

**EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE
OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HUBS FOR SUPPORTING
CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING IN
DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES:
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

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NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This report reviews the body of research that examines integrated early years services as 'neighbourhood hubs' located on or near primary school sites, especially in low socioeconomic areas of Western Australia. This review explores the extent to which research evidence supports the proposition that schools are logical and ideal 'hubs' for inter-linked, broadly based early childhood health and education services and that 'school communities' offer natural social contexts for the delivery of such services in Australia. Children who experience disadvantage tend to fall behind across various developmental and educational outcomes compared to their more advantaged peers. Factors contributing to socioeconomic disadvantage for young children may limit their access to basic primary healthcare or educational resources. Many of these factors are modifiable at the community or place level through strategies that facilitate connectedness among support services to address or mitigate the current inequity for young children associated with socioeconomic disadvantage. Such inequity can exact substantial social burdens and costs on health, education, and welfare budgets at the societal level. Researchers in the past decade have argued a strong case for investment in place-based approaches. Place-based approaches may offer significant long-term economic gain for nations as they strengthen opportunities for all families and their children. Neighbourhood hubs offer a locally tailored means of reaching families who need prompt, accessible and more effective support. However, many service systems have policies and guidelines that require certain needs-based thresholds to be reached before support may be provided. A neighbourhood hubs approach may present a suitable avenue for greater policy emphasis, especially in places with concentrations of disadvantage where families and parents face additional day-to-day challenges. Such a strategy can support families and children approaching a state of crisis whilst using less invasive, practical preventive and early intervention support services. The responsibility to step-up and lend families/parents accessible, trusting and appropriately tailored support through local hubs is greatest within these localities.



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ABSTRACT

The socio-spatial distribution of disadvantage in Australia has resulted in the concentration of families with fewer social and economic resources into poorly resourced communities. Children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage are at significantly greater risk of poor developmental, health, and educational outcomes, including disrupted social-emotional functioning and worse mental health than peers experiencing more favourable socio-economic circumstances. These inequities in children's outcomes are associated with complexities impacting their families' day-to-day lives. This report outlines evidence supporting the effectiveness of high-quality, integrated early childhood services and community programs located in local neighbourhood centres, and the additional benefits that may accrue from locating such centres on or close to primary school sites. Complementary evidence that localised integration of services can be especially beneficial for families and communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage is also discussed. The early years of a child's life are crucial for laying the foundation of their health, educational and developmental trajectory into adulthood. This report asserts that extended early years services provided at primary school sites can play an important role in connecting families with much-needed health, early learning and support services, particularly in disadvantaged settings. Such place-based responses align with a systems approach to early years policy, emphasising a need for interconnected neighbourhoods to support families in their efforts to scaffold children's early learning, development and wellbeing.

Keywords: Neighbourhood hubs, place-based approaches, disadvantaged settings, early years

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Introduction

This report provides a review of research about early years services being located on or near school sites, especially in low socioeconomic areas of Western Australia. It explores theoretical and empirical accounts of this approach in research literature, and the extent to which there is support for the proposition that schools are logical and ideal ‘hubs’ for inter-linked, broadly based early childhood health and education services (Arimura et al. 2011; Pascal, 2009) and that ‘school communities’ offer natural social contexts for the delivery of such services in Australian contexts.

The developmental focus of the paper is the period from conception to five years of age. This begins with the critical first 1000 days post-conception (Pentecost, 2018) and ends when most children commence full-time schooling. The rationale for this focus derives from neuroscience, which tells us that a substantial amount of brain development occurs in this period (Mustard, 2006; Nelson, Kendall, & Shields, 2014; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). It is the time in which children lay the foundations for the future life skills of communicating, getting along with others and the self-regulation and executive functioning skills of controlling and adapting behaviours, emotions and thought (Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Shonkoff, 2009).

The report outlines evidence in support of the effectiveness of high quality, integrated early childhood services and community programs located close to where people live (Arimura et al., 2011; Corter & Pelletier, 2010a; Patel and Corter, 2013). It also discusses complementary evidence that localized integration of services in this manner can be especially beneficial for families and communities with additional needs (Corter & Pelletier, 2010b; McLennan & Howitt, 2018; Moore, Kennedy, & McLoughlin, 2011; Pascal, 2009; Yau, 2009).

