ✓ | |
| | Dolls/Baskets | | | |
| | Blocks | | ✓ | |
| | Books | | | |
| | Singing | | ✓ | |
| Wattle | Craft | | ✓ | |
| | Pretend Play | | | |
| | Dolls | | | |
| | Blocks | | ✓ | |
| | Reading | | ✓ | |
| | Singing | | ✓ | |
| Acacia | Blocks | Soccer Program | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Cars | | ✓ | |
| | Home Corner Plastic Food | | | |
| | Painting | | | |

| | | | | |
|-----------|----------------|--|---|--|
| | Craft Activity | | ✓ | |
| | Reading | | ✓ | |
| | Singing | | ✓ | |
| Grevillea | Activity Table | | ✓ | |
| | Drawing | | | |
| | Imaginary Play | | | |
| | Dolls | | | |
| | Block Building | | ✓ | |
| | Puzzles | | ✓ | |
| | Cars | | ✓ | |
| | Dancing | | ✓ | |
| | Singing | | ✓ | |
| | Stories | | ✓ | |

The findings indicated that the parents' perspective on the play activities provided at playgroup was that they were valuable because they were different from the activities provided in the home, such as messy play with slime. Toby mentioned:

They [the children] do good messy craft here sometimes, which I wouldn't even try at home.

This response was mirrored by Mary who indicated that she valued experiences of messy play at playgroup; however she did not want to provide messy play at home:

I don't do a lot of play-dough or painting [at home] and stuff because it's too messy.

A further aspect of participating in activities at playgroup was parents' interactions with their children. When asked to comment on how the parents engaged with their children, Mary replied:

Normally I help with the painting. Sometimes they have the beads out [at playgroup] and they make bead necklaces. I give them a hand to tie the knots and stuff like that. Story time and singing, we all join in with singing together.

This response highlighted how Mary engaged through guided participation with her twin boys during playgroup activities as she became involved in working beside them to

support their efforts in threading a necklace. Tess also referred to the way she interacted with her children and how her active participation and interest in what the children were doing was important aspects of playgroup:

Just sitting down on the ground and playing, I also like to play footy and skittles with them.

Toby also acknowledged the importance of active participation with his child at playgroup but further indicated that sometimes this was not required and he preferred to be guided by his child in the level of interaction:

I'm happy to be involved if he wants me. He is the instigator. If he wants me to be involved in something, I'm involved. If he wants to be independent and do something with the students, I'm happy for him to do things on his own.

Toby appeared to have an awareness of the different ways to engage with his child at playgroup. Toby allowed time for his child to explore relationships with other children and be present for his child when needed. This gave Toby time to observe other children at play and share with other parents in the group. Parents interacted with their children in different ways. Cassie's child indicated his enthusiasm for attending SPinS and how he was looking forward to attending again:

Last time he [child] was playing here with different cars, small and big and he [child] was talking the whole week - "I want to go and play with those cars." We made a beeline for the blocks and made a garage for the cars.

Cassie showed that she valued her son's interest in cars and supported his interest. Parents described the activities children engaged in at playgroup as providing ideas for further activities in the home. In one example Joe, mentioned playgroup offered a range of play activities that helped him investigate new ideas to do at home with his children:

Playgroup offers different sort of crafting, like building the horses today, something like that we've never done at home. So just things like that, always getting new ideas I think; which is good.

Similarly Kate made connections between the different craft ideas presented at supported playgroup and activities in the home:

Last time at playgroup, she [child] was cutting something like it was a jelly fish and at home they [children] were trying to do the same, asking me [parent] give them some plates, we [parent and children] have to cut them, the paper plates.

The activities available at playgroup appeared to provide a stimulus for parents to extend on their knowledge of play for children's learning through extending on these in the home. Parents were gaining new skills when they participated in play-based activities. The interview data indicated parents were thinking about and valuing activities being offered at SPinS and using some ideas generated at SPinS at home. Deb said she had followed up on the children's interest in mask making as well as using natural objects at the craft table:

A lot of the stuff [things made at playgroup] we take home and then that gives me a foundation to move on from. The students [pre-service teachers] would do natural things [objects from nature] it then gave us the opportunity to go back to my house and we'd collect more natural things, find other things to do with those natural resources, just things like that, we could follow on from that original idea. We made teddy bear mask things so we were able to then go back to my place and have teddy bear picnics with our teddy bear masks.

Deb indicated that she understood the importance of the play-based activities presented at SPinS and was able to develop on these at home to support the children's learning.

A further indication of the influence of playgroup activities being transmitted into the home was evident in parent's comments about children's involvement in a nine-week soccer clinic at playgroup. The clinic, conducted by an outside organisation, went for half an hour each week during supported playgroup sessions. The children were given a ball from the soccer clinic to take home to practicing skills they had learnt with their families. The interest in the ball skills transferred from SPinS to home indicated how learning together engaged children and parents in active roles during play at home. The following conversation with Tamara and Kate highlighted the significance of the soccer program as an activity supporting this interaction:

The soccer program was great, it was so good; you took a ball home and showed what you learnt today. You learnt bouncing, kicking and skills like that. It made them [children] stop and talk about what we did [at the soccer clinic]. Dad wanted to attend next week.

The parents comments regarding the soccer clinic highlighted that when children and adults are involved in a shared interest they build an understanding together. Introducing a SPinS activity into the home environment prompted family members who were not coming to playgroup to show an interest in attending SPinS. The soccer activity demonstrated how learning a new interest was introduced into the home environment after attending SPinS. The engagement of the parent in a mutual interest supported a positive relationship between the parent and child which suggested that when parents have a shared interest with their children they engage more with one another.

5.3.2 Routine and structure

The SPinS were conducted for two hours, either in the afternoon or morning in a room allocated for the session at the host primary school. A playgroup coordinator and two pre-service educators at each SPinS planned and implemented the play-activities. The implementation of the playgroup by the playgroup coordinator and pre-service teachers enabled parents to spend time with their children participating in play experiences.

The routine and structure of the weekly SPinS play-activities was similar in each of the five playgroups. The activities were presented on tables or mats on the floor prepared for the parents and the children when they arrived. The two hour session began with free play and small group activities prepared in different places in the room, such as craft, painting, blocks, puzzles and a home play area. Children and parents helped pack away the activities each week before the fruit is served. The session concluded each week with parents and children coming together as a group to sing, dance and listen to stories. The parents indicated that their perspectives of the children's play in the SPinS were influenced by this regular routine and structure. For example, one of the parents, Kate described the importance of these routines in helping children and parents to feel comfortable knowing what happens next in the program and when to expect transitions:

The set-up is good. There's sort of a process. We [parent and child] know that we play and eat and do craft. Then it's pack up, and then it's ok for fruit time. Then that's packed up and it's book [pre-service teachers reading stories to the group] so they start to get to know that

its' book and song time. So they [children] know the routine. I think that's really important for kids, routine.

Another parent, Candy, also commented on the importance of the routine:

It's a good routine, the set-up is good, we [parent and child] come in play, do craft, then fruit time, pack up, and then sing and a story, and the kids know what's next.

Tamara mentioned that blankets on the floor provided boundaries for play-based activities to be distinguished which helped the children find the toys they wanted to play with:

The blankets have an activity on them, this activity stays there, and toys are kept on the blanket, not all over the room because its mayhem, it's a cleaner way of doing it.

Tamara valued this structure because it meant that the room felt calmer and it seemed to contribute to the satisfaction of the participants who could engage in play experiences at playgroup that they may not otherwise have experienced at home. The playgroup routine and structure demonstrated that play experiences were appreciated by the parents in terms of having designated areas for play-based activities and a structure to follow.

Structure and routine was valued by the parents for the opportunities that it provided for all participants to socially engage at the end of the session for group time. This was evident when the children and family members would sit on the floor and join in singing and dancing activities with the playgroup coordinator and pre-service teachers. This view is captured in the following comment made by Mary:

I join in when its story time and singing, we all join in with singing together.

