

## FINAL REPORT FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE PARENT MENTORING PROJECT IN MANUKAU

**AUCKLAND UNISERVICES LIMITED**

a wholly owned company of

**THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND**

**Prepared for:**

Ministry of Education  
22 Amersham Way  
Private Bag 94016  
South Auckland Mail Centre  
Manukau

*Date: August 2010*

ISBN 978-0-478-36756-0

**Prepared by:**

Dr Deborah Widdowson  
Assoc Prof Robyn Dixon  
Centre for Child and Family Research  
The University of Auckland

Reports from Auckland UniServices Limited should only be used for the purposes for which they were commissioned. If it is proposed to use a report prepared by Auckland UniServices Limited for a different purpose or in a different context from that intended at the time of commissioning the work, then UniServices should be consulted to verify whether the report is being correctly interpreted. In particular, it is requested that, where quoted, conclusions given in UniServices reports should be stated in full.

## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Evaluation .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Data Sources .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Participants.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Findings .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.0 Introduction .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.0 Context .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.1 Background .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.2 Purpose of the Evaluation .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3.0 Methods .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>3.1 Evaluation Design .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>3.2 Data Sources and Measures .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.3 Procedures .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3.4 Recruitment .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.5 Student sample .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.6 Analysis.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>4.0 Findings .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4.1 Quantitative findings .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4.2 Qualitative findings .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>5.0 Conclusion and Discussion .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Appendix 1.....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Appendix 2.....</b>	<b>55</b>

## Executive Summary

This executive summary contains the main findings and conclusions from the outcome evaluation for the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau, the aims of which are to assist children's transition to school, improve student achievement and increase parental involvement in children's education. The evaluation is based on analysis of quantitative data, including student achievement data obtained at ages 5, 6 and 7 for children who attended a Parent Mentoring Playgroup and those with a different or no early childhood education (ECE) experience, student attitudes to learning obtained at ages 5, 6 and 7 years, transition to school data, and qualitative data: interviews with Community Liaison Workers/Playgroup Leaders, teachers and principals, focus group discussions with parents and playgroup observation data.

### **Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau**

Parent mentoring involves *“the forming of relationships between parents and schools that enables both parties to contribute more effectively to the education and achievement of students”* (Hucker, 2001, p. 3). The Parent Mentoring Project was designed to improve student achievement through the provision of mentor support for parents of children starting school. In Manukau, the Project involved the establishment of playgroups within low decile schools for attendance by preschoolers and their parents. Playgroups were led by a Community Liaison Worker funded to facilitate educational activities for approximately 15 hours a week.

The key objective of the Parent Mentoring Playgroup Project in Manukau was to increase student achievement through the provision of mentor support for parents of children starting school. In addition, the expected outcomes of the Project were:

- parents and schools developed a positive two-way relationship focussed on student learning (i.e. the schools actively and as part of a regular cycle, involve parents in decisions affecting their children's learning and in critical reflection on achievement goals)
- parents gained learning resources and information on how to support their children's learning at home
- staff gained training and professional development

## The Evaluation

The outcome evaluation of the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau commenced in 2007 to address the following evaluation questions:

1. What evidence is there of how student achievement, attitudes to learning and other short and medium term outcomes have been affected by the Parent Mentoring Project in the first three years that the students are at school?
2. How do the parent mentoring children's achievement results and other short and medium term outcomes compare to those of children who have received significant other early childhood education (ECE) experience and to those who have received insignificant or no other ECE experience?
3. What are the key characteristics of the project in the schools and in the 'Parent Mentoring Playgroups' that make it successful in terms of learning outcomes for students and effective involvement of parents?

## Data Sources

### Quantitative measures:

Student achievement was measured at age 5 years and 6 years using the following instruments:

- Four literacy assessments from the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993):
  - 1) Concepts About Print (CAP);
  - 2) Letter Identification (LID);
  - 3) Word Test;
  - 4) Running Records (Reading Level);
- Numeracy Project Assessment (NumPA)

Student achievement was measured at age 7 years on:

- Supplementary Tests of Achievement in Reading Year 3 (STAR)
- Global Strategy Stage (GloSS) assessment

Students' attitudes to learning were measured at age 5, 6 and 7 years using a five-point Likert scale consisting of 9 statements (see Appendix1).

