

The experiences of rural Playcentre parents in providing parent-led early childhood education in New Zealand.

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Playcentre is an important part of the landscape of early childhood education in New Zealand. It 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 abilities. Particularly in rural settings, Playcentres provide valuable social support and relief from isolation, promoting communities and building social capital. This article is based on research carried out with rural Playcentre parents-as-educators in 2020, highlighting the nexus between rurality and parent-led early childhood education: the common challenges, strengths, and opportunities (James, 2020). A survey of rural Playcentre parents from the Far North to Southland explored their beliefs, experiences and perceptions, reinforcing the important place of Playcentre in rural settings in reducing isolation, providing community, and developing friendships for both parents and children.

Introduction

"We need to provide, to all families who want it, a comprehensive educational support service which treats the parents of the new child as his [or her] first teachers" (White, 1981, p. 217).

This exploratory study sought to investigate rural parents-as-educators' beliefs, experiences and perceptions about early childhood education (ECE) provision in New Zealand, drawing from rural Playcentre members as the study sample. 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 (Playcentre Aotearoa, 2019). Limited research has been conducted into the experiences of parents in Playcentre in the past decade, with no studies that focus specifically on the experiences of rural parents.

Existing research on the experiences of Playcentre parents has tended to focus on urban contexts. ECE-focused research into the specific experiences of rural parents has been largely absent (Graham & Underwood, 2012). In order to understand and appropriately resource and support parent-led ECE, the body of knowledge on the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, impact and sustainability of the Playcentre model in the rural New Zealand context needs to be further developed. To this end, the purpose of this study was to explore parent perspectives in the intersection of the rural experience and the Playcentre experience.

This research provided insight into the experiences of rural Playcentre parents across a vast geographical area (Kaitiāia in the Far North, to Invercargill in Southland), to begin to address the existing literature gap. In this study, the definition of “rural” was aligned with Playcentre’s own, which is drawn from the Ministry of Education: either rural centres that have a population of between 300 and 999, or rural areas that have a maximum population of 299 (Playcentre Aotearoa, 2019).

Literature Review

By way of context, Playcentres run as parent cooperatives under the umbrella of the consolidated trust, Playcentre Aotearoa. Playcentre Aotearoa (2021a) has declared itself to be a family organisation which empowers adults and children to work, play, learn and grow together. As well as providing ECE programmes for children, Playcentre has provided educational programmes for parents and whānau (Playcentre Aotearoa, 2021b). These programmes have aimed to increase parents’ understanding of how children learn and develop, and can lead to formal qualifications (Playcentre Aotearoa, 2021b).

Research on parent-led ECE services has suggested that families value contribution to the assessment practices in ECE as a way of engaging in their children’s learning (Archard & Archard, 2016). There has been broad consensus in the literature that where parental education promotes an involvement in and understanding of children’s learning, it has a positive effect on encouraging parents to take an active role in that learning (McLean et al., 2017). Further, this engagement has had positive consequences for children: in learning, and in parents’ recognition of children’s rights and valuing of children’s voices (Archard & Archard, 2016; Ma et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2006; K. Powell et al., 2005; Te One, 2010).

Involvement in parent-led services, including Playcentre, has also been shown to have positive outcomes for parents, including an increase in self-confidence and confidence in parenting, and positive interactions with other parents in their wider communities, reducing social isolation (Mitchell et al., 2006; K. Powell et al., 2005). For Playcentre specifically, positive outcomes reflected in the literature include increased confidence, skills, knowledge and faith in their own abilities as parents involved in the planning, management, and running of their Playcentre. Participation in Playcentre was also aligned with perceptions of positive personal outcomes: an improvement in parenting abilities, a feeling of empowerment, and enhanced self-esteem. Developing friendships, interacting with other adults, and learning and participating more in local communities were also common themes emerging in the research (Mitchell et al., 2006; K. Powell et al., 2005).