Australian children and the scope of disadvantage

According to Tayler, Peachey, and Healey (2018), the well-being of the 1.57 million Australian children under the age of five years (as of mid-2016) is broadly sound, however many have already experienced developmental risk or vulnerability at some point in their short lives. Those at greatest risk include children living in a low-income and/or single-parent families, and Indigenous children are over-represented.

McLachlan, Gilfillan, and Gordon (2013) referred to Australia’s lengthy period of post-1990s economic growth and rising average incomes, however noted that some in the community had been ‘left behind’.



They estimated that approximately five percent of Australians were experiencing multi-dimensional disadvantage spanning a lack of opportunity, social exclusion, and low income. A subset of this group was described as ‘deeply social excluded’ with those most over-represented in this category being single parents, Indigenous Australians, and people with low levels of formal education (McLachlan et al.). Factors cited that protect against deep, persistent disadvantage lie in the areas of education and employment.

It is well known that disadvantage is unequally distributed across Australian communities, with greater concentrations in some suburbs and regions. It is also known that the day-to-day circumstances of living within disadvantaged communities are likely to compound existing disadvantage, creating cycles of vulnerability and marginalisation that can persist across generations. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) noted that access to basic primary healthcare in the nation’s most disadvantaged areas is less than half of that in its least disadvantaged areas. Other aspects of life in more disadvantaged Australian communities include different behavioural risk factor profiles, including a higher prevalence of adult smoking, less breastfeeding and a lower likelihood of healthier diets (AIHW, 2020).

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the health of children and their parents in low socioeconomic areas and their risk of injury, disability and death compares unfavourably with those in higher socioeconomic areas (AIHW, 2020). Other unfavourable comparisons include substantial differences in teen birth rates (higher in areas of greater socioeconomic disadvantage and within disadvantaged households), and a greater likelihood of children having mental health disorders (particularly more common where family functioning is poor) (AIHW, 2020).

In terms of parenting practices in Australian homes, the AIHW (2020) refer to substantial differences in the prevalence of storytelling and reading in homes across different socioeconomic profiles: both become more common as relative advantage increases. They also report that the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable in a community is twice as high in the lowest socioeconomic areas compared with the highest socioeconomic areas.

An array of other indicators that reflect causes or consequences of deep disadvantage are also more common in low socioeconomic communities. This is important, because, as a recent analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) demonstrates, children’s educational progress and their emotional and behavioural wellbeing are the product of combinations of child, parent, school and community risks acting in concert across time (Christensen, Taylor, Hancock, & Zubrick, 2020).



Thus, seeking ways to ameliorate the combined effects of these risks via tailored neighbourhood-level solutions of the type discussed in this paper resonates with Christensen et al.'s (2020) conclusion that we should view children's development through a broader lens that extends beyond the individual to encompass family and neighbourhood characteristics. It follows that, in addition to measures of the developmental progress of children, account should be taken of the broader mix of elements that are at play within children's homes and communities, so that the question of child development is reframed as something including both individuals as well as their settings.

A background to neighbourhood early childhood hubs

Integrated early childhood hubs that deliver suites of health and education services and community programs are typically established in high needs communities as a strategy to increase life-course opportunities for local children. According to Harkavy, Hartley, Hodges, and Weeks (2016) the idea concept of hubs dates back to views espoused by John Dewey, the 19th century American philosopher and educator. Specifically, Dewey envisaged neighbourhood schools as places for comprehensive service provision, oriented to helping local communities and residents to solve the challenges they face in a changing world; the idea is not new.

This reflects a progressive characterisation of education and schooling that extends well beyond a focus on teaching children the 'three Rs'. It also usefully resonates with the most recent Education Goals for Young Australians with respect to a system that "promotes excellence and equity" and enables "all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community" (Education Council, 2019, p. 4).

The evidence base in support of integrated neighbourhood early childhood service hubs is growing, with theoretical and developing empirical support (Moore & Fry, 2011; Press, Sumsion, & Wong, 2013; Wong & Sumsion, 2013). This includes Australian evaluations and data on early childhood interventions that point to the effectiveness of community-wide endeavours in neighbourhood settings that focus on parent-carer capacity building with respect to home learning environments (Homel et al., 2006; Katz et al., 2010; Taylor, Jose, van de Lageweg, & Christensen 2017). Evidence suggests that sustained, community-level actions which seek to enhance early child development can lead to significant gains, especially for children with elevated risk of being developmentally vulnerable at school entry (Oakes, Maier, & Daniel, 2017).



