

Early Education



Volume 67 Spring / Summer 2021

- TLIF Round 5: The use of tools for reviewing shifts in practice and learning outcomes
- Reflections on the role of teachers in contemporary ECE: Pedagogy, leadership and engagement with fathers
- The past, present and future of rural playcentres
- ECE and COVID-emotional factors for teachers and leaders
- Supporting Associate Teachers across the years





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Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

Early Education welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
- Research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords.
- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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The experiences of rural Playcentres

Under-supported, undervalued and under attack

Elise James

Introduction

In rural settings, Playcentres provide valuable social support and relief from isolation, promoting a sense of family, community, and friendship. However, rural parents-as-educators are feeling the pressures of changes within the Playcentre Aotearoa governing body, and from the Ministry of Education, to the point where closures of rural centres are becoming a reality. Should rural Playcentres close, for some, the consequences are that their children lose out on an early education. This paper discusses the findings of a recent research project that investigated the beliefs, experiences and perceptions of rural Playcentre parents-as-educators, from the perspective of a rural Playcentre member. The study highlighted the need for greater attention to the role of rural Playcentres, their value to local communities, and the potential tragedy of closures resulting in complete loss of early education opportunities. In response to these findings, I argue that the role of Playcentre in rural Aotearoa is under-supported, undervalued, and under attack, and advocate for increased funding and policy commitments to ensure that the future of Playcentre as a unique early childhood education (ECE) offering is assured.

In the diverse landscape of early childhood education in New Zealand, parent-led services, including Playcentres, provide value for both

adults and children (Archard & Archard, 2016; Ma et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2006; Powell et al., 2005; Te One, 2010). Playcentre has the potential to positively change parents' attitudes towards parenting, increase their engagement in their children's learning, and increase their sense of self-esteem and confidence in their parenting ability (Mitchell et al., 2006; Powell et al., 2005). Particularly in rural settings, services like Playcentres provide valuable social support and relief from isolation, promoting a sense of local community and building social capital and connection (McShane et al., 2016; Powell et al., 2005; Statham & Brophy, 1991). Yet the Playcentre model is not without challenges. The too-intensive demands placed on parents as volunteers in the administration and management of parent-led ECE services, along with increasing marginalisation in government policy, is pushing Playcentres to adapt, at times in ways that are counter to the foundations of the approach, for example by hiring staff to alleviate some of the workload burden (Powell et al., 2005; Manning, 2018).

Thirty-three percent of all Playcentres are rural, and for many communities in New Zealand, Playcentre represents one of the only forms of ECE available and accessible to them (Playcentre Aotearoa, 2019). Yet, limited research has been conducted into the experiences of parents in Playcentre in the past decade, and no research has been conducted that focuses specifically on the experiences of rural parents. As part of a Professional Inquiry

master's degree course at Massey University, in 2020 I conducted an exploratory study that sought to investigate rural parents-as-educators' beliefs, experiences and perceptions about early childhood education provision in New Zealand. I found that rural New Zealand Playcentre families experience many of the same challenges as rural parents around the world, as well as other Playcentre parents in urban settings (James, 2020). However, rural families also described a number of unique strengths and opportunities offered by their access to Playcentre services, and articulated a high value for the contribution of Playcentre in rural contexts. Despite this, rural Playcentres in particular are increasingly under threat of closure, as parents identified issues with both Playcentre Aotearoa as a governing body, and insufficient funding from the Ministry of Education, as key challenges to their Playcentres' ongoing viability.