Another strong theme in the Playcentre-focused literature is that there has been a too-intensive demand placed on parents as volunteers in the administration and management of parent-led ECE services. Playcentre parent educators have reported spending too much time on policy development, strategic planning, elected committee/office work, centre paperwork/administration, and setting up and cleaning up before and after each session (K. Powell et al., 2005). The difficulty in balancing part- or full-time work with Playcentre demands has presented a potential barrier to participation in parent-led services, and to possible realisation of the benefits such involvement may bring. Parents have expressed dissatisfaction at the training requirements, and the need to assume administrative responsibilities at Playcentre (K. Powell et al., 2005). Assessment, and the responsibilities associated with it, emerged as a common

challenge experienced by parents, as new parents may find the writing of learning stories “overwhelming” (Stover & de Vocht, 2019, p. 111). Parents have reported feeling uncomfortable with the professional responsibilities being laid on them, and being put off by teacher jargon, as well as feeling self-conscious of their ability to write (Stover & de Vocht, 2019). Research has also shown parents in Playcentre can be reticent to bring their own knowledge to their practice as parents-as-educators (Manning & Loveridge, 2009).

Playcentre has had the highest number of services in rural locations of any licensed ECE service in New Zealand (Mitchell et al., 2006). Playcentre has offered itself as a “village” for families, for parents to play with and educate their children (Playcentre Aotearoa, 2021c). Playcentre has also offered a contribution to the rural education landscape in the provision of parent education, and the ability to gain a qualification without location being a barrier (Playcentre Aotearoa, 2021b). Playcentre has provided teacher professional development in all locations, either online or in person.

Despite the substantial number of Playcentres operating in rural New Zealand, there has been a scarcity of research looking at the specific experiences of rural parents and children in Playcentre, or in any other parent-led service. Stover and de Vocht (2019) suggested further research is needed to identify more about how children’s learning is understood by Playcentre parents, but this research has not materialised.

Methodology

The question under investigation in this study was, “What are the experiences and perspectives of rural Playcentre families in providing parent-led education for their tamariki (children)?” Intentional sampling was employed in order to directly target 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. A survey instrument was designed, utilising a fixed mixed methods approach with both qualitative and quantitative questions, based on a convergent design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The quantitative data was used to produce descriptive statistics from which responses were then coded to identify themes, and compared to the quantitative findings. An inductive approach was used, in which there were no pre-set categorisations allowing the data to determine the emerging themes (Thomas, 2006). In becoming more familiar with the data, some interpretation of the sub-text of responses was required in order to sort the data into its most appropriate theme (Gray & Densten, 1998). Therefore, as in all qualitative research, the researcher’s interpretations have emerged in the context of their own experiences. The researcher is a current member of a rural Playcentre, with a teaching degree in ECE and a personal interest in models of ECE that place parents as first educators. In order to obtain ethics approval, members of the same rural Playcentre as the researcher were excluded from this study in order to minimise bias and maintain confidentiality.

Findings

Respondents

All 54 participants in the study were female, and the majority (79%, n=42) had identified as New Zealand European/Pākehā. Most respondents (85%, x=46) held positions of responsibility in their Playcentre: see Figure 1. 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/Coordinator, Secretary, Education, Rosters, Enrolment, Health & Safety, Bi-Cultural, Te Whāriki, Fundraising, and Social/Wellbeing).