The economic importance of optimising these gains early in life has been articulated by Heckman (2008) who makes a case for early years investments on the basis that they offer significant opportunity for individuals, and long-term economic returns for nations as a whole. Recently work by Lamb et al. (2020) has quantified the relevance of this to Australia's context, showing that gaps in education and key life outcomes are unusually wide in Australia, and that these gaps align with socioeconomic status.

Core elements of an effective early years system are already in place in many parts of Australia, due in part to reforms of the past decade (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). However, the focus of effort for reforms in recent decades has been to increase and improve formal service provision (which is laudable and within the remit of government agencies) with limited direct effort to influence the home learning environment (HLE). This is despite compelling evidence that the HLE is the strongest predictor of a child's long-term learning and development outcomes (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). Away from the world of services and practitioners, families and communities retain control of the main levers of influence over their children's early development, and they decide whether or not to engage with services and practitioners. The approach to providing support in these areas, partnering with families and communities to support their childrearing efforts has been patchy (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). This paper argues that this is a critical issue for greater policy emphasis, especially in low SES areas where families and parents tend to face additional day-to-day challenges. The responsibility to step-up and lend families/parents accessible, trusting and appropriately tailored support through local hubs is greatest within these localities.

One of the benefits of neighbourhood hubs is that they offer a locally-tailored means of reaching families who need support earlier and more effectively. Many current service systems are constrained from early intervention in this regard because they have policies and guidelines that require certain thresholds of need to be reached before support may be provided. These thresholds tend to be set at points when families are approaching a state of crisis. This near-crisis status is often preceded by missed opportunities for less invasive, practical preventive and early intervention support services.

Waiting until issues approach crisis also means that options for remediation narrow, predisposing heavy-handed interventions which create the potential for deeper 'scars' to be left on children and families, including the potential for enduring intergenerational problems. The avoidable cost of this approach to policy in Australia has been estimated to be \$15.2 billion annually (Teager, Fox, and Stafford, 2019).



The opportunity cost of inadequate engagement with children, families and communities during the early years of life was addressed in a recent study involving ‘big-data’ analysis of public expenditure on adults in New Zealand and Denmark (Richmond-Rakerd et al., 2020). This study looked at data on almost 1.7 million New Zealanders and 2.3 million Danes and identified a clear ‘line-of-sight’ between clusters of high impact problems in adulthood and three critical early life-course markers: developmental vulnerability prior to school entry; adolescent difficulties; and early school-departure.

Richmond-Rakerd et al. (2020) found that when comparisons are made in adulthood between the trajectories of ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ cohorts, the per-person public service costs (associated with elevated welfare, crime, and poor health for those who got an impoverished start in life were in the order of 20:1. This research shows that candidates for high later-life health and social service costs are identifiable early in life, long before they start school. When this is combined with evidence that those likely to experience disadvantage in the early years are much more likely to live in lower socioeconomic areas (Lamb et al., 2020) a strong argument is established for neighbourhood policies that more effectively support families in these communities with responsive and culturally secure early childhood and parenting support initiatives.

Among the advantages of locally tailored neighbourhood hubs is their capacity to by-pass some of the bureaucratic challenges often associated with larger services and centres which operate with attractive economies of scale but struggle to achieve the flexibility required to address access barriers for disadvantaged families. Kodner and Spreeuwenberg (2002) cite a suite of these challenges, including rigid institutional and professional cultures, arguing that responsiveness to client perspectives and priorities in larger organisations can easily become secondary concerns to operational efficiency. They suggest that the problems this can create are often normalised to the extent that they become invisible to those working in the centres and services. Changing such cultures is complex and costly, and efforts in this area often have limited success (Bardsley & Street, 2014; Evans, Baker, Berta, & Jan, 2014).

This characterisation of problems within the early years system in Western Australia was apparent in recent work undertaken by Telethon Kids Institute in the eastern metropolitan region of Perth (Saavedra et al., 2018). Many of the vulnerable local families (and service providers) Saavedra et al. spoke to indicated that they found the local early years system complex, with unclear entry points and access criteria, and that this complexity was a barrier to service usage despite any potential benefits it might offer.



