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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

School playgroups: Which features of provision matter?

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Abstract

This paper identifies the shared features of provision in exemplar school playgroups defined using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging relationships. Relationships promote capabilities amongst people, with play a known capability for advancing children's developmental and educational outcomes. By attending to the bonding and bridging relationships in each school playgroup, exemplar groups were identified and studied to reveal their shared features of provision. Six main features of provision were identified, including materials, facilitator, space, location, scheduling and health and safety. Awareness of these features may benefit school leaders and/or governance seeking to implement a school playgroup within their own community. Findings from this project suggest high-performing school playgroups can operate in areas of lower and higher socioeconomic status and/or parental education, and in regional and rural areas.

KEYWORDS
play, playgroups, school, social capital

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

High-performing school playgroups have not previously been identified for intensive analysis of their shared features of provision enabling caregiver and children's capabilities about play.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Using social capital theory, this paper defines high-performing school playgroups according to the strength of the bonding and bridging relationships occurring between caregivers, children and families. Six features of provision in high-performing school playgroups are identified, including materials, facilitator, space, location, scheduling and health and safety.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports the findings from an investigation conducted in Victoria, Australia, seeking to identify the shared features of provision in high-performing school playgroups. School playgroups are provided onsite by primary (elementary) schools and offer opportunities for children and their adult caregivers (e.g. kinship members, parents, guardians, extended family) to participate in shared play and socialisation with others. Families with children aged from birth to school entry can attend a school playgroup. In this investigation, high-performing school playgroups were defined using the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging relationships (Lin, 2017). Bonding relationships are typically formed with like members of a group (i.e. caregiver to caregiver) and bridging relationships with people outside of the group (i.e. caregiver to school staff). Social capital theory considers these relationships a resource for building capabilities (Lin, 2017). Capabilities are concerned with the capacity of people to participate fully in their lives (Nussbaum, 2011). In Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), children's access to play and adult-provided opportunities for play at home and in the community are known capabilities enabling children's learning and development (Whitebread et al., 2017). Research also shows that access to play in the early years benefits children's educational, social justice and economic outcomes well into adulthood (Fisher et al., 2020).

Playgroup participation of any type benefits children and adult family members. Children who attend playgroup have increased social and emotional developmental outcomes and a better transition to school than those who do not (Sincovich et al., 2020). Adult caregivers who participate in playgroup experience increased social connections and better mental health, with corresponding parenting efficacy (Deadman & McKenzie, 2020). However, while the research about the benefits of playgroups is clear, little is known about the specific features of provision associated with high-performing playgroups in practice. This is especially the situation for school playgroups, these being a relatively new form of playgroup compared to long-standing playgroup types, such as community or supported playgroups. A lack of research about the specific features of school playgroup provision is concerning, because it runs the risk of localised school investment in these groups not being optimised. The features of high-performing school playgroups have not previously been identified, primarily because little attention has been paid to defining what constitutes a high-performing school playgroup in the first

instance. This paper makes a new contribution to the research, defining high-performing playgroups in terms of the relationships occurring between children, families and schools as a resource for children's capabilities about play. Using this definition, high-performing school playgroups can therefore be established for intensive analysis of their shared features of provision. The research question informing this project was: *What are the shared features of provision in high-performing school playgroups characterised by high bonding and high bridging relationships?*

PLAY AS A CAPABILITY IN ECEC

Play is well established in ECEC as a capability for early learning and development (Whitebread et al., 2017). Children's opportunities for play, and access to play opportunities in the home and the community, are known to promote their learning and developmental outcomes (Lehrl et al., 2020), with consequent impacts on their education and employment opportunities into adulthood (Fisher et al., 2020). Recent research highlights that play is culturally adaptive, serving different purposes for children and families (Reid et al., 2019). However, within the playgroup literature, play is primarily understood as a mode of learning for young children. This understanding draws on Western European interpretations of play, including children's participation in activities such as construction play, outdoor play, socio-dramatic play, arts and crafts, and singing songs/rhymes. These activities are viewed as supporting children's literacy and numeracy learning, alongside their fine-motor, physical, social and language development. Attesting to the role of play as a capability is the body of work associated with the home learning environment (HLE) (Lehrl et al., 2020).

The HLE survey measures children's access to play items (e.g. blocks, puzzles, books, technologies, drawing materials), regular use of play items (e.g. daily, weekly, rarely), interactions during play with others (e.g. parents, siblings, friends, extended family) and participation in community activities (e.g. going to the library, attending religious groups, sports or other clubs) (Toth et al., 2020). HLE as a measure of play is suggestive of capabilities determining what children are able to achieve within their lives over time (Nussbaum, 2011). This is demonstrated by research with 900 German children, showing that the quality of HLE was predictive of children's early language and mathematical abilities, and associated with the recommended pathway for academic or vocational progression into secondary school made by children's sixth-grade teachers (Niklas & Schneider, 2017). Play as a capability also includes the socioeconomic and/or levels of parental education experienced by children, with some research suggesting that the quality of play experienced by children may be influenced by these factors (Milteer et al., 2012). However, research also shows that what caregivers do with their children is more important than who the caregivers are in socioeconomic or educational terms (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

PLAYGROUPS

Playgroups are historically considered a self-help movement, first emerging in the UK during the 1950s. These early playgroups were established by female caregivers as voluntary and not-for-profit groups in which children (aged from birth to school entry) and their parents would gather for shared play and socialisation. These groups were typically organised by parents responding to a lack of available and affordable ECEC, and later emerged in Australia during the 1970s for similar reasons. Finch (1984), writing in this journal some decades ago, argued that whilst evidencing a self-help initiative, playgroups themselves could not replicate the benefits of formal ECEC for young children. She argued that playgroup

parents did not have access to the material and cultural resources to adequately provide for play as a capability. She considered that relying only on playgroups as a predominant means of ECEC provision, especially for those identified at the time as 'working class', was an unfair expectation on parents, and unequitable for young children.