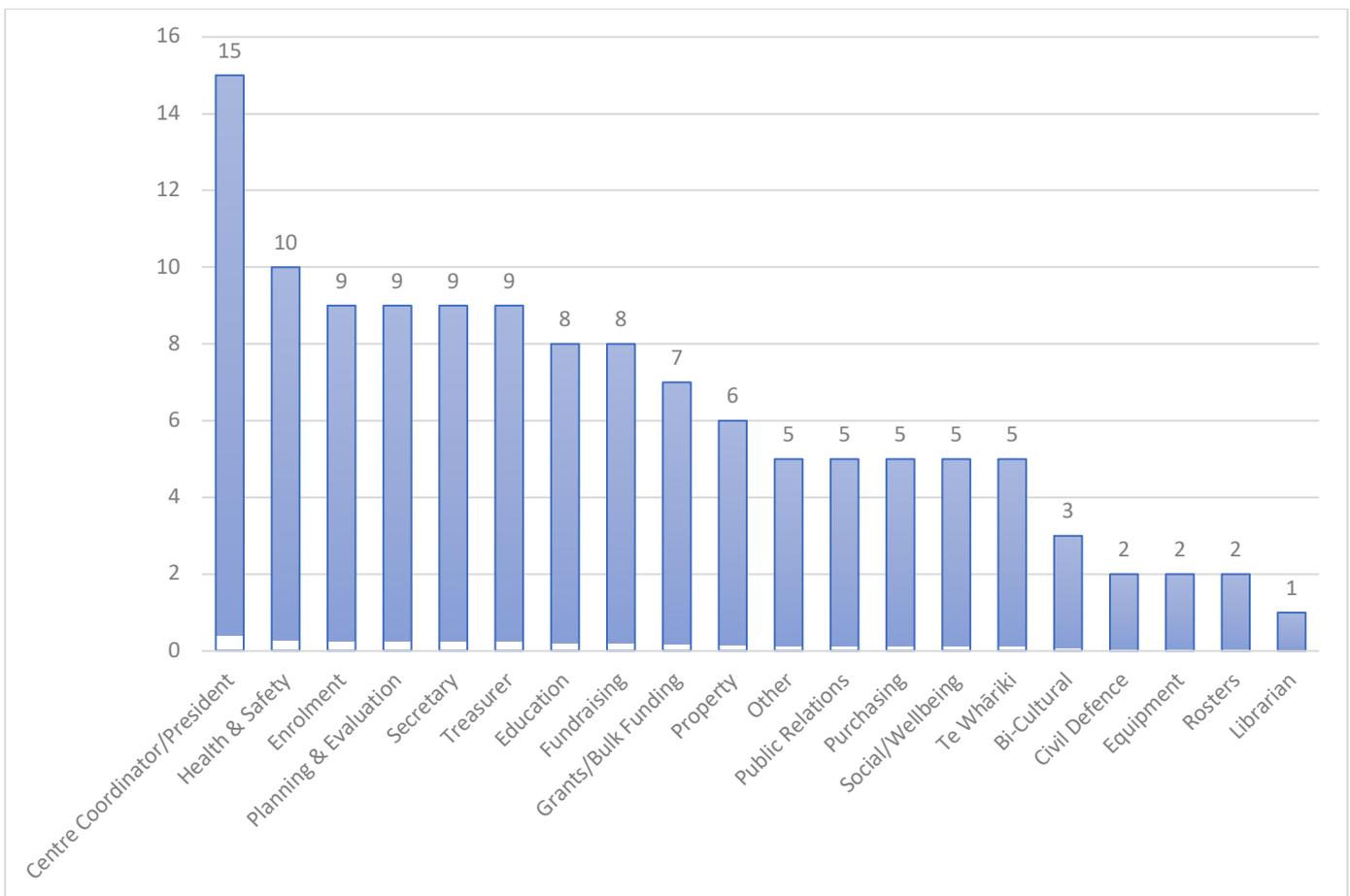


Figure 1: Respondents’ roles of responsibility in their rural Playcentres

Respondents were asked how long they had been attending their Playcentre, accounting for any time away. This was to attempt to determine the distribution of experience and history with Playcentre. This was asked in years; if under one year, the respondent was requested to enter “0”. 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. The distribution ran from less than one year (0), to 18 years: see Figure 2.