Deb mentioned when she joined playgroup she began to engage more with her child in activities:

When I started playgroup, my daughter just joined in with the singing and story time because she was part of the group. It made me engage with my daughter and I think she has benefited.

Findings in relation to the routine and structure illustrated that parents appreciated having set routines in place and attributed these routines and structures to contributing to a calm and supportive environment for children’s play. This also provided time for parents to interact with their children, either with set activities or group time at the end of the session. The routine and structure at SPinS meant that parents’ perspectives on the children’s play began to reflect an awareness of how they could interact and engage with their children.

5.4 Main theme 2: Parent inclusion of play at home

The second main theme was: ‘Parents inclusion of play at home’. This theme comprised two sub-themes, including: 1) Engagement in indoor play activities; and 2) Engagement in outdoor play activities. Table 5 summarises the play activities for each sub-theme that parents described valuing at home following their participation in SPinS.

Table 5 Summary of play-activities valued at home

| Parent | Indoor play-activities | Outdoor play-activities | Parent perspective on parent-child engagement | |
|--------|---------------------------|-------------------------|---|---------|
| | | | Indoor | Outdoor |
| Mary | Reading | Riding Bikes | ✓ | |
| | Computer | Trampoline | | |
| | Blocks | Swings | | |
| | T.V. | Balls | | ✓ |
| Deb | Role play/pretend | Ten Pin Bowling | | ✓ |
| | Play | walking | ✓ | |
| | Singing | | | |
| | Dancing | | | |
| | Cooking | | ✓ | |
| | Dress-Ups | | | |
| | Dolls House | | ✓ | |
| | Reading | | | |
| Nathan | Learning to walk and talk | | ✓ | ✓ |

| | | | | |
|----------|------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| | Music/Singing CD | | ✓ | |
| | Reading | | | |
| | T.V. | | | |
| Nancy | Drawing | Kicking balls | | ✓ |
| | Painting | Riding bike | | |
| | Puzzles | Ball play (general | | ✓ |
| | Dolls | | | |
| | Tea Sets | | | |
| | Singing | | ✓ | |
| | Dancing | | ✓ | |
| | Reading | | ✓ | |
| Joe | Singing Songs | | ✓ | |
| | Puzzles | | ✓ | |
| | Play With Cars | | | |
| | T.V. | | | |
| | Reading | | ✓ | |
| Rochelle | Imaginary Play | Footballs ,soccer balls, netball | | ✓ |
| | Craft | | | ✓ |
| | Play Dough | | | |
| | Drawing | | | |
| | Dress-Ups | | | |
| | Counting Numbers | | ✓ | |
| | T.V. | | | |
| | Reading | | ✓ | |
| Tamara | Play Food | Sandpit | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Blocks | Cubby house | | |
| | Cars | Running | ✓ | |
| | Balloons | Balls. Skittles | | ✓ |
| | Reading | Sword play | ✓ | |

5.4.1 Engagement in indoor play activities

Engagement in indoor play activities was the first sub-theme for parent inclusion of play at home. The parents indicated that there was an increased range of play activities they were providing to children in the home following their participation in SPinS. For example, Deb mentioned that since attending SPinS she sings and reads to the children daily:

We do singing at least once a day and we do reading at least once, a day like playgroup does. They [children] enjoy song and story time. I have [engaged in singing and dancing at home] it's a lot of singing and dancing because they're [children] all sort of three and under. Ring-a-ring-a-rosy is very big at the moment because they all do it together and they can do it all by themselves together. We've added the second verse [at home] 'The cows in the meadow and then all jump up'. A lot of songs, 'Big Mack Truck' is a good one cause of the actions, they [children] can get involved with the actions and 'Galoop Went the Little Green Frog' is also a very popular one because they can do the 'la-di-da-di-da'.

This example indicated that the play activities the parent was experience at SPinS were being transferred by Deb into the home. Deb further indicated that she engages with children during activities through being part of the children's circle of singing and dancing. In another example, Joe, a father who occasionally attends SPinS mentioned that his children play imaginary games at home, craft activities, dress-ups, drawing. He commented that since attending SPinS he reads to the children in the evenings before bedtime:

We [children and parent] have a story every night before we go to bed so they [children] all get to pick their own story. Dad reads to the three smallest ones, so reads three books.

Reading was also described by Tamara as an activity she enjoys doing with her children at home:

Reading is a big one. I love reading and they'll [children] often hijack me into reading a book. 'Or twenty'. One's never enough.

The findings suggested that parents were engaging with their children at playgroup and at home in activities to enhance their children's development. Nancy mentioned that her daughter enjoys a variety of craft activities and singing songs at home, particularly following their attendance at SPinS. For example:

My daughter she is into art a lot, so she loves to paint. All of my kids they like to draw and do puzzles. I help with puzzles. I know she'll hear dances and stuff that she's heard at playgroup and she'll do at home that we haven't done with her before, so she'll pick them up.

The influence of play activities at SPinS appeared to be repeated at home. The findings suggested that there is a transfer of experiences engaged in at SPinS, such as in Nancy's example of dancing - which her child now does at home but hadn't done previously. Another parent also described this repetition of activities from SPinS in the home. Mary referred to a range of different activities experienced at SPinS that were repeated in the home:

The kids love to build the high towers and stuff like that and we have the same [blocks] at home, like playgroup, we build castles and towers. We often sit down and read a book together, get on the computer and play some songs and some nursery rhymes.

In her comments Mary indicated that she was engaged with her children through the act of reading, singing and reciting nursery rhymes. She also provided blocks at home, which are similar to the blocks provided at SPinS because her boys like to build towers. The activities at playgroup have influenced Mary to provide play-based activities her children enjoy, such as the blocks. Others, such as Marley also made similar comments in relation to the repetition of similar activities from playgroup in the home:

Puzzles and playing with cars, lots of things at home we have now that he does here [playgroup] as well as home. There are of course different toys at playgroup, so he likes it here because it's different.

The parents indicated that they were actively involved in children's activities and engaged in play practices. Parents described cooking with children in the home as stemming from playgroup participation. They had asked the playgroup coordinator for a play-dough

recipe so they could make their own play-dough at home for the children. Two parents mentioned cooking with the children at home. For Deb making time to cook with the children at home was a significant activity and seemed to stem from participation in playgroup:

We make our own play-dough, so we [parent and children] cook the play-dough. We also have days where they [children] will help me make morning tea and we might make fruit kebabs or something or like that, something simple. We often make cakes, especially for birthdays. We will make a cake for the birthday.

Candy also mentioned that she cooked with the children at home but did not elaborate on what they cooked together:

Yeah, we [children and parent] do lots of cooking at home.

The findings indicated that parents were interacting with children as an extension of activities experienced at SPinS. This is significant because it shows that parents were able to increase their engage with their children and provide meaningful play activities at home after participating in the SPinS. This suggests that participation in a SPinS influences parents' perspectives of play at home so that they are able to provide an increased range of play activities and also engage more with their children during play activities.

5.4.2 Engagement in outdoor activities

Engagement in outdoor activities was the second sub-theme for parent inclusion of play at home. Outdoor activities were significant to some families as they involved a more physical outlet for the children, such as bike riding, jumping on the trampoline, going for walks, interacting with animals and playing with balls. One parent, Mary reported:

The boys [twins] just love being outside riding their bikes, on the trampoline and on the swings, anything outside they're quite happy.

Tamara mentioned her children usually enjoy being outside also:

The children enjoy just running around. We've got a couple of acres, so they [children] really entertain themselves. Often they're funny little games using swords, mainly playing with themselves.

Nelly talked about experiences in the sandpit:

We [parent and children] sit in the sand and I showed them [children] how to use the wheel. Putting the dry sand in [the wheel] it goes through better than the wet sand. If it gets blocked, I showed them [children] how to poke your finger down to keep it running. They try it, and then they finally do it themselves. I just sit and talk and explain things.