Playcentre as an institution has become increasingly marginalised by government policy decisions in recent years (Manning, 2018). The Early Childhood Education Taskforce's report in 2011 recommended an immediate focus on system quality and effective use of government spending, a better funding system, increased productivity by greater support for working parents, improved accountability, and supporting a highly regarded, professional, innovative sector (Early Childhood Education Taskforce [New Zealand], 2011). The report explicitly stated that with regard to funding, "other" services (for example, parent-led services) should qualify for some financial support, but should not be the main focus of the new system" (Early Childhood Education Taskforce [New Zealand], 2011, p. 76). Since then, the Ministry of Education's *He taonga te tamaiti/Every child a taonga: The Early Learning Action Plan 2019–2029* established the imperatives of early childhood education policy for the next ten years (Ministry of Education, 2019), yet barely acknowledges the existence of parent-led services. Co-designing a funding model with Playcentre is identified as one of the potential policy actions—an action that has not yet been

taken (Ministry of Education, 2019). Playcentre Aotearoa (2020) has asserted that it educates more than seven percent of New Zealand's pre-schoolers, on less than one percent of the government's funding for the early childhood education sector. There has been a trend of marginal funding increases to Playcentre, which are not in line with the rising costs of operations.

I am a rural Playcentre parent myself. I joined our rural Playcentre in 2018 with my then 10-month-old daughter, seeking a like-minded village of people who understood the importance of parents as first educators, but who also balanced work, study, and other similar commitments. Since then, our rural Playcentre has become a lifeline to our family: an endless stream of support, aroha and a place where we all feel we belong, in good times and in hard. In conducting this research, I was hoping to see if this sense of belonging was something that was experienced by other rural Playcentre parents; and if so, what could be done to "save" Playcentres from the trends of declining membership and rural centre closures.

Methodology

I conducted research in 2020 by purposefully targeting members of rural Playcentres. The study was conducted via an online survey, which was distributed to 96 Playcentres across New Zealand who met the definition of 'rural' as per Playcentre Aotearoa and the Ministry of Education. Fifty-four responses were received, spanning members from 31 different Playcentres across New Zealand.

All participants in the sample were female, and the majority (79%) identified as New Zealand European/Pākehā. Most respondents (85%) held positions of responsibility in their Playcentre. Twenty-two respondents (41%) held multiple roles of responsibility; some of these were complementary and overlapping (e.g. Health & Safety with Civil Defence), others meant layers of responsibility, accountability, and likely increased hours of work required (e.g. one person holding role responsibilities for

Centre President/Co-ordinator, Secretary, Education, Rosters, Enrolment, Health & Safety, Bi-Cultural, Te Whāriki, Fundraising, and Social/Wellbeing). The average length of time that a respondent had been attending their Playcentre was 4.89 years, with a median of four years and a mode of three years.

Access and resourcing

All participants in this research attend a rural Playcentre, and therefore have access to Playcentre as a rural early childhood education provider. Respondents were asked what other early childhood education services they have within their accessible/acceptable travel range. Forty-six respondents (85%) were able to name at least one other service in their area. However, for some respondents, if their Playcentre closed, this would leave them with no other option for early childhood education, as captured in the following comments.

- My children would receive no early childhood education.
- We would have to travel further for early childhood education, or not attend at all.
- Less early childhood education time as could not justify driving to the early childhood centres.

When asked about availability and access to ECE services, only a third of respondents felt that their area was “very well resourced” by a range of early childhood education service options. At the other end of the spectrum, 19 percent of survey respondents felt that their area was “very under resourced”. Such findings affirm that a lack of accessible options is a key challenge for many rural families in seeking to satisfy their early childhood education needs.

Respondents were asked to rank the most significant challenges that rural families experience in relation to early childhood education, including Playcentre. Regardless of whether respondents felt their early childhood education needs were well-met, adequately met, somewhat met or not met at all, the most

consistent and critical issue was identified as the distance families needed to travel to available early childhood education services.

Rural families were asked whether, in their opinion, they felt their children’s main early childhood education facility was sufficiently resourced, with consideration to finances, equipment and staffing, inviting comments about why/how. Forty-three percent of respondents did not feel that their main ECE setting was sufficiently resourced, with comments such as, “funding from the Ministry of Education is too low to adequately provide for the best outcomes for our tamariki”, reflecting the concerns rural families perceived. Others noted concerns related to volunteer or staffing challenges, being under-resourced, and the administration burden.