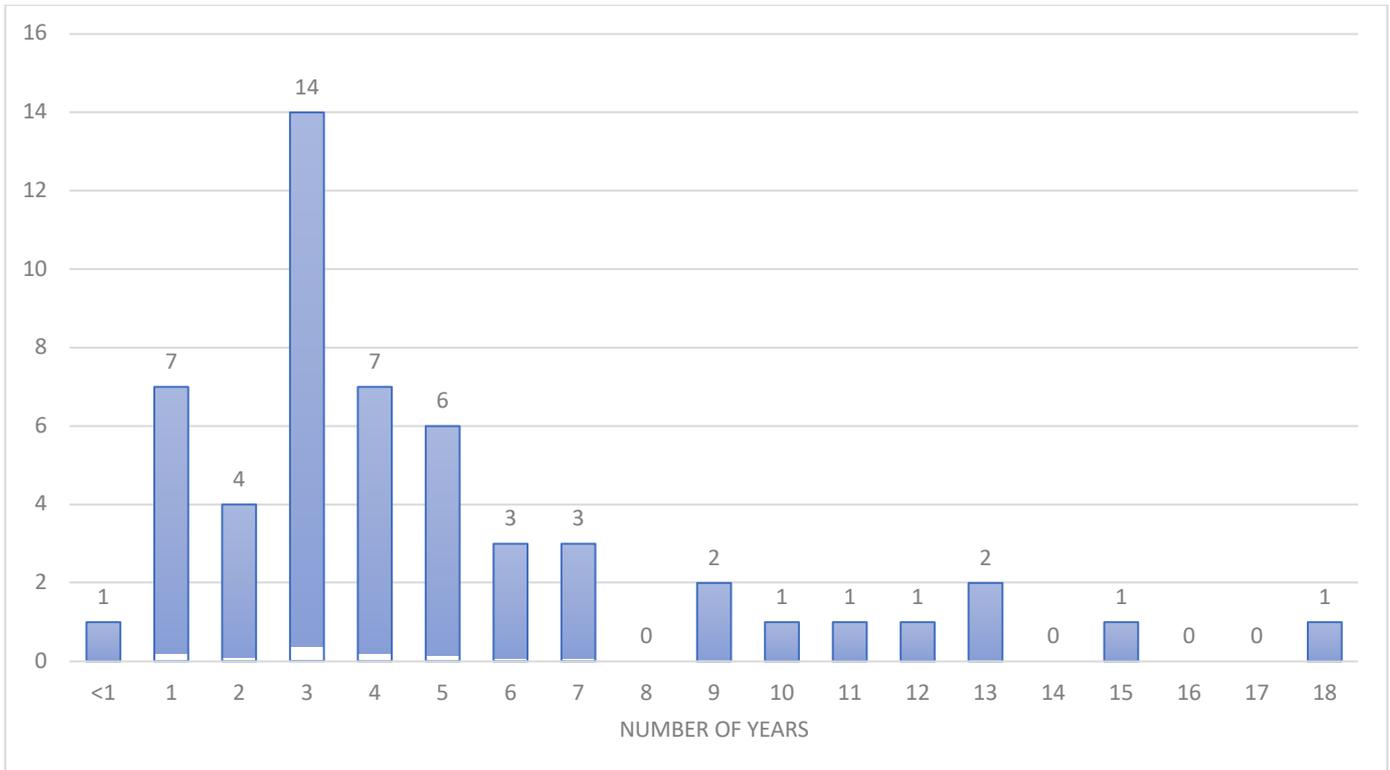


Figure 2: Respondents by length of time at Playcentre

Finally, respondents were asked what level of Playcentre adult education or other ECE education and training they had received, if any. This was to triangulate the respondent’s level of involvement: for example, a person may not hold a highly intensive role of responsibility in their Playcentre, but have been dedicating their available time to progressing steadily through the education programme instead; or, a person with a highly intensive role of responsibility may not have as much time available to study. All respondents answered this question: see Figure 3. While the Playcentre adult education programme requires New Zealand residency to be eligible, the four people who responded that they did not hold any education in this area and were not studying towards it, identified their ethnicities as New Zealand European/Pākehā (n=3) and as New Zealand European/Pākehā and New Zealand Māori (n=1); presumably, residency or citizenship is not a barrier for these respondents.