Nelly's example is of interest because it showed how Nelly is interacting with the children to learn a new skill using guided instruction to support children's learning. The findings suggested that learning through play activities from the SPinS was supported through interaction in a social group where learning was shaped during the collaboration with others. The shared collaborations between parents and the playgroup coordinator and pre-service educators at SPinS influenced the parents as they learnt how to engage with their children. This learning was transferred and extended into the home environment. Toby explained how he now joined in outdoor activities with his children:

They [children] mainly play with themselves, yet we've got a basketball ring [outside] and they'll [children] often get interested in that if I'm involved.

In this example, Toby indicated that his children become more involved in ball games when he takes time to be present and join in. As the child engaged in play-based activities outdoors, they are learning to interact with objects and events in the environment.

The findings indicated that play-activities experienced at SPinS were being extended into the home environment, and that parents were engaging with children through play activities such as sand play, ball games, and collecting natural objects for craft ideas. However, it also appeared that parents were not as involved or engaged in the children's outdoor play activities as they were in the inside activities. This could be because most

the play-activities at SPinS were inside activities. Mostly inside activities were provided because the school environment did not cater for the outdoor play needs of pre-school aged children.

5.5 Main theme 3: Playgroup as a site for social interactions

The third main theme was associated with parents' perspectives on SPinS as being a site for social interactions. This theme did not connect directly with the parents' perspectives on children's play at home and in the playgroup. However, it was a significant theme that described how parents and children were learning about play in the social context of the SPinS and the value social interactions supported within SPinS for both parents and children. This theme comprised four main sub-themes, including:

- 1) SPinS as a social setting for parents
- 2) SPinS as a social setting for children
- 3) SPinS supporting a social connection with pre-service teachers
- 4) SPinS supporting a social connection with the school community.

5.5.1 SPinS as a social setting for parents

SPinS provided an opportunity for families to connect with the local primary school community as well as other participants in the playgroup. The playgroup was seen as a place of social gathering for the participants who described the playgroup being a social meeting place for the children as well as a social outlet for the parents.

I venture out to come to playgroup purely for the social interaction and being at a school is a big advantage because it opens the door to these kids to what's school's going to be like before they get to school.

Mary saw SPinS as a social setting for herself. She had mentioned she felt isolated at home and reported that she enjoys attending SPinS each week. Mary described her experience:

I think playgroups just a good way to get out for myself to meet other parents and stuff like that. You get a bit isolated having twins, that sort of thing, you don't sort of do a lot, so just enjoy going each week and talking to the other mums and watch all the different kids interact and play and you also watch the other kids grow. You form a bond with the other little kids as well and they sort of become friends, so it's good, it's a really good thing.

SPinS provided a significant model for parents to make social connections outside the home environment. Kate also indicated that she is slowly making new friends by attending SPinS:

Actually I have made a good friend here and we plan to catch up for a barbie [barbecue] over the school holidays because their daughter goes here with my daughter and their son who comes here, he's a year older, but they're quite similar and they actually quite like to play together. They've been to the little boy's birthday party so we're slowly making up a nice friendship together, so it's good.

Kate's comment seemed to highlight the importance of social contacts for isolated parents who attend a SPinS. This would seem to be important for developing new friendships and building social networks. The findings indicated that SPinS provided a site to strengthen and build new relationships once formed.

5.5.2 SPinS as a social setting for children

The environment used for SPinS provided opportunities for children to engage with each other through play. The physical arrangement of the space prepared by the playgroup coordinator and the pre-service early childhood educators allowed children to freely move from one experience to another. This encouraged social skills such as sharing, taking turns, imaginary/pretend play and art and craft experiences. The play activities were designed to allow for the opportunity for children to engage with other children and adults. The parents talked about the social setting that SPinS fostered for their children and how this supported the development of friendships. Rochelle said:

It's nice the interaction, I've noticed that he [her child] now is starting to make friends here. We are beginning to know the faces, which is really nice. He is actually identifying others now. When he goes to school he will have a familiar face to relate to.

Candy also mentioned the changes to her child's confidence since attending SPinS:

He can see other kids and what they are doing, he is now more confident.

Rochelle talked about her child's experience at SPinS:

The interaction is nice. That's the one thing I've noticed as he [child] got a bit older, he is actually starting to have friends here. He now knows the faces, which is really nice. It's nice to have friends the same age.

Nancy spoke about how SPinS was a place for the children to engage socially with others:

Playgroup is really social, to get these children to engage and think about others around them, not just me.

The parents' valued that social aspect of SPinS for their children and believed that their children making friends with children of similar age was an important aspect of their decision to participate in SPinS. Parents also indicated that SPinS was an ideal venue for social interaction, especially for future friendships that extended beyond the SPinS experience. The following contribution from Sandy highlights this:

I like the playgroup for interaction with children, it's important for my child as he sees boys of his own age, he will have a familiar face when he goes to school.

Interaction with other children before going to school seemed to be important to other parents as well. This was evident in the response of Frank who described SPinS as a social setting for his child:

It's more about I think for us [parent and child] the interaction they [children] have with other kids, helps introducing them to Kinder, then preparing them for school at a later date.

In another example, Deb valued SPinS as a social setting for the children, as it provided a new environment for children to learn before attending formal education:

Playgroup really was the social to get these guys [children] to think about the others around them, to share and take turns and try and engage with others not just me. The whole aim of bringing this group to playgroup is to get them to start to engage with other children and being exposed to the school environment.

Parents seem to value SPinS as a stepping stone for their children's future education into kindergarten and school. SPinS was seen as a valuable social venue that provided a place for children to meet and engage with other children before moving onto more formal educational settings. It was understood to provide a social site for meeting same-age children and learning new social skills, such as turn taking, and sharing, through play-based experiences. These skills were perceived as allowing social connections to be made forming positive relationships to transfer into other settings.

5.5.3 SPinS supporting a social connection with pre-service educators

Parents valued the social connection they had with the playgroup coordinator and the pre-service teachers. The play activities presented weekly for parents and children were perceived as helping the playgroup become more child-focused. Community playgroups run by parents tend to be places for parents to socialise with very little focus on creating play activities for children. Rochelle highlighted this point when she made the following comment:

Because it [SPinS] becomes more focused on the children rather than the parent interaction; it's the child interaction, it's more focused on the child not just a group for adults, it's [SPinS] a kid focused group.

SPinS was seen as enabling parents to support their children's play and learning because the playgroup coordinator provided active modelling of play activities for parents that could be transferred into the home environment. Frank noticed that his child was learning by watching others when she attended the group:

I see her watching kids; I know that she does more stuff [play] when she gets home from playgroup; she tries to do the things she sees the other kids do.

Frank's child was able to learn when she watched and observed others while at SPinS, which indicated that participation in SPinS as a social setting was promoting learning.

Toby said that his child gained confidence over the year and became quite attached to the pre-service educators contributing to the operation of the SPinS:

I reckon over the year, he got attached to the girls [pre-service educators] and felt really comfortable and confident, sitting on their knee. At the start of the year he wouldn't even do that. The transition has shown he is comfortable in the space.

Toby talked about building trusting relationships in the group with the playgroup coordinator and the early childhood pre-service educators. This was important for parents to feel comfortable attending weekly with their children. The playgroup coordinator at SPinS helped the parents to connect with this community by building trust and respect for all participants attending.

5.5.4 SPinS supporting a social connection with school

The findings suggest that parents also valued SPinS for supporting a social connection with the host school. Parents reported that a connection with the school community was a priority for them attending SPinS. They felt welcomed by the school Principal and teaching staff. Nancy talked about how she enjoyed the experience of SPinS in her first year of attendance, and so returned the following year:

I took my daughter to the playgroup the year before she started school just to get her used to coming here - it was good for her. I enjoyed the activities and other parents, so came back with my son.

Parents reported they felt welcomed into the local primary school community. Kate's comment summed up the feelings regarding SPinS:

Playgroup is part of the school and we know it's here.