This description aligns with the circumstances described through studies in other low-SES communities in which early years initiatives have been implemented. Among these is the work of Homel, Freiberg, Branch, and Le (2015) who observed that, in its traditional form, the early years system is incapable of building family capacity to support child development among those most in need. They formed the view that this was a product of the system giving primacy to organisational concerns like service efficiency over an orientation to building solid local relationships with marginalised families that facilitate and sustain engagement (but may undermine ‘efficiency’).

The following sections draw together different threads of scholarly literature related to families, neighbourhoods and communities with additional needs, charting evidence on the benefits of locating neighbourhood hubs on or near school sites.

Concepts and theory – why neighbourhoods matter

Through extensive review of the concept of ‘neighbourhood’ in research literature, Baffoe (2020) arrived at the view that there is significant merit in using neighbourhoods as the unit of change for social policies because they allow for tailored solutions in a specific identifiable locality. Neighbourhoods are characterised by localised networks of social interaction that lead to a sense of identity in residents with shared interest and belongingness relating to a specific space or place. It is not unusual for this dimension of ‘neighbourhood’ – as a shared spatial unit which “ties people together” (Tieken, 2020) – to be associated with schools within a rural community when those schools face closure. Goldfeld et al. (2017) reflect this when they refer to communities providing the relational structures, conditions and resources that allow families with young children to thrive, by shaping:

- access to resources;
- parent and service provider perceptions of distinct community groups and of the community collectively; and
- how communities work to achieve better collective outcomes.

This resonates with Baffoe (2020) who talks of the promise of neighbourhoods to offering tailored solutions to important societal issues. Among these are challenges of exclusion and inequality, particularly as they impact on the early development of children.

Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2003) offer three complementary models to explain potential ways in which neighbourhoods might influence childhood development. The first is a resource model, referencing the



range and capacity of family-related services and supports in a community. The second centres on relationships and ties, indicating families as a possible mechanism of neighbourhood effects, with variables of parental attributes, social networks, parenting style, and home environment. The third model suggests that neighbourhoods might influence development through broader social norms.

The collective quality of relationships in neighbourhood – and the impact of these relationships on families who make up the neighbourhood – is recognised in the literature as a core influence on human development, engaging children in ways that help define who they are, their potential and their place in the lives of others (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). The quality of relationships in neighbourhoods also affect self-reported well-being among adults (Appau, Churchill, & Farrell, 2019).

The particular importance of relationships in family and neighbourhood settings for child development aligns with the general tenets of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (Neal & Neal, 2013). The EST suggests that early development is a product of parent-mediated interactions between a child and his/her environment (McLachlan et al., 2013) which, according to Bronfenbrenner’s conception, includes a range of systems, including the home and neighbourhood (Neal & Neal, 2013).

Bronfenbrenner’s Theory is widely reflected in scholarly and policy thinking about societal wellbeing, including Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) descriptions which refer to community-wide qualities of wellbeing, rooted in underlying beliefs people have about obligation, reciprocity and philanthropy, community trust and the degree of participation in the community.

Beyond broad conceptual perspectives, the specific theoretical landscape pertaining to neighbourhood effects on early child development is congested. Galster (2012) refers to 15 possible causal pathways linking neighbourhood contexts to individual behaviour and health outcomes, organised as four broad mechanisms which echo the complementary three-model framework (above) developed by Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn(2003). The four mechanisms identified by Galster (2012) are:

1. social-interactive mechanisms (e.g. local norms, negative impacts on parents from more stressful environments that translate into impacts on the home environment);
2. social exposures that compromise wellbeing (e.g. violence);
3. geographical mechanisms (e.g. a lack of local employment or transport infrastructure); and
4. institutional mechanisms (e.g. ready availability of fast food, limited availability of GPs or childcare services).



A review of empirical work by Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002) spanning the mid-1990's through 2001 provides empirical support for the impact of many of these mechanisms on problem behaviours and health-related outcomes. It also reinforces the role of local relational dimensions such as informal social control and trust and reflects findings from analysis of Longitudinal Study of Australian Children data undertaken by Edwards and Bromfield (2010).

Like Galster (2012), Minh et al. (2017) refer to a range of possible causal factors linking neighbourhoods to child development. They cite mediators of neighbourhood effects on child development, including home environments and parenting styles, as well as mechanisms such as local safety, and collective efficacy in the neighbourhood. Likewise, Irwin, Siddiqi, and Hertzman (2007) point to the potential for local communities to offer families multiple potential forms of support, from tangible goods and services that assist with child rearing, to emotional connections that are instrumental in child and caregiver well-being. This accords with a recent, more time-bound description of neighbourhoods and regions by Galster and Sharkey (2017) which refers to them being critical in shaping life chances via subtle, persistent, cumulative long-term effects.