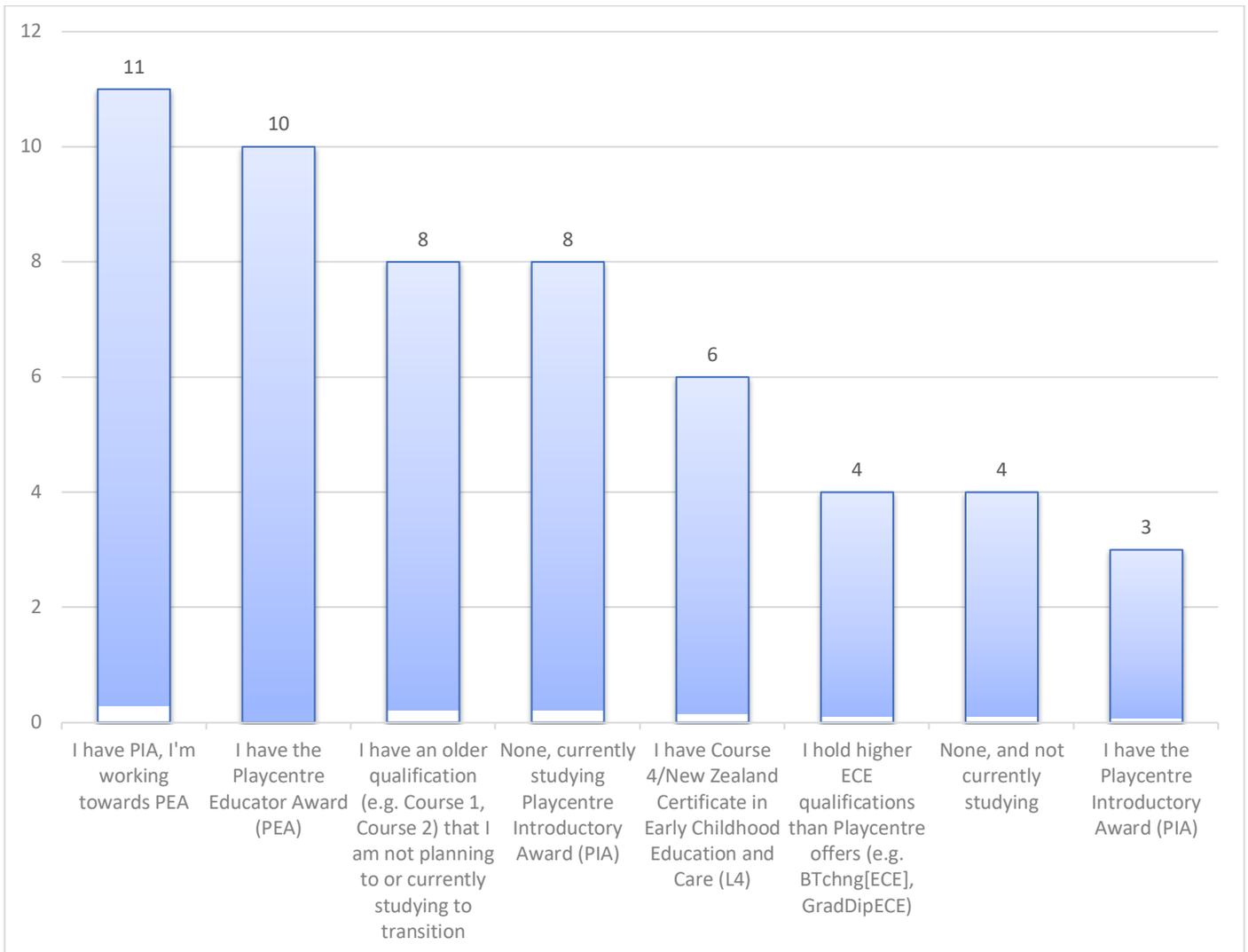


Figure 3: Levels of Playcentre education achieved by survey respondents

Of the Centre Coordinators/Presidents (n=15), one holds a higher qualification than Playcentre offers; two hold the highest Playcentre education level, Course 4/New Zealand Certificate in Early Childhood Education and Care (L4); three are not planning to transition their outdated education, which will have licensing implications from 2021; four hold the first award (Playcentre Introductory Award) and are working towards the next level (Playcentre Educator Award); and five hold Playcentre Educator Awards, indicating a mix of education amongst the highest responsibility office bearers.

The experiences of parents in rural ECE access

Research participants all have access to Playcentre as a rural ECE provider (100%). Forty-six respondents (85%) were able to name at least one other ECE service provider within their accessible/acceptable travel range. However, in the

absence of Playcentre – if their Playcentre was closed – some respondents stated that this would leave them with no other option for ECE.

Within the 85% of respondents, access to a kindergarten was the most common (67%, n=36), followed closely by qualified home-based services (65%, n=35). This was followed by privately owned for-profit centres (54%, n=29) and privately owned not-for-profit centres (33%, n=18).

Under a third of respondents (30%, n=16) felt that their area was “very well resourced” by a range of ECE service options. At the other end of the spectrum, 19% of survey respondents (n=10) felt that their area was “very under resourced” by a range of ECE service options: see Figure 4.