Despite this critique, playgroups have proved remarkably adaptable, evolving in their implementation over time to meet the needs of children and families of varying abilities, socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds from countries around the world, including Australia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, New Zealand and the USA (e.g. Williams et al., 2018). Many types of playgroups are now available internationally, including community playgroups, supported and therapeutic playgroups, transition playgroups and school playgroups. Community playgroups are operated by volunteer caregivers and held in civic spaces, such as local or church halls, parks and/or playgrounds (Fuller et al., 2019). Supported or therapeutic playgroups are usually offered by government and/or non-government family service providers. These groups are often led by a paid facilitator with the intention of supporting children and families experiencing vulnerabilities, such as intergenerational poverty, living with disability or facing drug addiction (Armstrong et al., 2019). Transition playgroups also have a paid facilitator and are intended to support children and caregivers to move from supported and/or therapeutic playgroups into community playgroups (Wright et al., 2019).

SCHOOL PLAYGROUPS

School playgroups are a newly emerging playgroup type compared to the historical prevalence of community, supported and transition playgroups. Their key point of distinction from existing playgroup types is that they are provided by local primary schools. Most school playgroups are initiated from within the school leadership on the basis that play is a recognised capability for learning in the early years (McLean et al., 2018). Children often go on to attend the school hosting the school playgroup, although this is not an expectation for participation. Because school playgroups are for children aged from birth to school entry, they can be accessed by children and families alongside other forms of ECEC, such as formal 4-year-old kindergarten, nursery or long day care. Many school playgroups are offered at no cost or low cost to families, with schools absorbing the expense of hosting the playgroup within their school budget or seeking external funding.

School playgroups are usually offered weekly, for up to 2 hours per session. Most school playgroups have a facilitator, typically a school staff member employed for this purpose, or a junior-school teacher undertaking the role. Children attending school playgroups participate in open-ended play or freely chosen outdoor activities; and may also engage in more structured activities, such as a communal snack time, completing arts and crafts, or shared group reading and singing. Caregivers attending school playgroups interact with other caregivers, discussing concerns about parenting and sharing information about community resources. They also connect with the facilitator whose activities in the school playgroup provide a framework for caregivers to understand their child's own play and learning.

The available research about school playgroups suggests that they are valued by both caregivers and school staff. Caregivers value the social connections school playgroups provide to other families and with the school more broadly (McLean et al., 2018). School staff appreciate that play affords capabilities for children's learning, and so view the school playgroup as an important opportunity for caregivers to play with their children (McLean et al., 2018). An Australian case study, following the decision of one school to implement a school playgroup, found that children who attended the playgroup evidenced increased behaviour regulation, concentration and learning satisfaction in their first year of school compared to those children who did not attend (Knaus et al., 2016). Most recently, school playgroups

have been adapted as a model for increasing the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) children and families in ECEC. The 'Kindilink' (Barblett et al., 2020) and 'Families as First Teachers' (Gapany et al., 2021) playgroups have been shown to increase the quality of relationships occurring between ATSI children, families and school communities, especially when Aboriginal Indigenous Education Officers are employed as facilitators.

FEATURES OF PLAYGROUPS

Studies investigating the features of playgroup provision are limited. Evangelou et al. (2013) investigated the core dimensions of playgroup associated with an initiative in England known as 'Room to Play'. Room to Play utilised a supported playgroup model offered to children and families on a drop-in basis within a local shopping centre. Evangelou et al. (2013) identified seven important dimensions of this model for supporting children and families, including: the location (e.g. shopping centre), space and time (accessibility of drop-in model), relationships and communication (e.g. with Room to Play staff); parent information brochures or posters (about children's play) and professional training and interpersonal skills of staff (for working with children and families). Building on this work, Armstrong et al. (2019) identified a series of 'active ingredients' similar in nature to the dimensions established by Evangelou et al. (2013). The Armstrong et al. (2019) study, conducted as a scoping review of the literature, confirmed three main ingredients central to the effective provision of playgroups, including: (1) affective involvement; (2) behavioural involvement; and (3) cognitive involvement. Affective involvement included caregivers building relationships with others, forming a sense of belonging and sharing information about parenting. Behavioural involvement involved parents having easy access to the playgroup, and the formation of a strong relationship between the facilitator and caregivers. Cognitive involvement referred to the regularity of playgroup attendance, the content of play activities at playgroup, community connections and opportunities for adult and child peer-to-peer socialisation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This project was informed by the social capital concepts of bonding and bridging relationships. Social capital refers to the range of knowledge, information and skills people are able to access via their relationships (Lin, 2017). The more social capital people hold, the more likely they are to advance their own capabilities. Capabilities refer to what people are 'able to be and do' in their own lives (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 21). Capabilities lead to functionings; these being the capacity of people to participate in society according to their full potential (Nussbaum, 2011). Play as capability is concerned with what children are 'able to be and do' (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 21), with play known to promote children's functionings in terms of enhanced learning and development (Whitebread et al., 2017) and increased education and employment opportunities into adulthood (Fisher et al., 2020).