The value of Playcentre

I also sought to understand what rural families felt the value was, in attending a rural Playcentre. The most common themes emerging from the respondents were about connection and community, and parent and child learning, as captured in the following comments.

- Children learn alongside their whānau.
- Parents as first and best teachers of their tamariki.
- It’s for parents just as much as the children. It connects families not just children. And helps ya [sic] be better parents.

I asked about what families’ initial reasons were for joining a rural Playcentre—and why they have stayed. The most popular reason for joining Playcentre initially was for their child to meet and play with other children, followed by meeting other parents and caregivers. The most popular reason for staying at Playcentre now was both the friendships between children and the friendships with other adults, followed by the sense of community. The results for both joining and staying are presented in Figure 1.

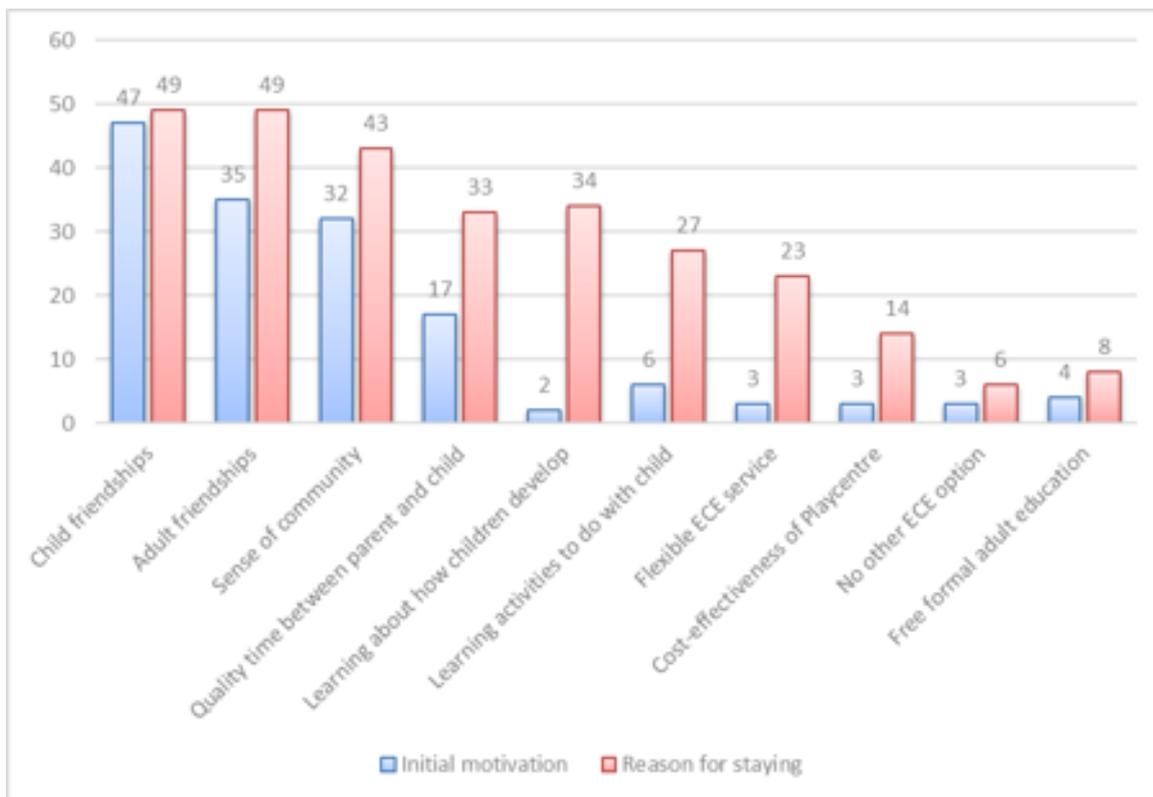


Figure 1. Motivation for joining and reasons for staying in Playcentre.