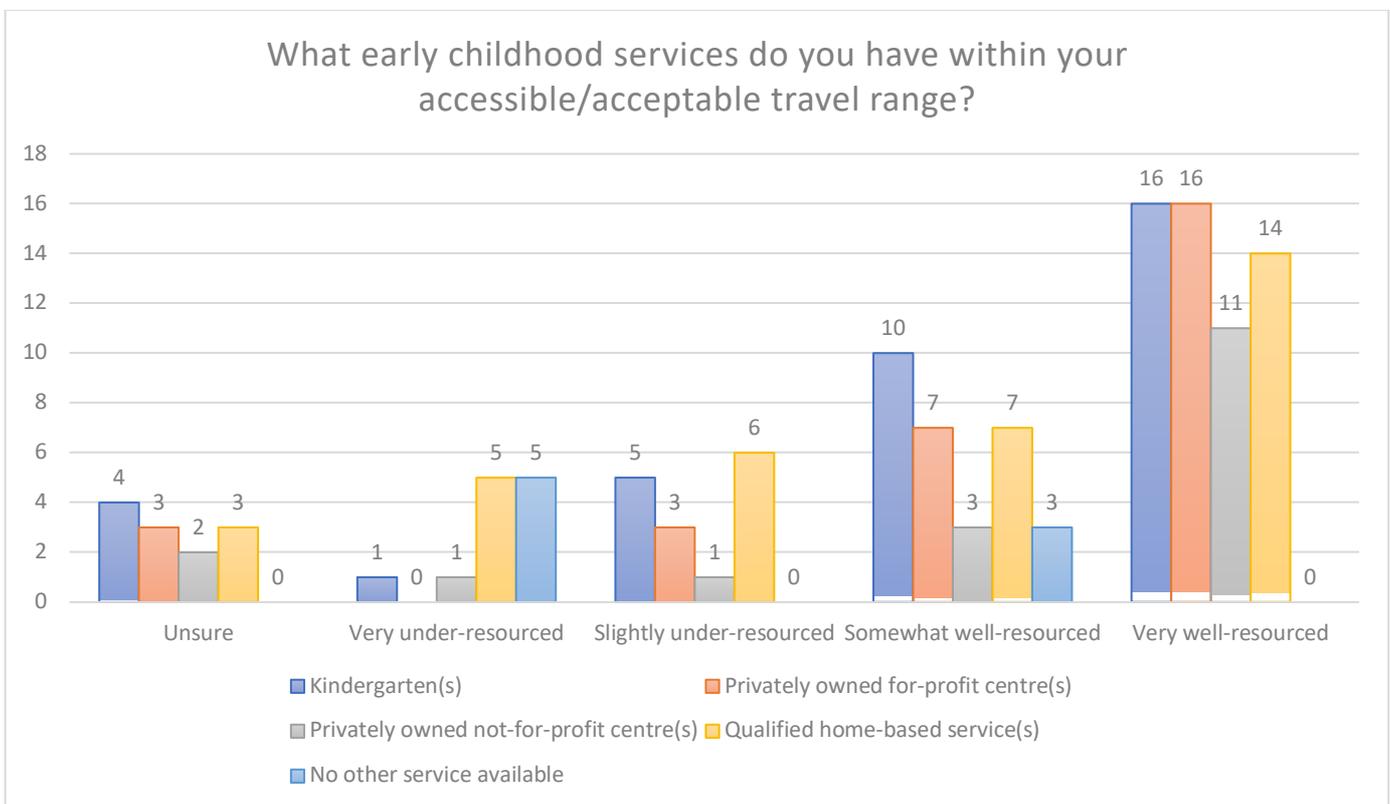


Figure 4: Rural access to ECE services

Respondents were asked to nominate their primary ECE service: this could mean their Playcentre, or it could mean another teacher-led service. Forty-five respondents (83%) named Playcentre as their first facility, compared to seven respondents (13%) for kindergarten and two respondents (4%) for privately owned for-profit centres. All respondents were asked how long they needed to travel each day for their child (or children) to access their primary ECE service. The most common distance was within 10 minutes’ travel time (43%, n=23), with most of these (n=22) being travel to Playcentre. Being within 20 minutes’ travel time was second-most common (33%, n=18), and while this was still majority accessing Playcentre (n=13), kindergartens were overrepresented. For those respondents that list their kindergarten as their primary facility (n=7), within 20 minutes’ travel time is the most common distance (57%, n=4),

compared with those who list Playcentre as their primary facility (n=45) tending more towards access within 10 minutes' travel time (49%, n=22) as the most frequent response. In ranking the most significant challenges that rural families experience in relation to ECE, across all respondents, the most pressing issue was consistent: the distance to travel to available ECE services was the greatest challenge.