Parents who had previously attended local community playgroups operated mainly by other parents suggested that community playgroups are not always predictable in their operation. In contrast, SPinS was viewed as being professional and reliable because of its location on a host primary school and the contributions of the playgroup coordinator and pre-service educators.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings for the study in answer to the research question: *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?* There were three main themes comprising the response to this question. These were: 1) Experiences of play at playgroup; 2) Parent inclusion of play at home; and 3) Playgroup as a site for social interactions. Parents were found to value the routine and structure of play-activities at SPinS and their exposure to these experiences to influence what they were doing in the home. Parents were also found to be providing and engaging in range of play activities for their children in the home. The activities in the home reflected that parents were influenced in their perspectives of play by their participation in SPinS with an increase in the type of activities played at home and parental engagement during play with children. Parents also discussed the social value associated with their participation in SPinS for themselves and their children. In the next chapter of this thesis the findings are discussed in more detail and reflect on how they connect with the theoretical framing of the thesis.

Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research findings in response to the research question: *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?* The chapter begins with three main themes generated by the data: 1) Experiences of play at playgroup; 2) Parent inclusion of play at home; and 3) Playgroup as a site for social interactions. The first two themes are discussed under the heading 'SPinS and parents perspectives on play'. The third theme is discussed under the heading 'SPinS as a site for social connections'. After discussing these main themes, the concept of the '*Cycle of Intent Engagement*' is proposed and it is based on Rogoff's (2003) ideas regarding *transformation of participation* to explain how active participation in SPinS influenced parents' perspectives and engagement with children's play. The chapter concludes with implications and recommendations for further research.

6.2 SPinS and parent perspectives on play

The aim of this study was to understand the influence of parent participation in SPinS on parents' perspectives of their engagement in children's play at home and at playgroup. In the literature review of this thesis, it was established there is limited research regarding the influence of parent participation in SPinS (or supported playgroups). Research into the home learning environment (Sylva et al., 2004, Hackworth et al., 2013) showed that enriched quality play experiences at home promoted children's learning.

This study found two themes from the data focussed on parent perspectives and engagement of play at home and in playgroup resulted from their participation in SPinS. The findings suggested that participation in SPinS encouraged parents to learn alongside their children and to understand how to provide play-activities for children. This appeared to be achieved when the playgroup coordinator was modelling appropriate interactions during play activities in the SPinS. For example, Tamara, Joe, and Deb talked about their interaction with the children while reading books, singing and cooking.

Parents also indicated that they valued the new activities presented at SPinS. For example, parents demonstrated that they were learning new play-activities that they could also do

at home with their children, such as making jellyfish or collecting natural objects for their children to play with. Theoretically, this finding is important, because it is not just the physical interaction between the parent and the child that brings about learning and development. Vygotsky (1978) argues that the enhancement of higher mental functions within the child is also based on social interactions and communication, while Rogoff, (2003) argues that development is gained through the process of shared endeavours between a child and adult. This study suggests that as parents increased the range of play activities and type of interactions they had with children at home as a result of their participation in SPinS that they may also have been increasing the type of interactions explained by sociocultural theory as important for children's learning.

The data therefore suggest that SPinS provided new play ideas for parents to use at home and that parents could build on what they were seeing happening at SPinS. I believe that the data suggested that as a result of parent participation in a SPinS, that the parents' perspectives on play in the home were enriched. This was noted when parents were introducing new activities at home, such as making their own play dough and providing art and craft activities. Parents appeared to value the importance of engaging in more play activities with their children because the data showed that parents were spending time to participate in action songs, reading with children, cooking and playing ball games.

Parents' perspectives about play in the home was positively influenced by their participation in SPinS. This indicated a possible transfer of understanding the value of play for children. This knowledge suggested that the parents were experiencing a form of *transformation of participation* (Rogoff, 2003). The data evidence also indicated that parents were also learning 'how to' engage with their children at SPinS during activities such as group singing and dancing and then described how they were supporting those activities for their children at home when they had not previously done so. Rogoff (2003) talks about transformation of participation as involving learners in: apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation. Learners acquire new ideas and skills by working closely with and observing and taking on the knowledge of more skilled peers. In SPinS the parents valued the structure and routine of the playgroup and the range of play activities provided to the children. They were able to learn from what the playgroup coordinator and pre-service educators were providing, and to transform this learning into the provision of play at home. The findings are consistent with Rogoff's (2003) views of a 'community of learners' involving both active learners and more skilled

partners who provide leadership and guidance that involves transformation of participation in the social culture of SPinS.

Evangelou and Wild (2014) refer to a range of parenting intervention programs which highlight the significance of high quality early intervention programs on children's learning and development. International research also indicates that programs offering welcoming, inclusive environments for parents and children (such as SPinS) build a sense of community for parents through social inclusion (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Data for this study suggested that SPinS positively provided parents with family supports that modelled for parents how to engage with their children during play activities at home and at playgroup. Data findings suggested that participation in a SPinS positively influenced parent perspectives of play at home and in the playgroup because parents spoke about valuing the new and different range of activities provided.

Data findings suggested that there were some significant engagements occurring between the parent and child as the parents participated in shared activities with their children at SPinS. Interest in the soccer clinic was one such example, where a parent who had previously shown little interest in home play expressed interest in attending SPinS and playing soccer with his child at home. This parent became more actively involved with his child both at home and at SPinS. Rogoff's (2003) transformation of participation can be seen here as the father is involved in the apprenticeship (taking part in SPinS), guided participation (learning how to play soccer with his child from SPinS) and participatory appropriation (playing soccer at home). Here, through shared learning the parent built new knowledge and understanding from his participation in a social activity, which illustrated a form of "transformation of participation" (Rogoff, 2003).

Later in this chapter, I consider the process of parents learning about children's play from their participation in SPinS as a process I call the 'Cycle of Intent Engagement'. The cycle focuses on how parents gained new knowledge or developed their perspective on the children's play through apprentice, guided participation and participatory appropriation with the playgroup coordinator and the pre-service educators. The parents then used this knowledge about play with children in the home.

The findings identified positive outcomes for parents as they advanced their perspectives of children's play. They were learning by participating directly at SPinS in the play

activities planned by the playgroup coordinator and the pre-service educators. Rogoff's (2003) metaphor of *apprenticeship*, used in this study related to the SPinS service actively involving parents to participate with others with a common purpose –the purpose was to engage parents in play activities with their children for the intention of learning. Rogoff (2003) termed social engagement in a community as apprenticeship. This study saw apprenticeship being conducted at SPinS because parents learnt alongside the playgroup coordinator about how to resource and provide for children's play and also how to engage in play with children. Guided learning was modelled by the playgroup coordinator in regard to methods of engaging with parents with their children during activities such as reading, singing and dancing at group time. The transfer of learning (Rogoff, 2003) through participation while being involved in social interactions at SPinS, provided parents with an understanding of how to effectively interact and play with their children – this was then carried over into the home. The transfer of learning was evidenced by parents talking about doing play activities in the home with their children that they had learned at SPinS.

The routine and structure at SPinS was important as an effective strategy to streamline participation by having designated activity areas. Parents reported that the blankets on the floor helped children to go from one activity to another. The routine supported parents and children to feel comfortable in the sessions and provided a sense of predictability. The routine helped to create smoother transitions between activities and allowed for the opportunity to learn responsibility and self-management of skills, such as packing toys away. The interactive routines, such as joining in with group singing and story reading gave the parents an opportunity to observe quality interactions with children. The Play-based activities were planned in advance by the playgroup coordinator and pre-service teachers, which meant that parents could engage with their children in activities as soon as they arrived to the session. This meant that the parents could focus on participation in the play activities with the children, as opposed to community run playgroups where parents need to set out the activities, which takes time. Parents reported that the routine and structure provided for a calm atmosphere and a sense of trust. The trust, mutual respect and understanding from the playgroup coordinator and pre-service teachers helped parents engage in positive interactions with their children during play while at the SPinS.