Bonding relationships are formed amongst a group of like-minded people (i.e. caregiver to caregiver). Bridging relationships are formed with people outside of the like-minded group (i.e. caregiver to school staff) (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). Both relationships are important for the accrual of social capital-advancing capabilities. Bonding relationships ensure that existing knowledge circulates amongst a group. For example, caregivers in a school playgroup sharing information with each other for responding to children's tantrums. Bridging relationships expand the available information within the group by ensuring access to people with alternative forms of knowledge. For example, school staff supporting caregivers with adult–child interactions during play that promote children's oral language development. Bridging

relationships are not one way. People can learn from each other within and outside the group. Because school playgroups involve children, caregivers and school staff, bonding and bridging relationships are potentially evident in these settings (McLean et al., 2018). This project was predicated on the premise that school playgroups characterised by high bonding and high bridging relationships would enable capabilities for children's play (via HLE), and thus operate as high-performing school playgroups from within which their shared features of provision could be identified.

METHODOLOGY

This project was conducted using a light-touch intervention with caregivers and school staff attending school playgroups located in Victoria, Australia. Light-touch interventions are intended to minimise participant burden while providing insight into the extent to which an activity benefits children and families (e.g. Hackworth et al., 2017). In this study, a light-touch intervention was used to invite participant perspectives on the bonding and bridging relationships occurring within their school playgroup (including the HLE survey as a proxy for capabilities about play). In this manner, the research question was addressed by generating data directed towards confirming high-performing playgroups according to their bonding and bridging relationships (and associated HLE) for the purpose of identifying their shared features of provision.

Participants

Purposive maximum variation sampling was used (Suen et al., 2014). Purposive sampling seeks information-rich cases for project participation (i.e. school playgroups). Maximum variation sampling studies more than one subset of sample cases. In this study, school playgroups were sampled from metropolitan, regional and rural areas. Research suggests that living in a regional or rural area can be disadvantageous for children's learning and developmental outcomes (Milteer et al., 2012). Playgroups from these areas were therefore deliberately included to examine the extent to which school playgroups are protective against such disadvantage. School playgroups were defined as metropolitan, regional or rural according to Victorian Government (2021) definitions.

Within each area, school playgroups were randomly invited to participate in the project by the state-based Playgroup Association, aiming for 10 metropolitan playgroups and five playgroups per regional and rural area. This was achieved, although one rural and one metropolitan school playgroup later withdrew (the rural one for unspecified reasons and the metropolitan one due to COVID-19). In total, there were 18 school playgroups (four rural, five regional and nine metropolitan).

Given that socioeconomic status and parental education are also associated with children's learning and development outcomes (Milteer et al., 2012), the Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage (IRSD) and Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) were used to establish variation in socioeconomic status and parental education amongst participating school playgroups (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The IRSD captures socioeconomic disadvantage in geographic areas, with the lowest 10% of areas indicated as decile 1 and the highest 10% as decile 10. The IEO captures adult educational achievement (highest level of education from mid-secondary school through to postgraduate qualification) and occupation (unemployed, skill-based employment and/or upper management). The lowest 10% of areas for educational achievement and occupation are indicated by decile 1, and the highest by decile 10.

In this study, 11% of school playgroups were decile 1; 39% decile 2–3; 39% decile 5–6; and 11% were decile 7 for IRSD. For IEO, 39% of school playgroups were decile 1–3; 33% were decile 4–6; and 28% were decile 7–9 (Table 1).

On average, across all 18 school playgroups, five caregivers and two school staff participated at pre-intervention, and three caregivers and one school staff at post-intervention. The retention rate was 80% for caregivers and 90% for school staff. Caregivers included parents, kinship members, guardians and/or extended family. All caregivers were female, except for one male. School staff were predominantly paid facilitators or junior-school teachers. One school playgroup was facilitated by the school principal. Qualifications varied from Certificate through to Bachelor of Education. All except one school playgroup operated once per week, typically from 9.00–11.00 am. One school playgroup operated 4 days per week, with morning and afternoon sessions (9.00–11.00 am and 1.00–3.00 pm). All school staff were female, except for one male. Pseudonyms were used for all caregivers, school staff and schools.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee as the lead institution (Approval No. 2017-202H). All participants were provided with an explanatory statement and consent documentation. Participants were able to withdraw from the project at any time. School playgroups were provided with vouchers valued at AU$100 to purchase equipment and/or materials at study completion.