Almost all theoretical positions on neighbourhoods and child development give primacy to effects being mediated or moderated by home environments, especially, parent/caregiver behaviours and parent/carer-child relationships. In this context, some have suggested that a key part of the effect of poverty on development is that it can create adaptive mindsets in affected parents that are more focussed on the immediate than the longer-term (Adamkovic, Kačmár, Martončík, & Babincak, 2020). Others, have taken what seem more pragmatic and policy-relevant positions that emphasise differences in levels of access families have to various domains of resources that are relevant to child development (Zubrick, Williams, Silburn, & Vimpani, 2000).

Both perspectives interpret substantial potential for neighbourhood effects on early child development, with these primarily occurring through their indirect influence on parents, parenting behaviour and related investments in the home (Istanbul International Center for Private Sector Development, 2014; Pinquart & Kauser, 2018). This position is echoed by Irwin et al. (2007) who noted that family environments were the major sources of children's human contact and that they mediated most contact with the outside world.

Accordingly, both theory and evidence provide a strong justification for neighbourhood, place-based policy investments that support family endeavours in raising their children. Both also lend support for



situating these in low SES areas, where families are more likely to be experiencing multiple and inter-related forms of disadvantage. In this context, Pascal (2009) has made a persuasive case, based on the collective views of parents, practitioners, and researchers, that neighbourhood public schools are the best locations from which to offer tailored solutions to the challenges of inequality, particularly as they impact on the early development of children. A key factor contributing to this view is that there is a local primary school in every neighbourhood, and a near-universal sense of entitlement and ‘ownership’ of local public schools (Pascal, 2009). This augments schools’ capacity to foster a sense of belonging among all children and their families. In making this claim, however, Pascal also called for a transformation to make primary schools more open to their neighbourhoods so they can provide local families with a broader range of opportunities to foster their children’s development, commencing from the prenatal period and continuing, uninterrupted, through to school entry and beyond.

Early years policy – current settings

More than a decade ago, Irwin et al. (2007) identified a consensus among economists that early childhood investments were the most powerful a country could make, with returns of many times the original investment over the life course. In a more recent sequence of papers in the *Lancet* (Richter et al., 2017; Shonkoff, Radner, & Foote, 2017) the importance of early childhood investments was again noted, with the case being made for increased international efforts to ensure all nations have solid fabrics of well-funded, universal and integrated early childhood policies.

The policy justification for early years investment also derives from equity considerations. Almost two decades ago, Wilkinson and Marmot (2003) highlighted the social gradient running through society in which poorer socioeconomic circumstances adversely affected health across the life course: those further down the social ladder are at greater risk of serious illness and early death. In the context of the early years, this supported the concept of proportionate universalism whereby more assistance is directed to those with additional needs, commencing with actions before first pregnancies and running throughout infancy to prevent risks of disease and malnutrition and to optimise parent–child relationships from birth.

Reflecting the above, scholars and policy thinkers in Australia have interpreted the key messages from the extant early years evidence and established a range of innovations in early years service delivery. In Western Australia, this has included universally offered postnatal parent groups; co-ordinated support and intensive home visiting for vulnerable families; the establishment of Child and Parent Centres on school sites in low SES areas; the introduction of KindiLink supported playgroups for Aboriginal and Torres



Strait Islander children; and the introduction of Early Years Networks to coordinate and develop local responses to child development needs across the State.

Notwithstanding the effort and investment that has been made in Australia, gaps remain in the system insofar as it is experienced by families with the greatest needs. This shortcoming is not unique to Australia, with the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2020) recently calling for a new era in early childhood policy. A core element of the solution proposed by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child was the provision of greater local area and family specific flexibility to find fit-for-purpose solutions to early childhood adversity, with an emphasis on creating opportunities for:

- improved quality of interactions between young children and their caregivers;
- removing sources of family stress via economic and other resource supports; and
- strengthening both adult and child core life skills.