Plowman (2009) reported that early intervention initiatives showed some evidence that services providing a partnership with parents improve parenting capacity and social inclusion. This in turn enabled parents to support young children's play and learning. The best practice playgroups are the ones that provide opportunities to build friendships and social support, help children learn through play, take responsibility and work together, provide a safe and supportive environment and exchange ideas about parenting (Plowman, 2006, p. 11). The research in this area seems to indicate that early childhood programs are effective when they support parents' active participation in children's early learning and development through play as well as providing regular and consistent opportunities for guided interactions and play with other children (Plowman, 2006). In this study, SPinS provided parents with a form of intervention that met many of these characteristics. For example, parents were able to help their children's learning through play and also had a safe place in which to learn about children's play. The transfer of these perspectives about play to the home suggests that SPinS was a useful form of intervention for increasing the provision of play to children in the Home Learning Environment (Sylva, et al., 2004).

The idea of transference connects with ideas about the importance of sociocultural context in supporting learning from Vygotsky (1978), Bronfenbrenner (1988) and Rogoff (2003). For example, Vygotsky (1978) says that people learn from more experienced others in a social relationship. Bronfenbrenner (1988) highlights the role of setting in supporting learning and Rogoff (2003) talks about people participating in interactions with each other that help them acquire new ideas and information. In this study, SPinS provided a sociocultural context that operated as a form of intervention for parents that helped them to learn more about children's play from the playgroup coordinator and the pre-service educators.

The data findings indicated that shared interactions allowed parents to be motivated and involved in learning for the sake of accomplishing meaningful, productive activities with their children to develop their child's play (Rogoff, 2003). For example, Deb drew attention to extending on her new knowledge at home when she said she had followed up on the children's interest in mask making by having a teddy bear picnic at home and going for a walk to get natural objects for a craft activity. Marley, Joe, Kate, Frank and Mary said that they valued enriched experiences offered at SPinS because they were different from what they provide in the home. They talked about their active engagement in playing

with their children. Marley helped her child build a garage with blocks. These findings are important because research conducted McArthur et al (2010) suggested that participating in a supported playgroup can help parents contribute more regularly to their child's play activities in the home. For children's learning this is important because Evangelou & Wild, (2014) have established that "parental involvement in learning is a critical factor in overturning adverse family circumstances" (p.380).

Children's learning is positively influenced by the environment where relationships with parents are nurtured and where they are able to engage in quality play experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). The social interaction and play-based activities afforded by SPinS provided opportunities for both the parent and child to be engaged in learning together. The underlying significance of the findings from a theoretical perspective is that effective learning of parents within the SPinS setting supported parent knowledge in increasing parental interactions with children at home.

Sociocultural theory allows for an understanding of how the parents may be seen to transfer their learning within the SPinS setting about their children and play activities into the Home Learning Environment. Sociocultural theory helps to analyse the relationships between the parents, child and professionals to find out what aspects of participation supported families to engage with their children. In this perspective, the focus on *proximal processes* allowed for an understanding of the interactions, such as observation, modelling (Rogoff, 2003) and insights gained from those in a social setting to be relevant to understanding the parent perspectives on their experiences as participants in SPinS as is the focus of this study.

From an ecological systems theory perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1988) the influence of SPinS and the home is seen as two separate microsystems that the parent and child interact within. They both provide a context for using the proximal processes to understand the active participation in progressively more complex, reciprocal interactions of parents, children and professionals (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). The SPinS environment (mesosystem) outside the child's microsystem, provided the context for learning to occur because it emphasises the importance of parent-child learning that is formed through dialogue and co-construction of knowledge (Wells, 1999) with the playgroup coordinator and pre-service early childhood educators.

Peer support emerged as an example of how parents use interactions to increase their knowledge of parenting skills, and as a means to see their children interacting with others. New knowledge was gained by watching and observing other people, listening to conversations, (Rogoff, 1988) and actively participating in a social setting of SPinS. The third finding illustrates how connecting with others gave parents the opportunity to form new friendships.

6.3 SPinS as a site for social connection

The third main theme focussed on SPinS as a site for social connections and interactions for parents and children. This finding was not directly connected to parents' perspectives on play as a result of their participation in SPinS. However, the finding was important because it showed how social connections helped parents relate to the playgroup coordinator, the pre-service educators and other parents. These relationships helped parents to participate in the activities and learn from each other about children's play. Parents talking about feeling less isolated by attending SPinS indicated this. For example, Frank, Kate and Mary highlighted how making new friends was an important part of participating in SPinS.

The social connections aspect of SPinS strengthened the building of new friendships for parents. These friendships were important to families feeling isolated in the home with young children because: "communication and coordination during participation in shared endeavours are the key aspects of how people develop" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 285). Parents spoke about the importance of SPinS as a place where they could share common experiences through mutual involvement (Rogoff, 2003) with their children and other parents. For example, parents made friends at SPinS and they planned to further their social contact and meet outside SPinS in the school holidays for children to play. The aspect of social connection of the study findings connected to sociocultural theory because it is through social interactions that people learn from each other. In this study, SPinS was a useful context for these social relationships that helped parents' social networks and therefore also supported their learning about children's play.

This is important because Moore (2005) found by reducing parents' social isolation and improving interpersonal relationships that positively impacts on child development and behaviour can be demonstrated. McArthur et al. (2010) also emphasised that "playgroup

coordinators play an important role in the value parents derive from playgroup” (p. 38). This is because coordinators can provide links to other parents in the group and promote social interactions amongst the attending parents.

The parents in this study who regularly attended SPinS showed indicated that they were connecting socially with others. This is consistent with McArthur et al.’s (2012) research showing that participation in supported playgroups promotes parents’ social connections with the community. Playgroup attendance is associated with increased social networks, the provision of new play activities to children in the home, building parental confidence and skills, the improvement of parent-child relationships, and enhanced parent knowledge of local services (McArthur et al., 2012, p. 38). The data findings indicated that parents enjoyed the new activities experienced at SPinS, such as the messy play. However, messy play was not an activity all parents wanted to do at home with children. From the findings, it was noted that parents were willing to make their own play dough at home and participate in ball games with children. The interactions that occurred in SPinS between parents, and children, the playgroup coordinator and pre-service early childhood educators, reflected the sociocultural notion that learning is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Rogoff, 2003). The SPinS environment encouraged parents to learn new skills by enabling their active participation in the program and with others.

The importance of the social setting at SPinS, suggested that there was a collaboration of ideas with all participants attending. New perspectives on children’s play were achieved by participating in a play-based program working alongside others. SPinS model suggested links could be established between the playgroup coordinator and pre-service educators working cooperatively with parents to support their understanding of children’s play. The family has been seen as “the most powerful influence on the development of a child, their collaborative relationships between professionals and families can bring benefits to all involved” (McFarland et al., 2012. p. 35). The findings therefore highlighted the importance of learning in a community where the social networks involved the parents in having a feeling of being accepted and belonging to a like-minded group.

The knowledge gained from the SPinS allowed me to develop the idea of the '*Cycle of Intent Engagement*' adapted from Rogoff's (2011) concept of Intent Community Participation.

6.4 The Cycle of Intent Engagement (Lambert, 2015)

The findings from this project suggested that there is a positive influence to bringing parents and children together within a context that supports parents' learning about their children's play. Learning the value of play is important because it increased the provision of play activities to children in the home, as well as parental interaction and engagement with children. Research into the home learning environment (Sylva et al., 2004, Hackworth et al., 2013) showed that enriched quality play experiences at home promoted children's learning. It was noted that play as a leading activity increased parent-child interactions which is the key to children's development (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, the sociocultural context of SPinS allowed the parents to be active learners in their children's play. This meant that the parents' perspectives of play at home were influenced by their participation in SPinS, which contributed to the shared play activities they described having with their children. To conceptualise how the transfer of learning was occurring for the parents I have developed the concept of The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015, Figure 1). This concept was adapted from Rogoff's (2011) ideas understanding intent community participation, where people learn when they interact with other people in community settings. The situated research gave rise to a model that may apply to other situations. The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) indicated how SPinS positively promoted learning for parents, and shows the progression of understanding that was transferred into the home. The cycle only goes one way because once learning is integrated through participation; there is no need to go back, only forward because scaffolded learning takes the parent to a higher level of integration when the time is right.