TABLE 1 Participating playgroups by area, IRSD and IEO deciles

Area	School	IRSD decile	IEO decile
Rural	Stephendale	2	3
	Brightwood	3	3
	Nambour	3	4
	Highbury	6	7
Regional	Mount Keema	1	1
	Bridgeburn	2	2
	Shelldon	2	4
	Kallum Valley	5	6
	Warmane	5	6
Metropolitan	Spring Gully	1	1
	Samberg Gardens	2	2
	Mimmia North	3	2
	Grevillea East	5	8
	Hearthend	6	6
	Norwood	6	8
	Straits Gully	6	8
	Taravan Park	7	9
	Croydonvale	7	5
Total	18	–	–

Intervention

The intervention involved caregivers and school staff participating in a workshop. The workshop was predicated on developmental work research (DWR) (Nuttall, 2013), in which data is generated from the perspective of participants with the intention of identifying aspects of their group activity that are working well and/or require change. Two iterations of the workshop were deployed. In the first, a formal 2-hour workshop was held with six school playgroups by the researchers. During the workshop, participants were invited to identify the strengths (e.g. *What do you like best?*) and challenges (e.g. *What do you think could be improved?*) of their respective school playgroups. Participants then viewed purpose-designed videos about bonding and bridging relationships created by the researchers. Following video viewing, participants were invited to map the strengths and challenges of their playgroups into a pre-prepared chart illustrating bonding (horizontal) and bridging (vertical) relationships, with these variously indicated as high or low in bonding and/or bridging (Figure 1). This mapping process is known in DWR as 'data mirroring' (Nuttall, 2013, p. 204) and provides opportunities for participants to reflect on their shared activity within the group.

Having completed the chart, participants and researchers discussed any potential improvements that could be made to the playgroup to further facilitate bonding and bridging relationships. This discussion was consistent with DWR, in which participant engagement with their own circumstances is promoted via research (i.e. identified features of provision according to bonding and bridging relationships) (Nuttall, 2013). The discussion was the final workshop activity. The first iteration of the workshop was later adjusted following feedback from the caregivers that it was overly demanding on their time and that caring for their children during the workshop was too difficult.

The second iteration of the workshop continued to follow the principles of DWR, but involved researchers attending the remaining 12 school playgroups in session. During these sessions, researchers invited caregivers and school staff into conversations about bonding and bridging. During these conversations, researchers used a small handheld whiteboard to illustrate the intersection between bonding and bridging relationships and invited participants to map any strengths and/or challenges they associated with their group onto the
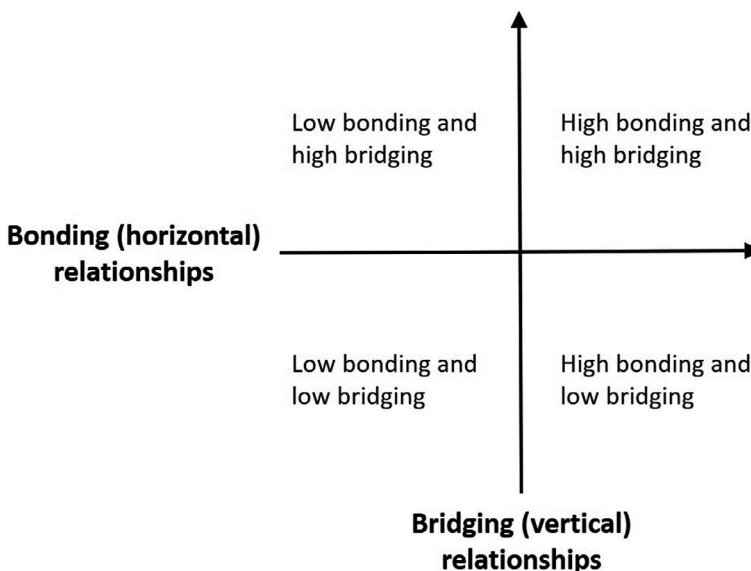
FIGURE 1   Mapping chart for bonding and bridging relationships

board (i.e. data mirroring). Researchers also invited participants to identify any improvements to their group during these mapping sessions (i.e. participant engagement). All in-situ workshops involved caregivers, school staff and researchers engaging with children for the duration of the visit. Links to the videos about bonding and bridging were emailed to playgroup facilities for distribution to caregivers. No further concerns were communicated by caregivers or school staff about difficulties in participation. Workshops were conducted over the space of one school term in each participating school playgroup.

Data generation

Mixed methods were used for data generation. Mixed methods involve sequencing qualitative and quantitative approaches to generate data directed towards realising new knowledge (Anguera et al., 2018). In this study, the qualitative component comprised interviews with participants for establishing bonding and bridging relationships and identifying shared features of provision. The quantitative aspect drew upon the HLE (Toth et al., 2020) survey as a proxy for capabilities about play.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted pre- and post-intervention with all caregivers and school staff. Interviews were completed by trained research assistants (by phone or face-to-face). Interview schedules for caregivers invited their perspectives on the school playgroup, including their reasons for attending, what they noticed about their child's play at the playgroup, what they thought their children were learning at the playgroup and their confidence in providing play opportunities for children at home. School staff interviews focused on the reason for instigating the school playgroup, how long the playgroup had been operating in the school, the value school staff attached to the playgroup for the school and participating children and caregivers, and the perceived role of play in children's learning prior to school commencement. Interview schedules were based on those previously used in an investigation concerning caregiver and school staff perspectives about school playgroups (McLean et al., 2014). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company adhering to a code of conduct in the ethical treatment of data.