Students' transitions to school were measured upon school entry using a four-point Likert scale comprised of 12 statements completed by classroom teachers.

Early childhood experience information, demographic data and maternal education levels were obtained using a survey completed by parents at the time a child entered school.

**Qualitative measures:**

Interviews were conducted with:

- Community Liaison Workers/Playgroup Leaders at each Parent Mentoring Playgroup;
- School Principals and/or Deputy Principals
- Classroom teachers

Focus groups were conducted with:

- Parents of children who attended a Parent Mentoring Playgroup.

Observational data:

- An observation was conducted at each of the 9 Parent Mentoring Playgroups

## **Participants**

### *Student sample*

The student sample at Time 1 and 2 comprised 290 students; 72 students who had participated in a Parent Mentoring Playgroup, 176 who had attended Other Formal early childhood education and 42 who had No Formal early childhood education.

At Time 3, age 7 years, the total student sample consisted of 242 students; 58 of whom had attended a Parent Mentoring (PM) Playgroup, 151 who had experienced Other Formal ECE and 33 of whom had no formal ECE.

### *Adult sample*

Interviews were conducted with 11 Community Liaison Workers/Playgroup Leaders, 19 classroom teachers and 10 principals/assistant principals. A total of 42 Parent Mentoring Playgroup parents participated in focus groups.

## Findings

Quantitative findings showed that there were no significant differences on any of the measures of academic achievement between the three groups of students, Parent Mentoring Playgroup children, children who had experienced Other Formal ECE and children who had experienced No Formal ECE, at age 5 years on entry to school indicating that all students were achieving at similar levels at school entry no matter the type or lack of early childhood education they had experienced. Differences were found, however, at age 6, with Parent Mentoring Playgroup (PMP) children achieving higher scores on all literacy measures compared to children who experienced Other Formal ECE and those who experienced No Formal ECE.

Specifically, at Time 1, analyses conducted found no differences between students at age 5 years. At Time 2, differences were found between ECE groups: At age 6, students who had attended Parent Mentoring Playgroups achieved higher scores on all four literacy measures compared to students who experienced Other Formal ECE, and to students who had experienced No Formal early childhood education. These differences were significant on CAP, Reading Level and LID between PMP students and students with Other Formal ECE, and on CAP, Reading Level, Word and LID between PMP students and students who had No Formal ECE. No significant differences were found on achievement scores between students who had Other Formal ECE and those who had No Formal ECE. The differences were educationally significant (i.e., effect size above 0.4) between the PMP children and No Formal ECE group on CAP, Reading Level, LID and Word, and approached educational significance between the PMP and Other Formal ECE group on LID and CAP.

### *Findings at Time 3 (age 7 years)*

Comparisons of mean scores for each group at Time 3 on the literacy measure, STAR, found that students in the group that had attended a Parent Mentoring Playgroup obtained a higher mean score than either the students who had experienced Other Formal ECE or the students who had experienced No Formal ECE. However, these differences were not significant. Comparisons of mean reading level for each group at Time 3 showed that children in the PM Playgroup cohort obtained a higher mean reading level score than either of the other two groups, although none of the differences were significant. Analysis of numeracy assessment data found no differences between any of the groups.

*Key characteristics of the project contributing to successful outcomes for students and effective involvement of parents*

Characteristics of the Parent Mentoring Playgroup experience that appear to have contributed to the successful learning outcomes for students include the finding that PM Playgroups incorporated structured, teacher-led, school-like activities and provided children with opportunities to become familiar with school practices and routines. These opportunities and activities served to prepare children for school entry, easing their transition to school and providing them with skills and a readiness for learning valued by classroom teachers.