Respondents were asked whether, in their opinion, they felt their children's primary ECE facility was sufficiently resourced. While one person did not respond, 56% of respondents (n=30) felt that their primary ECE facility was sufficiently resourced, while 43% (n=23) did not. Amongst those who answered "no," the most common theme emerging from the open-ended answers was about insufficient funding for the service. Other themes that arose were in volunteer or staffing challenges, being under-resourced, and the administration burden. Amongst those who answered "no" (n=23), 91% (n=21) consider Playcentre to be their primary ECE facility. Within those respondents who felt that yes, their primary ECE facility was sufficiently resourced (56%, n=30), respondents were more complimentary about the physical resources, as reflected in the following comments.

The children have access to a wide range of resources, and we purchase items regularly if we see a need.

Our PC [Playcentre] community is great at pitching in and making sure the kids have got everything they need.

Other themes that arose were in positive experiences of volunteering and/or staffing, and being financially stable or sufficiently funded. Amongst those who answered "yes" (n=30), 77% consider Playcentre to be their primary ECE facility.

Our centre is very well off. We have a large roll with a steady income from quality funding and fundraising.

We are fortunate to be in an OK state financially, we have an amazing facilitator, we have plenty of equipment and some really engaged families.

The experiences of parents in rural Playcentre attendance

Respondents were asked what their initial motivations were in choosing Playcentre as a rural parent, as well as their reasons for continuing to stay. The most common reasons for joining Playcentre initially was for their child to meet and play with other children, followed by meeting other parents and caregivers. The most common reasons for staying at Playcentre now was both the friendships between children and the friendships with other adults, followed by the sense of community.

Respondents were asked to describe what they felt they had gained from their participation and attendance in Playcentre as well as any challenges they had experienced in being part of their Playcentre. The most positive aspects – things that respondents felt they had gained from their attendance at Playcentre – were regular social interactions,

having made friends, being part of a community, and gaining knowledge and skills – some which were shown to be particularly relevant during COVID-19.

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 interests... 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.

The most frequent 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 issues with Playcentre's demands on volunteers and requirements for its education programme came through strongly from respondents. Education is a core part of Playcentre's delivery model, yet is struggling to remain fit-for-purpose for its rural members.

Feel we aren't well supported by federation, education programme not flexible enough and taken way too long to be offered online.

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.

I have struggled to fit the way that the education was presented (evenings for 8 weeks, 20min drive away) for me and my family. Hopefully online option will change that... I have also had negative interactions with the national Playcentre education team which put me off for a long time.

In order to help determine the value of Playcentre as an institution in rural settings, respondents were asked "If your Playcentre closed down, what would be the impact on you and your family? Fifty-three respondents answered, with the most common theme emerging being the personal impact, of feeling devastated and sad about a potential closure, followed by the impact on their children who may no longer receive an education at ECE level. Other themes to emerge were the impact on the community as a whole, and the flow-on effect for rural schools.

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.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of Playcentre as an institution in their communities from very important through to not at all important. The majority (85%, n=46) said that Playcentre is “very important,” with just seven respondents saying “somewhat important,” and one being unsure.

Key messages

Strengths and challenges of attending rural Playcentres

While education services in rural settings tend to have positive, close connections with families and communities (Bauch, 2011; Semke & Sheridan, 2012), rural deprivation remains a serious issue (M. A. Powell et al., 2013). The findings of this survey confirm both of these points: first, that parents value close connections and a sense of community in their ECE services, and second, that the challenges of distance and a lack of choice/overall variety and number of services present difficulties in access to early childhood provision.

As the sample for this study consisted of families currently engaged in a rural Playcentre, most of the strengths and challenges of rurality were framed in relation to the provision of parent-led ECE, through Playcentre. The literature establishes that services like Playcentre can contribute to the landscape of social care, provide social support, provide opportunities for a “break”, and provide a setting for learning and modelling of parent practices (McShane et al., 2016; Statham & Brophy, 1991). Social support and isolation were mentioned as challenging factors for respondents, with Playcentre playing an important role in addressing such concerns. The value placed on connections, socialisation, combating isolation and being part of a community was a strong, recurrent theme throughout this study. Study participants recognise and value the role that parent-led ECE can provide in socialisation for their rural children, as well as for themselves.