HLE survey

The HLE survey was completed pre- and post-intervention by caregivers. The HLE is a recognised measure for the range, type and regularity of play and play materials available to children at home and in the community (Toth et al., 2020). In this study the questions focusing specifically on play items at home and regular use of play items at home were examined. For caregivers with English as a second language, or those living with limited literacies, the HLE was completed with the support of a research assistant (by phone or face-to-face).

Data analysis

Data was analysed in three stages: (1) establishing bonding and bridging relationships; (2) confirming exemplar school playgroups; and (3) identifying the shared features of provision in exemplar school playgroups (Figure 2).
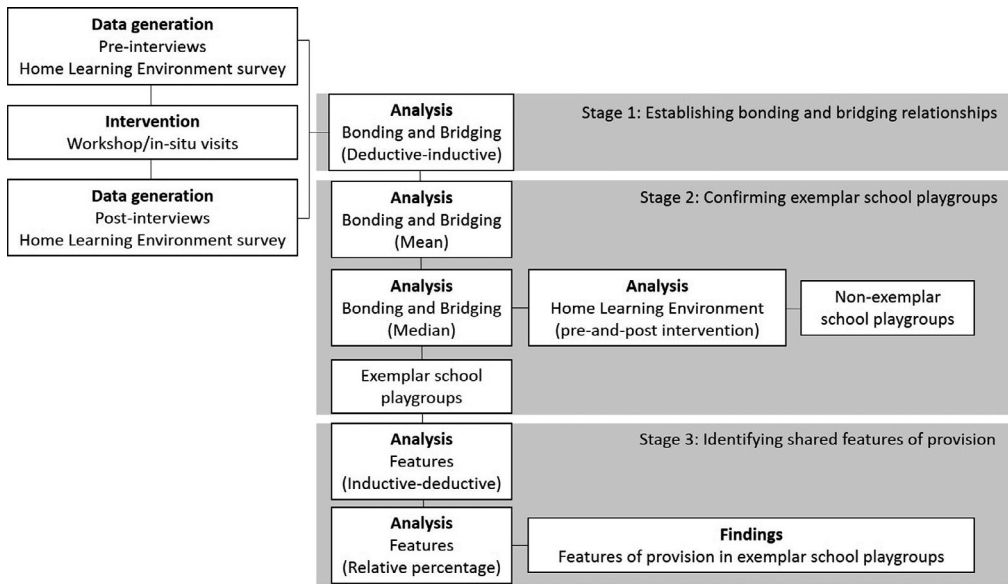
FIGURE 2 Data analysis in three stages

Stage 1: Establishing bonding and bridging relationships

All interview data for caregivers and school staff was deductively coded to either bonding or bridging as conceptual categories (Terry et al., 2017). Coding was conducted by Authors 1 and 3, working with two research assistants. Iterative rounds of coding for bonding and bridging were completed amongst the team until inter-rater reliability reached 90%. All data was then recoded to one of two categories, either bonding or bridging. Within these categories, data was inductively coded to identify relationship sub-types. Iterative rounds of coding were conducted until inter-rater reliability was achieved amongst the team at 90%, confirming four sub-types of bonding relationships and six sub-types of bridging relationships.

For bonding relationships, the sub-types were caregiver to caregiver, caregiver to children, children to children and global. For bridging relationships, the sub-types were caregivers to school staff, playgroup children to school staff, playgroup children to school children, caregivers to school children, caregivers to community organisations and global. A definition for each relationship sub-type was confirmed amongst the coding team and paired with illustrative data comprising an analytic codebook (see Table S1 in the online Supplementary Material). All data categorised as either bonding or bridging was deductively recoded for relationship sub-type as per the codebook.

Stage 2: Confirming exemplar school playgroups

Data coded to bonding and bridging sub-types for each school playgroup was abstracted from the main dataset. A frequency count for bonding and bridging sub-types within each school was conducted. Based on these counts, the mean bonding and bridging score for each school playgroup was calculated, and the median bonding (24.93) and bridging (3.94) score for all 18 school playgroups established.

School playgroups above the median for bonding and bridging relationships were confirmed as exemplar cases. Exemplar cases offer insight into phenomena in practice and are so defined according to their difference from non-exemplars (Goddiksen, 2015).

School playgroups with at least one mean below the median for bonding and bridging were identified as partial cases (e.g. low bonding and high bridging, or high bonding and low bridging); and any school playgroups below the median for bonding and bridging were classed as standard cases (e.g. low bonding and low bridging). From a total of 18 school playgroups, six were confirmed as exemplar cases; six partial cases and six standard cases (Table 2).