As Pascal (2009) has argued, public primary schools are ideal locations for progressing these reforms and this is reflected in the transformational approach being taken under the banner of the *EarlyOn* reform strategy within the Canadian province of Ontario. Much of the National Scientific Council's suggested direction with early years policy has also been reflected in the policy rhetoric of Australian governments of recent decades including the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019). However, while policy consensus has emerged in Australia about the importance of addressing early childhood vulnerability and the early learning goals to be achieved (COAG, 2019), an undercurrent of persistent policy intransigence has stifled substantial reform (Lamb et al., 2020).

The reasons for this intransigence are complex. Halfon, Russ, Oberklaid, Bertrand, and Eisenstadt (2009) suggest that in part it may be cultural in that intervention in the home circumstances of early child rearing remains something that is beyond the remit of governments. They also refer to early years programs tending to a deficit model, with marginal funding, and operating within a maze of local, state, and national funding streams, with little communication or coordination across service sectors.

Other early years policy challenges evident in Australian, especially in the context of addressing family vulnerability, are that the inter-connected nature of factors that influence children's early development has not been adequately considered. Rather than simply expanding access to programs and services, it may be more effective for policy to address and shape the broader pattern of how things are done, giving more emphasis to the quality of the links that run through and between families and service providers. France, Freiberg, and Homel (2010) have argued from this perspective, pointing to the need for a new



interdisciplinary preventive enterprise, where a combination of family, services and access pathways facilitates opportunities for better outcomes.

According to Homel, Freiberg, and Branch (2007), a significant barrier to achieving such an approach relates to existing ‘siloes’ organisational structures and the influence this has on models of service delivery for those who have more complex needs. Their view is that siloes encourage blinkered perspectives taken from organisational standpoints rather than being adequately informed by the lived experiences and circumstances of families. According to Freiberg, Homel, and Branch (2010) one of the causes of this problem is that organisations often lack the skills to discern better ways of working with families in vulnerable communities, which are often characterised by significant diversity.

Notwithstanding the challenges involved, Moore’s (2012) has advocated a more proactive approach to help shape Australia’s child-rearing environments and that outcomes for families and children in our myriad community settings are not left open to chance.

The local relevance of the previous points has been highlighted by recent Western Australian work undertaken in Midland by Telethon Kids Institute between 2017-19. This work included a quantification of local early years family and child support programs set against consultations with vulnerable families on service utilisation in their community. The study found low levels of service and program utilisation use despite widespread local availability (Saavedra et al., 2018). An earlier study by Telethon Kids Institute that also focussed on relatively disadvantaged communities in Western Australia also shed light on some of the issues at play (Clark, Breen, Skoss, Donnelly, & Jackiewicz, 2016). It found that the issue was not early years service supply, reflecting findings from New Zealand on disadvantaged neighbourhoods in New Zealand (Pearce, Witten, Hiscock, & Blakely, 2007). Rather, the cause of low levels of early years service use in poorer neighbourhoods and by local disadvantaged families in particular more likely arises from low levels of parental agency and a lack of awareness of what services are available or that might be useful for family wellbeing and child development.

In the context of parental agency and awareness, Saavedra et al., (2018) found that parents with lower levels of education who reside in more disadvantaged areas accessed substantially fewer of one particular category of services, i.e.: services oriented to developmental advancement such as play groups and ‘Story Time’ which foreground dual-generational engagement. Paradoxically, several empirical studies have found that accessing these types of services protect against having a low intelligence-quotient (IQ) score (Leventhal et al. 2000) or developmental vulnerability (Sincovich, Harman-Smith, Gregory & Brinikman,



2020) at the time of school entry. As Pascal (2009) has suggested, this prompts consideration of locating more of these services on neighbourhood school sites where their potential benefits for child development can be made more explicit for families and where strong relational connections can be built between local staff and families to overcome potential issues related to a lack of parental agency.

Like others, Leventhal et al. (2000) argued for a such a change of focus within the early years sector, emphasising that support be proactively provided to new parents in disadvantaged areas to help them establish regular patterns of service-use. A critical point they made was that the window for establishing proactive patterns of use were open only briefly in the days and weeks after someone becomes a parent for the first time. This again makes the case for neighbourhood hubs to be established in disadvantaged areas on local primary school sites because they are typically within ‘pram-pushing’ distance in most neighbourhoods.