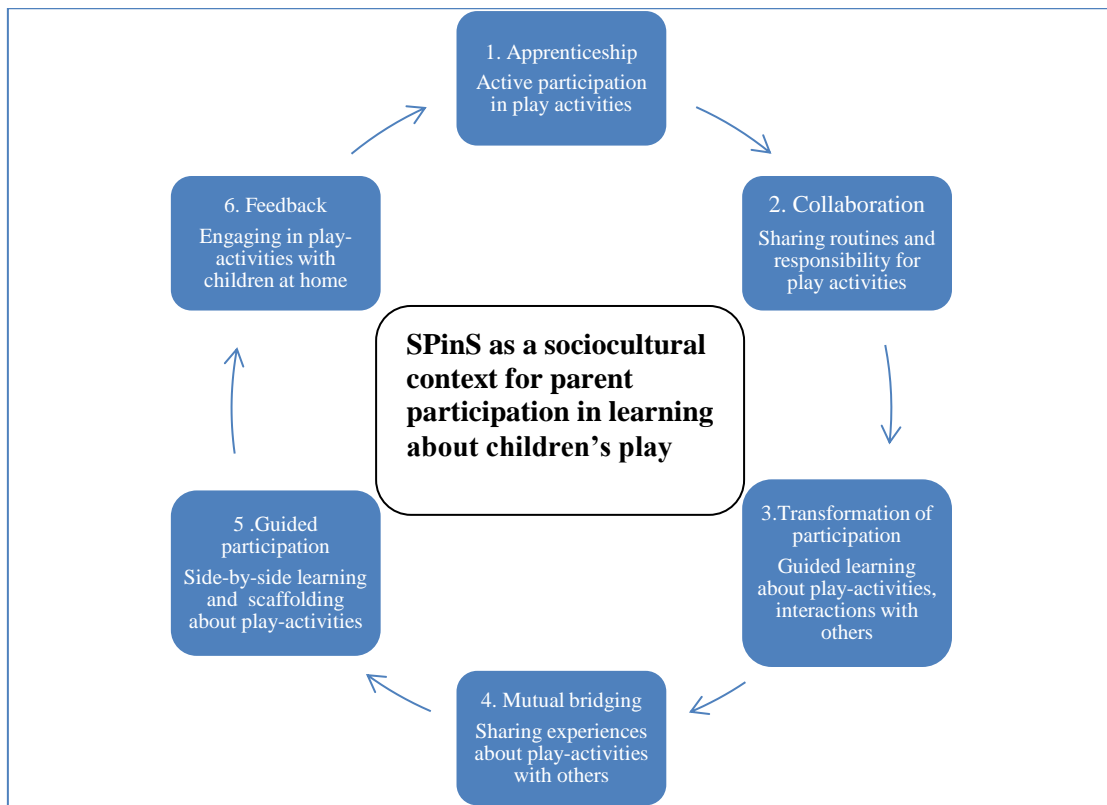


Figure 1 The Cycle of Intent Engagement (Lambert, 2015) (adapted from Rogoff 2011, Intent Community Participation) explaining how parents perspectives about play were influenced by their participation in SPinS.

The Cycle of Intent Engagement (Lambert, 2015) draws on ideas from Rogoff’s (2003) work regarding transformation of participation and how this is achieved through apprenticeship and guided participation. The model represents the stages of events as a continuing cycle. Table 6 provides examples from the findings to illustrate each stage in The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015).

Table 6 Explanation of The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015)

| Stage | Description | Example |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1) Apprenticeship | Active participation in play activities | Tess described how she liked to sit on the floor with the children and actively participate in play such as playing skittles with the children. (Chapter 5.3.1. p. 75). |
| 2) Collaboration | Sharing routines and responsibility for play activities | Parents described how routines such as fruit time and the pack up times were shared activities for families (Chapter 5.3.2. p. 78). |
| 3) Transformation of participation | Guided learning about play-activities, interactions with others | Deb referred to the influence attending SPinS had on her joining in activities such as singing and storytelling with child (Chapter 5.3.2. p. 78). |
| 4) Mutual bridging | Sharing experiences about play-activities with others | In one example a mother described how sharing experiences at home about the soccer clinic contributed to the child's father's interest the Soccer clinic (Chapter 5.3.1. p. 77). |
| 5) Guided participation | Side-by-side learning and scaffolding about play-activities | Parents described engaging with their children in a range of activities such as messy play activities (Chapter 5.3.1. p. 72). |
| 6) Feedback | Engaging in play-activities with children at home | Deb described singing, dancing, reading with her daughter after noticing that her daughter at home after being involved in these activities in SPinS (Chapter 5.4.1. p. 81). |

The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) has six stages of events that support learning.

- 1) Apprenticeship: This is about learning something new. The stage refers to SPinS as the community organisation that incorporates collaborative engagement with families. Families are encouraged to participate regularly in ongoing endeavours of play with children at SPinS because the learning takes time to process.
- 2) Collaboration: Families contribute and belong as valued members of the SPinS community. A bi-directional approach to learning with professionals and parents learning together. Flexible leadership allows families to contribute and are valued in their role. The parents are trusted to take initiative to participate.
- 3) Transformation of participation: The goal of learning is to acquire new ideas and actively imbed the new learning.
- 4) Mutual bridging: This stage of learning involved encouraging other family members to be actively involved in mutual endeavours.
- 5) Guided participation: Supporting learning as participants engage in shared activities. Guidance may be in the form of keen attention, observation or scaffolded learning.
- 6) Feedback: The outcome of attending SPinS is seen in the efforts of parents to repeat activities at home, indicating the value of a community of learner's model. This can also apply to parents supporting newcomers to the group.

By participating in the SPinS community, parents are supported to take responsibility for engaging in children's play. They also learn from the playgroup coordinator and pre-service educators on how to provide and structure play for learning. The social connections formed in SPinS supported new opportunities for learning about play. As parents repeat efforts to incorporate new learning at home, they are able to bring their new understanding back to SPinS. Engaging in play with children, parents gain new insights into how to interact with children in a variety of new and different activities.

The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) helped to explain the pattern of interaction that supported parent s' perspectives about children's play as a result of their participation in SPinS. The model suggested a delineation and progression of developing parents' perspectives on play and allowing them greater autonomy. The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) therefore considered the role of the parent and how

they can be supported via an intervention such as a SPinS to learn the value of children's play. For example, learning how to engage in dialogue with a child supported parents to interact with their child to complete a puzzle. The same process will continue for a new experience, such as singing songs with children at home, learned at SPinS. An interesting idea regarding The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) is that in the feedback cycle, as new parents enter SPinS, they will be involved in apprenticeship with parents who have been attending for some time, who are now able to support newcomers with knowledge gained (Rogoff, 2003). Sociocultural theory understands that people change as they master new knowledge, they can then support newcomers to obtain similar knowledge (Rogoff, 2003). This is why the cycle only goes forward. It empowers change through collaborative engagement by promoting the sharing of information and knowledge on the value of children's play. SPinS promoted a positive parental capacity to value children's play and develop new skills so parents can support their child's early childhood development. SPinS therefore helped to positively guide parents in a practical ways of interacting with their children.

The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) then depicted and predicted greater autonomy for parents by providing an environment of shared learning that was influenced by active parent's participation in shared cultural endeavours at SPinS. For example, play-based activities being repeated at home, such as singing songs and co-reading.

The Cycle of Intent Engagement (Lambert, 2015) shows how building: "on the parent's capacity to support their child's health, development, learning and wellbeing" (Jackson, 2011a, p. 1) can be achieved by offering parents a social service or intervention such as SPinS. The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) also shows that it was also important to give parents time to develop relationships within the group. The playgroup coordinator's role was to build strong effective partnerships with parents through trust and respect building relationships that help to provide a sense of social connection for the parents. Ongoing participation of parents attending weekly was seen to be vital for decreased social isolation and increased parent confidence. When parents felt supported in their parenting role, there is an increase in positive outcomes for children (Jackson, 2011b; McArthur et al, 2012; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sylva et al., 2004). There is also research evidence that emphasising the role of social connections among

parents has positive effect on the economic and health factors of well-functioning parent-child relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Jackson, 2011b).