Partial and standard school playgroups were categorised as 'non-exemplars'. HLE scores for exemplar and non-exemplar school playgroups were considered for play items at home (e.g. dolls, playdough, dress-ups, sandpit, maths games, songs and rhymes, books, construction toys and outdoor toys) and regularity of play activities at home (e.g. hourly, daily, weekly). Given that the HLE operated as a proxy for play capabilities, the sample was not powered for effect size. Instead, two sample unequal variant t-tests (Mann, 2016) were conducted on play items at home and regularity of play pre- and post-intervention for exemplar and non-exemplar schools. This showed a significant difference between play items at home ($p = 0.0026$) and regularity of play ($p = 0.0076$) for exemplar school playgroups over non-exemplars at pre-test. Post-test, the difference for items at home ($p = 4.713$) and regularity of play ($p = 7.915$) between exemplar and non-exemplar school playgroups was not sustained. This analysis suggested a possible change in caregiver capabilities about play in non-exemplar school playgroups. Here, data mirroring as used in DWR promotes participant engagement with their own circumstances, and so indicates that capabilities about play may have been evident in exemplar school playgroups pre-intervention, thus confirming their selection for analysis of shared features.

TABLE 2 Exemplar school playgroups defined as high bonding and high bridging

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

Stage 3: Identifying shared features of exemplar school playgroups

The full interview sets of e*xemplar school playgroups only* were then inductively analysed following stages two to five of Clarke and Braun's (2014) approach to thematic analysis, including: generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes. One full cycle of stages two to five was enacted between team members (Authors 1–3 and one research assistant), achieving 80% reliability on seven main themes. These themes comprised the *shared features of provision* identified amongst the exemplar school playgroups. Definitions for each feature were paired with illustrative data in an analytic codebook (see Table S2 in the online Supplementary Material). All data was deductively recoded using the codebook, and frequency counts used to establish the relative percentage of each feature across all six school playgroups.

FINDINGS

Six exemplar school playgroups were above the median for bonding and bridging relationships. Of these exemplars, three were in decile 1–2 for IRSD and IEO (e.g. lower socioeconomic and parental education and employment) and three were in decile 5–8 for IRSD and IEO (e.g. higher socioeconomic and parental education and employment) (Table 3). One exemplar school playgroup was in a rural area, one regional and the remaining four in metropolitan areas.

Within the exemplar school playgroups, six shared features of provision were identified. By relative percentage, these were materials, facilitator, space, location, scheduling and health and safety (Table 4).

Materials

Materials were defined as the range of toys, equipment, craft resources and/or indoor and outdoor options available to support children's play and caregiver interactions with children. Caregivers valued materials for providing their children with access to opportunities they would not have at home (e.g. messy play, such as painting) and to a range of toys that were otherwise unaffordable (e.g. a toy rollercoaster). Caregivers were also alert to the educational potential of toys at playgroup, such as caregiver Aston (Croydonvale) who said: '*They have educational toys and jigsaws and there is a book corner set up for them to read*.' For school staff, materials were viewed as critical to extending children's home learning opportunities

TABLE 3 Exemplar school playgroups by area, IRSD and IEO

Playgroup in school	Bonding	Bridging	Area	Decile	
				IRSD	**IEO**
Spring Gully	44.20	4.83	Metropolitan	1	1
Highbury	30.00	6.25	Rural	6	7
Norwood	31.33	4.87	Metropolitan	6	8
Samberg Gardens	27.40	6.92	Metropolitan	2	2
Mount Keema	26.00	5.38	Regional	1	1
Croydonvale	22.20	4.0	Metropolitan	7	5
Median	24.93	3.94			

TABLE 4 Shared features of provision in exemplar school playgroups by relative percentage

	Materials	Facilitator	Space	Location	Scheduling	Health and safety
Spring Gully	43	56	12	3	5	0
Highbury	21	11	3	4	7	5
Norwood	55	29	6	15	6	4
Samberg Gardens	37	50	21	4	7	9
Mount Keema	17	6	6	5	5	6
Croydonvale	29	25	11	14	4	2
Relative percentage	38	31	11	9	6	5

and providing an opportunity to model play interactions with caregivers. For example, school staff Greta (Norwood) explained: 'When I do playdough, I will say [to caregivers], *"This is what you can do. You can maybe roll it and make the letter for your name. You can make cookies, pretend cookies. You can pretend to eat it."* So, I demonstrate activities.'

Facilitator

Facilitator referred to having a nominated person to manage, support and lead the playgroup, fostering relationships between caregivers, children and the school. The facilitator took on many roles, including setting up and packing away the play space, selecting materials, designing activities, managing administration tasks and paperwork, welcoming children and caregivers, connecting the school playgroup with the school community (e.g. organising for school children to read with the playgroup children) and alerting caregivers to local opportunities for play and learning (e.g. social support services, speech therapy, library reading sessions).

Facilitators were secured by various means. Some schools directed available school funding towards employing a facilitator, while others allocated the role within existing junior school or teacher aide responsibilities. In one playgroup, where funding was exceptionally tight, the principal herself took on the role, viewing the playgroup as critical to supporting the early learning needs of the community. Caregivers viewed the facilitator as critical to their sense of belonging within the playgroup and building their connections with other caregivers and the school more broadly. Caregiver Dinya (Spring Gully) explained: '*Maria* [facilitator] *is a really good bridge to the playgroup and at this school, Mums, they end up sending their kids here*.' School staff viewed the facilitator as a mechanism for coaching and supporting caregivers in understanding children's play. School staff Carolyn (Highbury) explained that she was able to model and illustrate play with caregivers '*through exploring, being able to try things that may or may not work out*'.