A second characteristic identified was the quality of transitions made by Playgroup children. Various aspects of the PM Playgroups played a role in this. Familiarity with school, school-like practices and the classroom environment, and the continuity that this provided children and parents between the ECE context and school impacted positively on children's transitions to school

Another salient characteristic of Playgroups is parent participation and engagement: through participation, Parents gained skills to support their children's learning, both in the Playgroup and at home, and developed confidence in interacting with their children's educators. These factors assisted parents to participate more fully in their children's learning. The skills, confidence and familiarity with schools gained through participation in Parent Mentoring Playgroup may have increased parents' ability to provide support for their children's learning once they started school, over time contributing to the successful outcomes obtained for their children.

Effective participation by parents in the Parent Mentoring Playgroups was supported by parents' preference for a structured learning environment for their children and their desires to participate and learn alongside their children, which were satisfied in this context.



## 1.0 Introduction

This report presents the findings from an outcome evaluation of the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau initiated in 2007. It is submitted by Auckland UniServices Limited on behalf of the researchers, Dr. Deborah Widdowson and Assoc. Prof. Robyn Dixon, at the Centre for Child and Family Research, the University of Auckland.

The evaluation follows the school achievement of a cohort of students who began school in 2007 at one of nine Parent Mentoring Playgroup schools in Manukau, tracking their achievement at three points: at age 5 upon entry into school (Time 1), at age 6 (Time 2) and finally at age 7 years (Time 3). Two previous reports, the *Progress Report for the Evaluation of the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau 2008*, and the *2009 Progress Report for the Evaluation of the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau* reported on the first two years of the evaluation, providing findings on student progress at age 5 and age 6 based on achievement data available at the time of reporting. This report brings together findings from the previous two reports, updates findings from previous reports based on the full sample of 6-year-olds, and considers these in the light of findings obtained for students at age 7: In accordance with the mixed-methods research design employed, quantitative findings regarding school achievement, attitudes to learning and school transition are considered and interpreted in the light of qualitative findings from interviews, observations and focus groups.

## 2.0 Context

### 2.1 Background

Established in 2002, the Parent Mentoring Project extended work conducted through the Early Childhood Primary Links school improvement initiative (Hahn, 2005). According to Gorinski (2005), the notion of parent mentoring underpinning the Project is encapsulated in the definition provided by Hucker (2001, p. 3), which states that parent mentoring involves *“the forming of relationships between parents and schools that enables both parties to contribute more effectively to the education and achievement of students”*.

A literature review on Parent Mentoring was conducted in 2001 for the Ministry of Education by Hucker. The purpose of the review was to inform the proposed Parent Mentoring initiative through the identification of key principles that would form the basis of the parent mentoring programme (Hucker, 2001). On the basis of the review, Hucker outlined a proposed framework for Parent Mentoring in schools based on the key principles identified in the literature, and established a set of

guidelines for effective parent mentoring programmes. The principles identified by Hucker (2001, p 27-28) were:

*There is no 'one size fits all' solution to establishing a successful parent mentoring programme.*

*A shared responsibility by parents and school for student achievement.*

*A relationship of equal partners.*

*A partnership that has bi-directional communication and mutual respect.*

*A programme that reflects the values and culture of the community and tailors involvement to this.*

*Parent education and home resourcing.*

Guidelines for effective parent mentoring programmes were identified as follows (Hucker, 2001, p 29):

*Schools are part of, and must work within, their communities.*

*Flexibility in planning and implementing programmes to take account of diversity.*

*Training and staff development is an essential investment.*

*Relationships between home and school have to be bi-directional.*

*Communication - effective communication between home and school about school programmes and children's progress and achievement.*

*Learning at home –providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and school related activities particularly literacy and numeracy.*

*Decision-making – include parents in decisions affecting the education of their children.*

*Collaborating with the community – identify and integrate resources from the community to support school, students and their families.*

*Use of the home curriculum as a resource rather than viewing it as a deficit – particularly where there is cultural diversity.*

*Parent education, particularly in relation to school expectation*

*Acting as a resource centre for information on child development, homework advice and school liaison.*

The Parent Mentoring Project was designed to improve student achievement through the provision of mentor support for parents of children starting school (Ministry of Education Request for Proposals, 2006).