It is also important to consider that some respondents stated their children would not receive any ECE, if not for Playcentre, due to the challenges of their rural location and the difficulty in accessing a service. The consequences of children missing out on any form of early childhood education is well researched and documented. Travel distance is a frequently cited challenge for rural parents in the research, and has been strongly confirmed in the results of this study (Cherrington & Wansbrough, 2010; Graham & Underwood, 2012; Luo et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2006; M. A. Powell et al., 2013). In this study, most respondents travelled only up to 10 or 20 minutes to access their Playcentre: one of the strengths of Playcentre shown in this research is its ability to be easily accessed by rural parents, through a wide geographical spread.

Involvement in Playcentre has been correlated with parents experiencing increased confidence, skills, knowledge and faith in their own abilities (Mitchell et al., 2006; K. Powell et al., 2005). The findings of this study are consistent with the reviewed literature: survey respondents frequently stated they have gained new knowledge and skills as part of their involvement in their rural Playcentre. As in the research, which shows participation in Playcentre is well aligned with perception of positive personal outcomes, developing friendships and reducing social isolation (Mitchell et al., 2006; K. Powell et al., 2005), the findings of this study reinforce the importance placed on Playcentre in rural settings for reducing isolation, providing a community to be part of, and developing friendships at both child and adult levels.

Respondents in this study were generally positive about the role that parents can play as first teachers, and expressed enthusiasm for play-based learning, and parent involvement in documenting learning. As shown in the literature, participation in parent-led ECE services increases those parents' engagement in their children's learning, with positive overall effects for children (Archard & Archard, 2016; McLean et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2006; K. Powell et al., 2005; Te One, 2010). However, it is worthy to note that although respondents were generally positive about their involvement in their children's learning, there were multiple responses across areas that raised the challenge of excessive administrative and paperwork burdens. Findings in this study – that some rural Playcentre parents find the administration and management of parent-led ECE too intensive, and the education training requirements too excessive – are consistent with research dating for the last 15 years (K. Powell et al., 2005; Stover & de Vocht, 2019). 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.

Issues with the Playcentre adult education programme came out strongly in this study. While the literature establishes that parental education programmes tend to have a positive effect in promoting an involvement in and understanding of children's learning (McLean et al., 2017), and was even a motivator for joining and staying at Playcentre for some parents, many expressed frustration at the current education programme and a desire to see changes in it. It should be noted that the timing of this study (September 2020) follows some substantial changes already made to the Playcentre education programme.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the nexus between rurality and parent-led ECE: the common challenges, strengths, and opportunities for parent-led ECE provision in rural settings, and the perspectives of rural parents on parent-led ECE.

The study site for this research was rural Playcentres. The "typical" profile built from the survey respondents is a rural, female Pākehā who has been at Playcentre for around three years, has a significant volunteer role of responsibility in their centre, and has completed some of Playcentre's adult education programme. Despite diversity of locations across NZ, there was a lack of diversity shown in the gender and ethnicity characteristics of respondents. While this is generally typical of Playcentre membership (Playcentre Aotearoa, 2019), it is not a wholly accurate reflection. In addition, focusing on Playcentre families with a shorter history with Playcentre, or less involved members, may provide different perspectives of the rural Playcentre experience.

It is apparent from the findings that rural New Zealand Playcentre families experience many of the same challenges as rural parents around the world, and as other Playcentre parents in urban settings. However, many of the strengths of being both a Playcentre family and being rural appear to be as a result of the convergence of the two identities. Where rural isolation is a challenge, Playcentre provides a community to be part of. Where Playcentre education requirements are considered onerous, they provide an opportunity for formal adult education that can be otherwise unobtainable in rural settings.

Finally, the research was limited to the perspectives of parents, and did not seek to qualify the experiences of, or outcomes for, tamariki. The absence of due attention given from a range of stakeholders – including the Ministry of Education and the academic community – to Playcentre as a model for the delivery of early education has resulted in a stagnation of progress, reflected in the frustration felt by respondents to this study, and the lack of realisation of key items such as the Ministry’s co-funding model. Further research into the quality of parent-led education in rural New Zealand is well overdue.

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