Space

Space was concerned with the onsite setting in which the school playgroup operated. Space was allocated according to the available infrastructure within each school. For example, two of the exemplar school playgroups were held in the school library when it was not in use by the school-aged children. The remaining four exemplar school playgroups had a dedicated

playgroup room, and all six playgroups had access to outdoor play spaces. Caregivers valued space as a provision made by the school. School staff Maria (Spring Gully) explained: '*Parents are very proud of our playgroup space.*' Outdoor space was also highlighted, such as by caregiver Marcia (Mount Keema): '*There is not much room for physical play in our house. But here there's a slide. My child can go outside in the garden.*' School staff viewed space relationally, arguing that provision of a room for the playgroup was part of making children and families feel welcome at the school. School staff Tonya (Croydonvale) believed caregivers '*should not feel constrained*' by the space allocated to the playgroup by the school.

Location

Location was concerned with accessibility to the school playgroup and building social connections with others. Accessibility was valued by caregivers, especially when the school was within walking distance of their homes. Caregiver Laura (Samberg Gardens) explained: '*It is really convenient for us because we live nearby, we don't have a car so we can just walk.*' Social connections were expressed by caregivers and school staff. Caregivers were alert to the relationships their children established with other children, families and school staff before starting school. They considered these relationships supportive of their children's later transition to school. Caregiver Bridget (Croydonvale) said of her son: '*It is brilliant because when he starts school next year, he will know all the teachers.*' Community connections were also viewed by school staff as strengthening family ties to the school and promoting familiarity with school staff and routines. School staff Greta (Norwood) suggested: '*The families are already familiar with how things run. They see children in the yard. It is almost like education for the parents before they enrol their children.*'

Scheduling

Scheduling referred to operating the school playgroup in a manner enabling participation. Within the exemplar school playgroups, the starting time was usually 9.00 am, coinciding with the school starting time for older children. Caregivers could drop their older children off at the school, and then make their way to the playgroup room or library. Most school playgroups finished by 11.00 or 11.30 am so that playgroup children and caregivers could go home in time for lunch and an afternoon rest before returning at the end of the school day for older children. Caregiver Emma (Norwood) viewed this positively: '*It ticks all the boxes. You can hit home and have a relaxed sort of afternoon.*' Within each playgroup session, caregivers were aware of a set routine. Lilla (Spring Gully) shared: '*There is a routine that we do, they play for an hour and then for half an hour they have to come and then sit down for a story.*' Most of the exemplar school playgroups operated once a week. The Highbury school playgroup provided four sessions per week.

Health and safety

Health and safety comprised the physical and emotional wellbeing of children and caregivers. This feature of the exemplar school playgroups was the only feature not jointly identified by caregivers and school staff, with only caregivers speaking of their children's physical safety and their own emotional security. For physical safety, caregivers referred to the age-appropriateness of materials and toys. Caregiver Nora (Highbury) said: '*Like using scissors, I don't let her use scissors at home because she might cut her hands. But in playgroup*

they have the safety ones.' The physical safety of the room also mattered. Caregiver Lilla (Spring Gully) said: '*Here it is safe. You have the fence and our playgroup room. The kids are safe here to play.*' Emotional security was also noted. Caregiver Juliana (Croydonvale) talked of the school playgroup providing an opportunity to show her child what a safe community was: '*I think it is really important to show children that this is a safe place.*' Caregiver Ange (Highbury) considered emotional safety important: '*You just have to have a good feeling about it. It is a safe environment, and the people are friendly, they seem friendly and trustworthy.*'

DISCUSSION

According to social capital theory, relationships act as a resource enabling access to information, knowledge and resources. Strong relationships benefit people because they enhance access to social capital in these forms. Burt (2017) explains the benefits of relationships using the notion of 'structural holes' (p. 34). Structural holes occur in communities with low bonding and low bridging relationships. The problem with structural holes is that they limit the capacity of people to share social capital. When this occurs, the range of capabilities relative to human functionings are reduced, so that people are not able to fully participate in their communities. However, structural holes may be addressed by paying direct attention to the features aligned with high bonding and high bridging relationships. Gittell and Vidal (1998) argue that identifying these features is significant because they serve the 'common good' (p. 7). When the features associated with high bonding and high bridging relationships are identified, they can be deliberately deployed within any given community for enabling capabilities.

In this study, the identified features evident in high-performing 'exemplar' school playgroups characterised by high bonding and high bridging relationships were materials, facilitator, space, location, scheduling and health and safety. These features were evident in school playgroups with high bonding and bridging relationships. Theoretically, the features in these school playgroups suggest capacity for enabling capabilities about play (Figure 3).

Enabling capabilities about play was evident in each of the seven features. For example, materials provided access to play (e.g. 'messy play' such as painting) or unaffordable resources (e.g. toy rollercoaster) children would not otherwise have at home. The facilitator connected caregivers with each other, and school staff members. School staff themselves were clear this role was directed towards helping caregivers play with their children. Providing space for the playgroup at school ensured caregivers and school staff had access to facilities for regular sessions. The location of the school enabled children and caregivers access to the playgroup, especially when within walking distance from home. Location was also perceived by caregivers and school staff as facilitating productive relationships for children within the school community before school commencement. Scheduling was an important feature, ensuring the playgroup operated at times that best suited the needs of caregivers with young children around those of their school-aged children. Health and safety as a feature promoted feelings of physical and emotional security amongst caregivers, meaning the school playgroup was a place *they wanted* to attend. In combination, the six features may be read as protective against the formation of structural holes, with caregivers and school staff actively engaged in play with children, sharing and modelling information about play and connecting with each other in a local, accessible and safe space. Engaging in play, sharing and modelling information and connecting with others are social activities evident in the research describing play as an important capability for children (e.g. Ginsburg, 2019).