In addition to improved student achievement, the expected outcomes of parent mentoring support were that:

- parents and schools have developed a positive two-way relationship focussed on student learning (i.e. the schools actively and as part of a regular cycle, involved parents in decisions affecting their children's learning and in critical reflection on achievement goals)

- parents gained learning resources and information on how to support their children's learning at home
- staff gained training and professional development

The Project has operated in three geographical areas in various forms (Gorinski, 2005), one of which was the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau, the focus of this evaluation.

### **Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau**

In addition to the overarching goals outlined above, the aims of the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau were to facilitate the transition of preschoolers to school and to encourage greater family participation in the early literacy development of children. This was to be achieved through the funding of Community Liaison Workers (CLWs) to run playgroups sited in schools for approximately 15 hours per week (Ministry of Education Request for Proposals, 2006). The role of the CLW was to facilitate pre-school activities within the school-based parent mentoring playgroups.

Although originally involving 12 low decile schools in Mangere and Otara, in 2006 the Manukau Parent Mentoring cluster comprised ten schools each of which employed CLWs/Playgroup Leaders to run an on-site playgroup, provide information and training for parents to support their children's education and build strong links between parents and schools.

Evaluations of the Parent Mentoring Project undertaken in 2005 (Gorinski; Hahn) provided indications of the efficacy of the project. However, more research was necessary to examine the impact of the project over time and to obtain information on other outcomes, such as ease of transition to school and on-going engagement by parents in their children's schooling.

## **2.2 Purpose of the Evaluation**

The present evaluation was begun in 2007. The purpose was to address the following evaluation questions for the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau:

1. What evidence is there of how student achievement, attitudes to learning and other short and medium term outcomes have been affected by the Parent Mentoring Project in the first three years that the students are at school?
2. How do the parent mentoring children's achievement results and other short and medium term outcomes compare to those of children who have received significant other early

childhood education (ECE) experience and to those who have received insignificant or no other ECE experience?

3. What are the key characteristics of the project in the schools and in the 'Parent Mentoring Playgroups' that make it successful in terms of learning outcomes for students and effective involvement of parents?

This report provides the final outcomes for the evaluation of the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau. It details findings regarding the impact of Parent Mentoring Playgroup participation on student achievement and attitudes to learning from age 5 years to 7 years compared to children who experienced significant other early childhood education (ECE) and to children who had no significant ECE experience. It also reports on findings regarding children's transitions to school and explores the key characteristics associated with the school-based Playgroup participation that appear to contribute to obtained outcomes for students and the involvement of parents in their learning.

## 3.0 Methods

### 3.1 Evaluation Design

A mixed methods triangulation design in a convergence model (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) was employed to address the research questions. In order to answer the first and second evaluation questions, quantitative data were obtained in an ex post facto criterion-group design, wherein a naturalistically occurring intervention (type of ECE experience) was related over time to various outcome measures, namely, school achievement, attitudes to learning and school transition.

Ex post facto refers to the fact that the intervention, in this instance, type or absence of pre-school educational experience, is not created by the researcher but is a naturalistically occurring treatment: Type of pre-school experience for a child depends upon parental choice and is outside the control of the researcher. The criterion-group design involved comparison of the intact groups that differed on the basis of an experience according to a criterion, in this case, nature and extent of pre-school experience (e.g., Parent Mentoring Playgroup, formal significant ECE, no significant ECE). Data were gathered according to the outcome measures of interest, (e.g., student achievement, attitudes to learning, ease of transition to school). Quantitative data were collected across time enabling comparisons of outcomes for the various groups on three occasions: Repeated measures of student

achievement and attitudes were obtained at the time of each child's entry into school at age 5 (Time 1), at age 6 (Time 2) and finally, at age 7 (Time 3).

To better understand the quantitative data and to answer the third evaluation question, different but complementary data were obtained using qualitative methods, including interviews, observations and focus group discussions. Due to constraints associated with the timing of the evaluation, and the need to gather achievement data over the first three years following school entry, observations of Parent Mentoring Playgroup sessions were conducted in the first half of 2007. This was after the children participating in the evaluation had left the Playgroups and had entered school.

Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered and analyzed separately and then converged in interpretation. (Details of measures and data sources are provided below.)

### 3.2 Data Sources and Measures

#### *Quantitative methods*

- Survey of student information and early childhood experience

A questionnaire was designed to obtain information on a child's preschool education experience and extent of participation: the type(s) of ECE experienced (Parent Mentoring Playgroup, Kindergarten, Playcentre, Kohanga Reo, Education and Care Service, Other), if any, the name of the ECE service(s) accessed (to verify service type); the length of time spent in ECE (number of hours per day/days per week and period of time in months/years), child's date of birth, ethnicity, gender, mother's highest level of education, the language spoken most in the home and number of children's books in the home.

- Achievement measures

Four assessments from the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993) were administered to students; Concepts About Print (CAP), Letter Identification (LID), Word Test and Running Records (Reading Level), by teachers in each school between 3 and 9 weeks post school entry (Time 1) and again one year later (Time 2) upon turning six. These assessments have high reliability and validity (Clay, 1993). NumPA (Diagnostic Interview) was used to measure progress in numeracy at Time 1 and Time 2<sup>1</sup>. At Time 3, the Supplementary Test of Achievement in Reading Year

---

<sup>1</sup> It is acknowledged that NumPA is a diagnostic tool which, additionally, is used as a professional development tool, and is not intended as a wide scale measure of achievement in maths. However, this was the only measure schools all agreed to administer. The evaluation team expressed serious reservations over the usefulness of this assessment as a measure of achievement at the time of evaluation planning.

3 (STAR) and the Global Strategy Stage numeracy assessment (GloSS) were used to measure literacy and numeracy achievement at Year 3.

- Attitudes to learning

Children's attitudes to school learning were measured on a five-point Likert scale consisting of nine items (see Appendix 1). Total scale score ranged from 9 to 45, where higher numbers equal more positive attitudes. An estimate of internal consistency revealed good reliability, (*Cronbach's alpha* = .81)

- Transition to school

A 12 item, four-point Likert scale was used to measure how well a child transitioned to school, with a total scale score ranging from 12 to 48, where higher numbers equal more positive transitions (see Appendix 2). An estimate of internal consistency revealed good reliability, (*Cronbach's alpha* = .91).

#### *Qualitative methods*

- Observations

An observation was conducted at each of the nine Parent Mentoring Playgroups by two researchers to record session activities, processes and participant engagement and as a measure of programme fidelity. Observational data were recorded via fieldnotes made *in situ*. Fieldnotes from each researcher were later merged.

- Interviews

Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders: Playgroup Programme Leaders (Community Liaison Workers and/or Playgroup Leaders); classroom teachers; school principals and/or deputy principals. CLWs and Playgroup Leaders were asked about their programme, aspects of parent and child participation, relationships with the school, and about the perceived effects on children and parents who participated in the programme. Teachers were asked about their perceptions of the effects of the Parent Mentoring (PM) Playgroup programme on children and how PMP children compared, in terms of their readiness for learning and academic progress, to children who had experienced alternative preschool education or no formal preschool education. Teachers and principals were also interviewed about parent participation in their child's learning and in the school.

- Focus groups

A focus group was held with Parent Mentoring Playgroup parents at 8 of the 9 Playgroup sites. At one Playgroup, too few parents were available to participate in a focus group. Parents were asked

for their perceptions of the effects of PM Playgroup on their children, why they preferred to send their child to PM Playgroup over other forms of ECE and were asked about their interactions with the school.

### **3.3 Procedures**

Ethical approval to conduct the evaluation research was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee at the commencement of the evaluation.

The ten schools operating Parent Mentoring Playgroups in Manukau were invited to participate in the evaluation, and consultation was held with the schools to determine the assessment instruments schools would use to measure achievement to ensure commonality of measures across schools. Consensus was reached with all but one school, which subsequently withdrew from the evaluation. Prior to data collection, a moderation training meeting was held with teachers from the nine remaining schools to maximise consistency in assessment procedures across schools.