This position is supported by Robson (2006) who undertook research in the UK in the context of early years centres. It also influenced the concept-design for Doveton College, located in a low-SES and culturally diverse outer-suburb of Melbourne, which offers an integrated suite of early learning, playgroup and further education opportunities for families and children on the site of the local public primary school (McMahon, 2017). As Byron (2010) has argued, there was a strong justification for neighbourhood approaches to engage families experiencing multiple, inter-related forms of disadvantage and to offer locally integrated and holistic services and supports with close links to local primary schools.

While empirical evidence about the specific models best suited for early years services in different communities continues to be progressed, the broad concept of locating early years hubs on school sites in low SES communities has solid and growing support. Among this is evaluation findings of Western Australia’s Child and Parent Centres (CPCs) (Shelby Consulting, 2017) which are now located on 22 public primary school sites in low SES areas of the State. Parents surveyed for the CPC evaluation consistently agreed that locating the centre on the local primary school site made it easy to find and easy to access.

The Queensland Pathways to Prevention model, a school-community-based family support program with a highly relational two-generation model of parent and child intervention, also demonstrated positive impacts on child behaviour that persisted across most of the primary school years (Homel et al., 2015). Notably, evaluation of this model found the most powerful predictor of improved child behaviour was parental participation in family support and that the strongest impacts were found among parents with low levels of initial efficacy and relatively light involvement with the Pathways intervention service. Thus,



it seems, neighbourhood early years prevention strategies need not be excessively prolonged or expensive to be beneficial. This aligns with the strong association identified by Sincovich, Harman-Smith and Brinkman (2019) between playgroup participation and reduced developmental vulnerability evident in Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data. Their quantitative analysis, adjusted for background characteristics, found that children who did not attend playgroup were 1.71 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable on the AEDC at school entry. Playgroups are a low-cost, two-generational early learning opportunity for children and offer an entry-point service option that most schools can accommodate on-site.

Marmot (2020) discussed findings from an evaluation of Sure Start Centres in the United Kingdom, which were similarly oriented to community based, relational, two-generation programs and services. He concluded that the greatest benefits are found among the most disadvantaged children and families. A similar picture is painted in descriptions of the Canadian experience with *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* (BBBF) and *Toronto First Duty* (TFD) (Corter & Pelletier, 2010b).

Notably, the Canadian experience (Corter & Pelletier, 2010b) has strongly encouraged primary schools as preferred neighbourhood settings for early years services. Reviewing the evidence from 143 studies, Maier, Daniel, Oakes, and Lam (2017) also noted the particular suitability of schools in low SES neighbourhoods for these services.

To synthesise, therefore, neighbourhood hubs located on or near school sites have an important role in early years policy, most particularly in low-SES areas. The literature suggests that much of their potential lies in their capacity to foster connection with and between disadvantaged families so that what Nettles et al. (2008) refers to as the factors predicting early school success are better established prior to children's school commencement. The idea of local hubs resonates with the interconnected nature of neighbourhoods and homes, which encourage relational, flexible responses that are capable of partnering with families in their efforts to scaffold their children's development and learning.

Conclusions

This paper examined research literature related to high quality, integrated early childhood services and community programs being provided through neighbourhood 'hubs' located on primary school sites, most especially targeting disadvantaged families and communities. The paper linked theory, concepts and evidence in relation to neighbourhoods and outlined their role in influencing child development



outcomes. It pointed to the general rationale for such endeavours including evidence from neuroscience, which tells us that a substantial amount of brain development occurs in the period prior to entry to school; between conception and the age of five years.

While much is already done in Western Australia to promote children's development across households, schools and communities, the paper indicated that there was potential to significantly improve life course opportunities for children via neighbourhood early years initiatives based on school sites. The need for such policy has been amply demonstrated by Lamb et al. (2020) in their recent analysis of learning and development across early childhood through to early adulthood.

The paper has shown that evidence in support of neighbourhood school hubs is growing, with a coherent base of theory and empirical support to recommend their more widespread establishment on public primary school sites. Consequently, hubs situated on or near primary school sites in the State are readily justified as a key pillar of early years policy, allowing interventions at a point in the life course where the economic evidence suggests it is most cost efficient to do so.

In conclusion, it is noted that such interventions will become increasingly important with new occupational demands requiring more of the skills that have their roots in early life development and learning. These include problem-solving, communication and social skills. Critically, as this report has shown, neighbourhood early years service hubs located on primary school sites offer a fit-for-purpose and 'shovel-ready' policy opportunity to address the key performance gaps that were identified more than a decade ago by Australia's Education Ministers' in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008).



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