Respondents were asked what they felt they had gained from their participation and attendance in Playcentre and what challenges they had experienced in being part of their Playcentre. The most positive aspects—benefits that respondents felt they had gained from their attendance at Playcentre—included regular social interactions, having made friends, being part of a community, and gaining knowledge and skills. The most frequently reported negative aspects were the struggle to balance Playcentre with other commitments, that the education and volunteer roles were too time-consuming, and that the respondent feels overwhelmed when they think about Playcentre.

The positive experiences of rural parents in attending their Playcentre were many. These were most frequently associated with Playcentre being a family, whānau or village which is strongly supportive, followed by achievements in learning for parents themselves, better preparing them as parents as

first educators. The following quotes illustrate these points.

Playcentre as a family, whānau or village:

- Our Playcentre and its members are my family, it is my second home.
- Lifelong friendship for myself and my children. They are parents now, and they and I take our grandchildren.
- I barely knew my neighbours before starting at our Playcentre, now they are some of my closest friends. Hugely helpful for mental health being able to be a stay-at-home mum but still have regular interactions with other adults whilst having meaningful experiences with my own and other children.

Playcentre as a supportive environment:

- When we were made redundant and had to move out of the farm we were on at 8mo [sic] pregnant, the local people we had met through centre helped us find a temporary housing and a job for the new season so we only had to move down the

road instead of the huge hard across region moves we had previously had to do.

- When I had a baby, they organised meals to be dropped off at my house. When my baby hadn't slept, we went to Playcentre and I was allowed to sit with a cup of coffee, while my baby was passed around for cuddles and my other children got to play, they gave me the break I needed, as we have no family nearby.
- Playcentre is amazing!! I have one challenging child who went through a time of biting. I was fully supported and not judged. My child was supported until he grew out of it. This situation was dealt with in this way because we are all friends and love each other's children.

Playcentre as a place for education and learning:

- I have learnt a lot about child development, my own children and myself. Didn't think I would be interested in doing any coursework when I started, but then felt a whole new world opened up and now studying towards the C4 certificate.¹
- I have learnt loads becoming President. I've learnt just how much I can accomplish, I've worked on people skills, management skills, time management skills. I can run meetings, and I know what a quorum is now. I've recognised my strengths and weaknesses and haven't just been a "stay at home" mum all these years.
- It became clear during the nationwide Level 4 lockdown that I was far more confident in how to parent and educate my children at home than I would have been if I hadn't been attending Playcentre. With my now school aged child, I was more aware of his learning styles and interest.... I was also able to recognise that my 3yo [sic] was still

accessing educational opportunities at home, and I had more ideas about what to do with all three of my children while in lockdown due to my experiences at Playcentre.

Playcentre's impact

Respondents were asked "If your Playcentre closed down, what would be the impact on you and your family?" in order to help determine the value of Playcentre as an institution in rural settings. Responses highlighted a significant personal impact, with strong emotions of feeling "devastated" and sad about potential closures, as well as more practical implications for those families whose children who may no longer be able to access early childhood education. Respondents also identified potential impacts on the wider community as a whole, and the flow-on effect for rural schools, as highlighted in the following comments.

Personal impact:

- We would feel a significant loss in our lives.
- It would be devastating if our centre closed. My children love Playcentre and so do I.
- We would be really gutted—Playcentre is a really important part of our lives, we hugely value our Playcentre whānau. My kids would be very sad if we didn't go to Playcentre anymore.

No more early education for children:

- We probably wouldn't do any early childhood learning.
- My children would no longer go to an early childhood facility as we live too far from town to use another one.
- We wouldn't attend any early childhood education, as the other Playcentres/kindys [sic] are too far for reasonable travel.

¹ "The C4 certificate" tends to refer to Course 4 of the Playcentre Diploma in Early Childhood and Adult Education (Playcentre Practice); this course has been

replaced by the New Zealand Certificate in Early Childhood Education and Care, at the same level.