All parents of participant students were surveyed at the time their child started school to ascertain the nature of preschool education experience and the extent of participation. Once parental consent was obtained, each parent completed the questionnaire about their child's participation in early childhood education

School staff trained in the use of the four literacy assessments and the numeracy measure administered these to students at age 5 years upon entry to school, and again at age 6 years. At age 7 years, classroom teachers administered STAR and GloSS. At the same times, children were administered a measure of their attitudes to school learning. An adult, either a member of the school staff or one of the researchers, assisted each student to complete the scale by reading out the statements and ratings and helping the child to circle their response. Classroom teachers completed the Transition to School scale for each child at age 5, soon after they entered school.

Two researchers conducted observations and made fieldnotes on one occasion at each of the nine Parent Mentoring Playgroups as a measure of treatment integrity. Interviews were conducted by the same researchers with the CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, classroom teachers and principals/assistant principals to ascertain their perspectives on the Parent Mentoring Playgroups. Eight focus groups were conducted, one at each of eight of the schools. (No focus group was held with one school due to the unavailability of parents.) Interviews with CLWs/Playgroup Leaders and focus groups with parents were conducted between June and August of 2007. Interviews with teachers were conducted in Term 1, 2008, and interviews with school principals took place during Terms 2-3, 2008.

### 3.4 Recruitment

Recruitment of students began in February 2007 at each of the nine Parent Mentoring Playgroup schools. Schools were provided with Parent Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms outlining the research for parents and inviting participation, and were asked to present these to every parent of a 5-year-old enrolling at the school in 2007. A summary information sheet translated into Tongan and Samoan was also provided for distribution alongside the English Participant Information Sheet. Each school determined their own process for distributing the information sheets and consent forms to parents.

The number of students recruited for participation was monitored throughout the recruitment period. Midway through 2007 recruitment levels were noted to be lower than anticipated in some schools. As a consequence, an evaluation team member worked with schools to determine ways to maximise recruitment. These included making follow up calls to parents to ensure they had received information regarding the research and sending out forms along with prepaid addressed envelopes if these had been mislaid or not received the originals; enlisting CLWs/Playgroup Leaders to provide information regarding the research to parents of children about to turn 5; an evaluation team member attending Parent Interview evenings to provide information to parents; an evaluation team member attending schools on the morning of a new term to inform parents enrolling new entrants; enlisting new entrant teachers to provide new parents with information on the research.

Towards the end of the 2007 school year the decision was made to extend the recruitment period into Term 1 of 2008 to boost the student sample further. Together, these strategies resulted in a 31% increase in student numbers.

### 3.5 Student sample

Information obtained from parents at the time of school enrolment was used to determine children's early childhood education experience. For children to be included in the PM Playgroup sample it was necessary to have attended a Parent Mentoring Playgroup for a minimum of three months. Children classified as having formal, significant ECE (Other Formal ECE) had attended either Kindergarten, Playcentre, Kohanga Reo or Education & Care Centres (E&C). The name of the ECE provided by parents was checked against databases of licensed and chartered ECEs to ensure formal status and a minimum attendance of three months was required for inclusion in this category. Children considered to have not experienced any formal ECE consisted of those who had informal ECE, (i.e., other unlicensed playgroups), those who had less than three months of formal ECE experience and those whose parents indicated they had not had any ECE whatsoever.



*Time 1*

The total student sample at Time 1<sup>2</sup> consisted of 300 5-year-olds; 73 PM Playgroup students, 181 students who experienced Other Formal, significant ECE and 46 who experienced only informal or no ECE. Between Time 1 and Time 2, 10 students were lost from the sample.

*Time 2*

The complete student sample at Time 2<sup>3</sup> comprised 290 students; 72 students who had participated in a Parent Mentoring Playgroup, 176 who had attended Other Formal early childhood education and 42 who had No Formal early childhood education. For the purposes of ongoing comparison across time and between groups, the 290 students (72 Playgroup; 176 Other Formal ECE; 42 No Formal ECE) for whom we had both Time 1 and Time 2 data were used in the analyses presented here.

*Time 3*

The 2010 student sample consisted of 242 students; 58 PM Playgroup children, 151 students who had experienced significant, formal ECE and 33 who had not experienced any formal ECE.