6.5 Limitations of the research

This study has significance to the field of early childhood education because it has indicated parents can be supported to learn the value of early childhood play. However, the study has several limitations. First, the study provided a small in-depth view of parent perspectives about play following their participation in a SPinS. The small sample size meant that findings may not occur in other populations of parents. Second, the findings relied on only interviews with parents conducted in the real-life setting of SPinS in action which is subjective. Third, having another form of data, such as questionnaires to obtain pre and post information on play activities at home. This would have provided more depth the research. Fourth, there was a limitation of parent perceptions having concerns of reliability due to the interpretive basis of analysis.

Studies to be followed up in the future therefore could identify the strategies playgroup coordinators use to scaffold parents to engage with their children. Also, extensive follow up in the first two years of primary school would help to understand if SPinS transfers lifelong learning for children.

6.6 Implications

This study has contributed to an understanding of how SPinS contributed to developing parents' perspectives on children's play. The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) explained the progression of developing parent perceptions and their role in engaging with children during play. The focus was on empowering change through collaborative engagement. The three themes and eight sub-themes that were generated and The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) suggested the following implications were important for early childhood education practice:

- 1) Models of learning for parents should focus on opportunities to learn from others and extend learning into the home: All participants have an influence on each other's learning through the relationships they develop (Rogoff,

2003). Relationships foster social learning and mean that parents can learn about play from experts and peers. Parents have deep knowledge of their children. What they learn about play from others they can connect with their knowledge of children

- 2) Parents benefit from learning how to engage in play with their children: apprenticeship and transformation of participation suggest that parents benefit from learning about how to engage in play activities with their children because they are more likely to try some of these activities at home with their children
- 3) The implications drawn from these findings saw that social connections and the context of learning was important. The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) indicated there was a progression of learning happening because parents were able to repeat play activities at home. Knowledge and information was gained through shared learning and parents positively benefited by attending a SPinS community.

In the future, what may be useful for government policy would be to recognise the validity of the SPinS model in order to provide a high quality service to families in the community. Early childhood policy has become important for governments to provide funding for these services to increase the understanding of empowering families to support their child's education. The home learning environment is an ideal place to begin learning the value of play and the skills of interacting with the child because the child spends most of their early years in the home. The implications of this research may inform national policy initiatives in Australia such as the Early Years Strategic Plan (DEECD, 2014) or existing programs such as the HIPPY program (Rooste et al., 2014) and PlaySpot (Oke, et al., 2007), or the use of online resources by parents such as PlayMap (Playgroup Victoria, 2015).

6.7 Future research

For future research recommendations suggest a study to understand the bi-directional influence of parent involvement and the quality of children's play activities being experienced at home and in the playgroup. This would involve understanding the early childhood pedagogy of the playgroup coordinator and how learning is transferred. The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) indicated a transfer of learning, so this model may be used to help parents understand the quality of play for children. Further research around the different types of guided learning used with parents at SPinS may be useful for understanding the quality of play in SPinS and the home learning environment. Research has indicated that parent interactions during play with children are important for supporting children's learning. Hence, a further recommendation would be to study what type of effective interactions support parents to further children's learning through play. Communication with children requires an informed approach to listening to children and to understanding the value of early childhood. Research investigating the various interactions that occur in SPinS may assist in identifying the most effective interactions for fostering awareness and understanding of children's learning through play.

6.8 Conclusion

This research set out to explore the influence of parental participation in SPinS on parents' perspectives on play at home and at playgroup. The research also sought to know whether SPinS had an influence on enabling parents to engage with and enact play with their children at home. SPinS as a relatively new form of playgroup provision, was seen to have a positive influence on parents' ability to positively engage with others while also enacting play with their children.

The theoretical literature indicated that Rogoff's (2003) theory of transformation of participation supported collaborative and co-learning relationships with parents working together alongside the playgroup coordinator. It was established that participation in SPinS informed parents understanding of the value of engaging in children's play.

This research sought to answer the question: *What influence does participation in a SPinS have on parent perspectives of children's play at home and in a playgroup setting?* The main empirical findings are summarised as: 1) Experiences of play at playgroup; the findings indicated that parents were interacting with children during play activities.

2) Parent inclusion of play at home; the findings suggested that there was a transfer of experiences engaged in at SPinS. 3) Playgroup as a site for social interactions. Parents talked about the social value associated with their participation in SPinS reducing isolation for themselves and their children. These three themes indicated ways in which parents were influenced in regard to learning how to engage in play with children and transferring learning to the home. The research in this area indicated that early childhood programs are effective when they support parents' active participation in children's early learning and development through play as well as providing regular and consistent opportunities for guided interactions (Plowman, 2006).

The sociocultural theoretical framework suggested aspects of sociocultural theories and collaborative relationships have a direct and positive impact upon parents learning about and enacting play with their children. The findings from this research point to the influence of Rogoff's (2003) theory of a community of learners in which people learn new skills through active involvement. Transference of participation saw changes occurring in the parents' thinking or perspectives during social interaction. Transference of participation was highlighted as supporting parents' to understand the value of their engagement with children during play.

The focus understood that empowering change was influenced by active participation during collaborative engagement. Additional elements that came to light through this research informed the development of 'The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015). This model was proposed to explain how the parents' ability to learn was empowered through collaborative engagement. This model may provide worthwhile information to support future research in understanding ways to empower parenting skills. The Cycle of Intent Engagement Model (Lambert, 2015) also modelled how patterns of social interaction at SPinS supported the learning. The model provided more of an in-depth progression and explanation of how parents learn to develop their perspectives of children's play during their participation in SPinS. This was achieved by the playgroup coordinator working alongside the parents and children during play. This model may have positive implications for early childhood education because it suggested community-

based participation positively informed parent-child interactions so parents were able to effectively engage with children through play.

This research in the area of SPinS was important because there are indications of positive changes during the provision of SPinS to support parents to engage with their children and this engagement continued into the home environment for the benefit of the children's learning and development. This chapter concludes with the limitations of this research followed by implications of the research for early childhood education practices and recommendations for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix one: Ethics approval forms



Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Strategy and Review Group

2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne, Victoria 3002
Telephone: +61 3 9637 2000
DX 210083
GPO Box 4367
Melbourne, Victoria 3001

2013_002065

Dr Karen McLean
Australian Catholic University
PO Box 650
BALLARAT 3353

Dear Dr McLean

Thank you for your application of 16 July 2013 in which you request permission to conduct research in Victorian government schools and/or early childhood settings titled *Bringing supported play groups into schools*.

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. The research is conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
2. Separate approval for the research needs to be sought from school principals and/or centre directors. This is to be supported by the DEECD approved documentation and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.
3. The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter and any extensions or variations to your study, including those requested by an ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for its consideration before you proceed.
4. As a matter of courtesy, you advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools or governing body of the early childhood settings that you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director or governing body.
5. You acknowledge the support of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in any publications arising from the research.
6. The Research Agreement conditions, which include the reporting requirements at the conclusion of your study, are upheld. A reminder will be sent for reports not submitted by the study's indicative completion date.
7. If DEECD has commissioned you to undertake this research, the responsible Branch/Division will need to approve any material you provide for publication on the Department's Research Register.





Subject: Ethics application 2013 192V approved
Date: Tuesday, 30 July 2013 11:28:14 AM Australian Eastern Standard Time
From: Res Ethics (sent by Stefania Riccardi <Stefania.Riccardi@acu.edu.au>)
To: Karen Mclean, Suzy Edwards
CC: Clare Schaper, Scott Lee, yjcoll001@myacu.edu.au

Dear Applicant,

Principal Investigator: Dr
Karen Joy McLean Ethics
Register Number: 2013
192V
Project Title: Supported playgroups in schools:
Stakeholder perspectives on belonging, home learning and
young children's play
Risk Level: Low Risk 2
Date Approved: 30/07/2013
Ethics Clearance End Date: 30/11/2015

This email is to advise that your application has been reviewed by the Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee and confirmed as meeting the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

This project has been awarded ethical clearance until 30/11/2015. In order to comply with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, progress reports are to be submitted on an annual basis. If an extension of time is required researchers must submit a progress report.