Communities' and rural schools' impact:

- It would be very sad for the community if it closed.
- We feed into our rural school, if we closed most members would just drop off in town, then their kids would end up in town schools.

Playcentre undoubtedly has value for rural families, as this study has demonstrated. However, the current status quo is unsustainable: families are turning away and feeling pushed out, as requirements intensify, and support dwindles. Given the multiple changes in government and policy, changes in Playcentre Aotearoa, changes to the Playcentre education programme, and changes in two to three generations of parents coming through Playcentre during that time, it is important to note that these issues remain persistent from previous literature and research conducted (for example, Powell et al., 2005) to the present day.

The future of Playcentre

Participants in this study had a number of suggestions and comments on how or what they would change about Playcentre. Here, the strongest themes emerging were for desired changes with how Playcentre is governed; followed by a desire for more funding and recognition from the Ministry of Education; and overall, less paperwork and training requirements, with a desire for more time available to spend with children. For example, suggested changes included:

- Less pressure from Ministry of Education to present/complete paperwork at a national early childhood education level, e.g., strategic plans, evaluations etc. Learning stories are fine but admin takes away from interactions with children.
- Remove or minimise our dependence on the national organisation. Ease pressure on centres with regards to qualified supervision numbers and recognise parents' attendance and input without the pressure to have to do Playcentre education.

- For regional/Playcentre to be more understanding. I feel that they have changed a lot of things to save money however the centres are wearing more costs because of it. I also feel that they forget we are volunteers and don't know what to ask and also that this is a job on top of our normal jobs/lives.
- The changes at Head Office were meant to make things easier for centres but a lot have actually made things harder. It feels like it is so hard to do anything now. The education programmes are too full on as well.

Conclusion

Rural Playcentres are a valuable feature of the early childhood education landscape in New Zealand, and without conscious actions to support and strengthen, they will close, and children will lose out on an early education. This outcome is untenable; access and participation in quality services is a key imperative in ECE policy. Short-term benefits to tamariki, whānau and communities are clear, while early childhood education also makes a significant long-term contribution to life-long successful outcomes (Wylie & Hodgen, 2007).

It is apparent that Playcentre plays an important role in the lives of the rural parent participants in this study. Its value as a place of community, support, friendship and learning is evident. However, rural parents-as-educators are feeling the pressures of changes within the Playcentre Aotearoa governing body, and from the Ministry of Education. In order for Playcentre to continue to be a viable place of support and learning in rural New Zealand, changes need to be made at the Playcentre Aotearoa level, in consultation with their members, to strike an appropriate balance for the requirements on volunteer time, versus the contributions rural centres make to their national governing body. At the same time, funding is an ongoing debate with the Ministry of Education; the manifestation of a co-designed funding model between the Ministry of Education and Playcentre may help to

address some of the issues raised in this research.

I argue for greater support from the government to Playcentre, particularly in rural areas, to be shown through an increase in funding, and strong policy commitments that assure the future of Playcentre as a unique ECE offering. Playcentre Aotearoa (2021) posits itself as a family organisation, honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi and celebrating people's uniqueness, valuing and affirming adults and strengthening whānau. And so, I also call for Playcentre Aotearoa to *listen* to the voices of its members, through platforms that its members prefer, rather than simply on its own terms.

From the practitioners, thought leaders and academics in the broader ECE sector, I call for greater attention to be given to the Playcentre model: prioritise examining its value and contribution towards quality holistic early education, including its support to strengthening families for the overall mana atua of children. The lack of research and evidence on the quality of Playcentre and its wider strengths and weaknesses holds the organisation and model itself back from further progress, with the flow-on effects of de-prioritisation and marginalisation in government policy and funding. There has been little research into the leadership and development opportunities for rural women in Playcentre, despite the rural Playcentre origins of several famous New Zealand leaders, including its first female prime minister. Overall, research into the quality of parent-led education in rural New Zealand is well overdue.

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