**Attrition**

Due to the transience of families, attrition of the student sample was a concern from the outset. It is not uncommon for there to be high levels of turnover of students in schools in South Auckland, which can be as high as 25-30 percent per year (Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, Turner & Hsiao, 2009). While this study has suffered from attrition due to student movement out of schools, the level at which this has happened has been comparatively low. Over the first year of the evaluation, attrition amounted to just 6 percent of the sample, and 9 percent in 2008. However, over 2009 to March 2010, attrition increased to 17 percent (in part, this appeared to be due to a number of families moving to Australia), bringing attrition across the three years of the study to 32%. Notably, fewer PM Playgroup children had moved out of the schools than those in the other two groups since 2007: In 2007, the proportion of students in the PM Playgroup cohort who left was 2 percent, compared to 4 percent of those students who had experienced Other Formal ECE and 5 percent of those students who had had No Formal ECE. Of the 9 percent of students who moved out of the schools in 2008, none were PM Playgroup students. The proportion rose, however, between 2009

---

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing the 2008 Progress Report, data were available for just 252 students in total.

<sup>3</sup> The 6-year-old student sample for which achievement data were reported in the 2009 Progress Report consisted of a smaller sample of 233 students; 50 PM Playgroup students, 169 students who had experienced other formal ECE and 34 who had experienced informal or no ECE. At the time of reporting in 2009, achievement data on the final sample of 6-year-olds was not available.

and 2010, where 19 percent of those in the PM Playgroup sample were lost, compared to 14 percent of those who had experienced Other Formal ECE and 21 percent of those who had had No Formal ECE. Overall, a smaller proportion of students in the Parent Mentoring Playgroup cohort were lost over time compared to the other two cohorts.

### Demographic data of sample at Times 1 - 2 & 3

#### *Gender*

The total student sample at Time 1-2 (T1-2) was evenly split between males and females (see Table 1 below). Of the 242 students in the sample at Time 3 (age 7), there were slightly more (52%) male than female (48%) students.

Table 1: Number and percentage of male and female students by ECE group at Times 1 -2 & 3

ECE group	Time	Male	Female	N
Playgroup	<u>T1- 2</u>	50%	50%	72
	T3	52%	48%	58
Other Formal ECE	<u>T1- 2</u>	51%	49%	176
	T3	51%	49%	151
None / Informal	<u>T1- 2</u>	48%	52%	42
	T3	54%	46%	33
Total	<u>T1- 2</u>	50%	50%	290
	T3	52%	48%	242

#### *Ethnicity*

The majority of children in the sample at T1-2 and T3 were Samoan (36%), with Tongan, Māori and Cook Island Māori being the next most common ethnicity groupings in the student sample at each time. Table 2 provides a breakdown of ethnicity for the student samples at T1-2 and T3.

Table 2: Ethnicity of children in sample at Times 1-2 and 3

*Ethnicity	Percent	
	T1-2	T3
<i>Samoan</i>	36	36
<i>Tongan</i>	25	25
<i>Cook Island Māori</i>	15	14
<i>NZ Māori</i>	13	14
<i>Niuean</i>	4	5
<i>Fijian Indian</i>	4	4
<i>Other (Vietnamese, Indian, Filipino)</i>	2	2
<i>Pakeha/NZ European</i>	1	1

\*Where more than one ethnicity was noted for a child, priority was given to Māori. Otherwise the first ethnicity listed was designated. Ethnicity information was unavailable for 9 children at Time 1-2 and 6 children at Time 3.

#### *Main language spoken in the home*

English was regularly spoken in 60 percent of the homes of children in the Time 1-2 and Time 3 samples. Of these, similar proportions (T1-2 = 39%, T3 = 38%) spoke English exclusively or spoke English and another language at home regularly (T1-2 = 21%, T3 = 22%). Māori was exclusively spoken in less than 1% of households, while Samoan was the sole language spoken in 16% to 17% of households, and Tongan in 15% to 16% of households. Table 3 shows the breakdown of languages spoken in the home at each time.