Whilst the data collection of your project has received ethical clearance, the decision and authority to commence may be dependent on factors beyond the remit of the ethics review process. For example, your research may need ethics clearance or permissions from other organisations to access staff. Therefore the proposed data collection should not commence until you have satisfied these requirements.

If you require a formal approval certificate, please respond via reply email and one will be issued.

Decisions related to low risk ethical review are subject to ratification at the next available Committee meeting. You will only be contacted again in relation to this matter if the Committee raises any additional questions or concerns.

Researchers who fail to submit an appropriate progress report may have their ethical clearance revoked and/or the ethical clearances of other projects suspended. When your project has been completed please complete and submit a progress/final report form and advise us by email at your earliest convenience. The information researchers provide on the security of records, compliance with approval consent procedures and documentation and responses to special conditions is reported to the NHMRC on an annual basis. In accordance with NHMRC the ACU HREC may undertake annual audits of any projects considered to be of more than low risk.

It is the Principal Investigators / Supervisors responsibility to ensure that:

1. All serious and unexpected adverse events should be reported to the HREC with 72 hours.
2. Any changes to the protocol must be approved by the HREC by submitting a Modification Form prior to the research commencing or continuing.
3. All research participants are to be provided with a Participant Information Letter and consent form, unless otherwise agreed by the Committee.

For progress and/or final reports, please complete and submit a Progress / Final Report form:
www.acu.edu.au/465013

For modifications to your project, please complete and submit a Modification form:
www.acu.edu.au/465013

Researchers must immediately report to HREC any matter that might affect the ethical acceptability of the protocol e.g.: changes to protocols or unforeseen circumstances or adverse effects on participants.

Please do not hesitate to contact the office if you have any queries.

Kind regards,
Stefania Riccardi

Ethics Officer | Research Services
Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research) Australian Catholic
University

THIS IS AN AUTOMATICALLY GENERATED RESEARCHMASTER EMAIL

18 July 2013



Dr Karen McKlean & Prof Susan Edwards
ACU – Aquinas Campus
PO Box 650
BALLARAT 33503

Dear Karen & Prof Edwards

I am in receipt of your application requesting the participation of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Ballarat in your Research Project: *Supported playgroups in schools: stakeholder perspectives on belonging, home learning and young children's play*

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of information you have provided I grant permission for you to approach the Principals of our schools seeking their involvement in the project. You will understand that many requests are made to our schools and I am conscious of the time commitment required by participants. With this in mind I stress that the decision as to whether or not to participate rests with the individual Principals.

The following general conditions apply to all persons/institutions conducting research in schools in the Diocese of Ballarat:

- 1) The decision as to whether or not your research can proceed in a school rests with the School Principal. For each school in which you wish to do the research, you must obtain approval directly from the School Principal.
- 2) You are requested to provide the Principal with an outline of your research proposal and the likely time that participation in the research project will demand. A copy of notification of approval from the appropriate Ethics Committee should also be provided to the participating school.
- 3) A Criminal Record check is necessary for all researchers visiting schools and should be shown to the Principal before starting research in each school.
- 4) No student is to participate in your research study unless s/he is willing to do so and permission is given by a parent/guardian. Sufficient information must be provided to enable a parent/guardian to make an informed decision. Permission to participate would generally be indicated by means of a consent form, signed by a parent/guardian and returned to the school. You are requested to liaise with the School Principal to assist in the writing of a letter to parents/guardians regarding information about the research project.
- 5) You are requested to forward a list of schools/participants to this office.
- 6) Any substantive modifications to the research proposal or additional research involving use of the data collected will require a further research approval submission to this office.
- 7) Data relating to individual students or schools is to remain confidential.
- 8) I will look forward to receiving a copy of the research findings and would expect that you offer such results to participating schools.

I take this opportunity to wish you success with your research project.

Yours sincerely

Audrey Brown
DIRECTOR

ABN. 45 121 091 506

PO Box 576 Ballarat Victoria 3353

Tel. (03) 5337 7135

Fax. (03) 5331 5166

Email. director@ceoballarat.catholic.edu.au

www.ceoballarat.catholic.edu.au

Appendix two: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

PROJECT TITLE:
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
STUDENT RESEARCHER:
STUDENT'S DEGREE:



Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

What is the project about?

The research project investigates [describe the project, its aims and objectives, why it is/should be important to the participants and what you hope to achieve]

Who is undertaking the project?

This project is being conducted by [insert name] and [if appropriate] will form the basis for the degree of [insert degree] at Australian Catholic University under the supervision of [insert name of supervisor].

Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?

[Describe any risks associated with the project. If there are no foreseeable risks, you should state this rather than saying there are 'no risks'. Every project contains some risk. Indicate how any risks will be mitigated.]

What will I be asked to do?

[Describe in lay terms what the project involves for the participant. This should include:

- Does it involve digital recording, procedures, questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, interviews? If it is more appropriate, you can also include the time commitment here rather than in the next paragraph down.
- Indicate the nature of the activities – i.e. types of questions asked, what is involved in procedures, are there any follow up requirements?
- Indicate the location of the study. If this is going to be determined later by appointment, say that the study will take place at “a mutually convenient location”]

How much time will the project take?

[Describe how much time the participant will need to participate in the project (i.e. how long will the questionnaire/interview take, how many follow up visits are required, how many testing sessions will there be and how long will they be?)]

What are the benefits of the research project?

[Describe the benefits of the project to the participant. Be careful not to overstate the benefits or provide unrealistic expectations. If there are no immediate benefits to the participant, this should be

stated (please note that if this is the case there must also be only negligible risk involved). You should also describe the more general benefits of the project.]

Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences [(mention if there are limits to this – i.e. you cannot withdraw after you submit your survey, as surveys are non-identifiable). If the participant is in a dependent relationship with any of the researchers, mention that non-participation or withdrawal will not affect their ongoing treatment/enrolment/employment etc.]

Will anyone else know the results of the project?

[Describe where the study will be published. Describe the use and storage of the data – will the data be identifiable or non-identifiable? If it is identifiable to the researchers, how will confidentiality be maintained? Will participants be identified in publications, or will only aggregated data be published?]

Will I be able to find out the results of the project?

[Describe how the results or a summary of the results will be made available to the participants.]

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

[Insert details of how the participant can contact the researcher/s to ask questions about the project.]

What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (approval number 2013 xxxx). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research).

Have the participant letter
Chair, HREC
c/o Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)
Australian Catholic University
Melbourne Campus
Locked Bag 4115
FITZROY, VIC, 3065
Ph: 03 9953 3150
Fax: 03 9953 3315
Email: res.ethics@acu.edu.au

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

I want to participate! How do I sign up?

[Describe how participants will contact you to agree to participate (i.e. how do they return a consent form, instructing them to sign both copies of the consent form, etc.)]

Yours sincerely,

RESEARCHER NAME/S AND SIGNATURE/S

Appendix 2



CONSENT FORM – Family Members
Copy for Participant to Keep

TITLE OF PROJECT: Supported Playgroups in Schools

NAMES OF STAFF INVESTIGATORS:
DR KAREN MCLEAN AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR SUSAN EDWARDS

Consent (fill out below)

I..... (the participant) have read (or, where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that

- I will be invited to participate in two interviews: one at the beginning and one at the end of the project time;
- each audio-taped interview will last for approximately 30 minutes;
- I will be invited to complete a brief questionnaire at the end of the second interview;
- this questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes for me to complete;
- all information from the audio-taped interviews and questionnaire will be treated with the strictest confidentiality;
- I can request a copy of the results for my verification.

I agree to participate in this project, realising that I can withdraw my consent at any time. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way. I understand that the family members involved with the playgroup constitute a small group and there may be some possibility of identification through deduction.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:.....

SIGNATURE..... **DATE**.....

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHERS.  **DATE:**