The identified features in this project are largely consistent with those of previous research regarding the Room to Play model (Evangelou et al., 2013) and other playgroup types
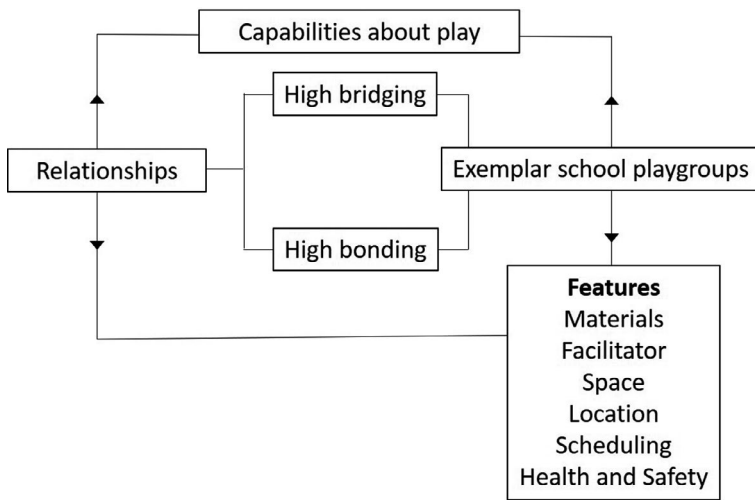
FIGURE 3 Features of provision in exemplar school playgroups relative to high bonding and bridging relationships enabling capabilities about play

(Armstrong et al., 2019). It appears that accessibility in terms of space, time and location is an important aspect of playgroup provision. Like the school playgroups, the Room to Play playgroup was offered at a location already frequented by families, reducing the demand on caregivers to get themselves and their children to yet another service. Likewise, the formation of strong relationships with playgroup facilitators appears decisive. This is of interest given that Finch (1984) argued so many years ago that parent-provided playgroups alone were inequitable as families were unlikely to have access to the range of professional knowledge about early learning held by qualified educators. From this perspective, caregivers are limited in their capabilities about play. However, from a social capital perspective, bonding and bridging relationships enacted within school playgroups are likely to foster parent capabilities about play. A triadic approach, involving children, families and educators, rather than only children and educators, is indicated. The ABCEDARIAN, HIPPY and High Scope initiatives have operated on this basis for a number of years (Fisher et al., 2020), as do more recent approaches in Australia, including Kindilink (Barblett et al., 2020) and Families as First Teachers (Gapany et al., 2021). The triadic potential of school playgroups is worthy of further attention, particularly given that these groups are likely accessible to children and families in communities in which schools are already operating.

It is of interest that three of the exemplar school playgroups were from the lowest IRSD and IEO, while the remaining three were from higher IRSD and IEO. Furthermore, of the six exemplars, one school playgroup was from a rural area, and one regional (with the remaining four metropolitan). Typically, lower socioeconomic status, reduced parental education and living in a regional or rural area is associated with increased social and educational disadvantage (Milteer et al., 2012). However, three of the most disadvantaged schools in this study delivered exemplar school playgroups. It may be that the identified features are protective against disadvantage, ensuring the bonding and bridging relationships in these school playgroups are sufficiently robust to support capabilities about play. This is a particularly interesting proposition, given that Siraj-Blatchford (2004) argued that it is what parents do with their children, rather than their socioeconomic and/or educational status, that matters most concerning the HLE. With at least three of the exemplar school playgroups from areas of higher IRSD and IEO, there may be some merit to this argument.

LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to consider in this study. First, the HLE was not powered for an effect size, instead comparing reported HLE by caregivers in exemplar and non-exemplar school playgroups. Further investigation is required to establish causality between high bonding and bridging relationships as resources for capabilities about play. Second, adapting the intervention meant some participants attended a workshop, while others engaged in situ with the researchers during their usual playgroup attendance. While this was a necessary adjustment to support caregiver participation in the project, it should be noted as a variation between participants. Finally, analysis identifying the features centred on the exemplar school playgroups. In further work, the non-exemplars could be examined to establish the presence or otherwise of features in school playgroups with low bonding and bridging relationships.

CONCLUSION

School playgroups have been under-researched in terms of their effective provision in practice. This study has identified six shared features of provision evident amongst high-performing school playgroups characterised by high bonding and bridging relationships: materials, facilitator, space, location, scheduling and health and safety. Attending to these features in practice may optimise investment in school playgroups, enabling caregiver capabilities about play. School playgroups capitalising on these features may be particularly advantageous for children and families living with socioeconomic, educational and/or geographic disadvantage.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT
Ethical approval was obtained from the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee as lead institution (Approval No. 2017-202H).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that supports the findings of this study is available on request from the corresponding author. The data is not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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