Table 3: Main Language(s) Spoken in the Home at for Time 1-2 &amp; Time 3 student samples

	Language	Percent	
		T1-2	T3
One Main Language	<i>English</i>	38.5	38.0
	<i>Māori</i>	0.4	0.5
	<i>Samoan</i>	16.7	16.4
	<i>Tongan</i>	16.0	15.0
	<i>Cook Island Māori</i>	1.6	1.4
	<i>Niuean</i>	0.8	0.9
	<i>Other (Hindi, Vietnamese, Filipino)</i>	3.9	4.7
Two Main Languages	<i>English &amp; Māori</i>	2.7	2.8
	<i>English &amp; a Pasifika language</i>	16.6	18.3
	<i>Two Pasifika languages</i>	0.8	0.5
	<i>English &amp; another language*</i>	1.6	1
	<i>Māori &amp; Samoan</i>	0.4	0.5

\*Other than Māori or a Pasifika language

Information on language spoken in the home was unavailable for 33 (T1-2) and 29 (T3) students.

### *Educational level of mothers*

For 11% of T1-2 students and 9% of T3 students, mother's highest educational level was 4<sup>th</sup> form (Yr 10) or less, 64-65% of mothers had attained 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> form levels of schooling, approximately 20 percent had achieved a Trade or Polytechnic Certificate or Diploma and around 5% had a university degree. Table 4 shows mothers' educational levels for the T1-2 and T3 student samples.

Table 4: Mothers' Educational Level of Time 1-2 & Time 3 samples

Highest Educational Level	Percent	
	T1-2	T3
<i>4<sup>th</sup> Form or less (Yr 10 or less)</i>	10.9	9.1
<i>5<sup>th</sup> Form (Yr 11)</i>	27.8	29.1
<i>6<sup>th</sup> Form (Yr 12)</i>	21.1	20.5
<i>7<sup>th</sup> Form (Yr 13)</i>	15.4	15.9
<i>Trade or Polytechnic Certificate or Diploma</i>	20.3	20.5
<i>University Undergraduate degree</i>	3.8	4.1
<i>University Postgraduate degree</i>	0.8	0.9

\*Information on mother's highest level of education was unavailable for 24 (T1-2) children and 22 (T3) children.

### *Availability of children's books in the home*

Information regarding the number of children's books in the home showed that, in the majority of homes (64% for both T1-2 and T3 samples), 10 or more children's books were available. Around 32% of homes had between 1 and 10 children's books, and just over 4 percent of homes had no children's books.

## **3.6 Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were carried out on survey data and parametric tests were carried out on assessment and scale data using the statistical package SPSS Version 15.0. Thematic analysis was carried out on qualitative data using QSR NVivo8. Transcripts of focus groups and interviews were imported into NVivo and subjected to close readings to facilitate an understanding of emergent themes and to develop a framework for coding the data. Transcript segments were subsequently

systematically coded into categories based on the coding framework. Patterns and discontinuities were then looked for within and across data sources, using processes of data triangulation.

Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered and analyzed separately and then converged in interpretation. (Details of measures and data sources are provided below.)

## 4.0 Findings

This section presents the final quantitative and qualitative findings for the evaluation.

### 4.1 Quantitative findings

#### *Reliability*

It has been shown that the date of assessment on *Concepts about Print* has a considerable impact on student performance (Anderson, Lindsey, Schulz, Monseur & Meiers, 2004): Early assessment (less than 3 weeks after school entry) and late assessment (more than 9 weeks post school entry) affect performance in that children assessed early can be expected to score at least one point less, while those with a late assessment can be expected to score at least half a point more. Given this, an analysis of the dates of assessment for CAP at Time 1 was conducted. It was found that the large majority (88%) of students were assessed within the recommended time period (between 3 and 9 weeks post school entry), with only 2% assessed more than 9 weeks post entry and 10% less than 3 weeks post entry.

#### *Literacy Achievement at Time 1, age 5 years*

Analysis of assessment data at Time 1 showed that there were no significant differences between students in each ECE cohort at age 5, upon entry to school, on any of the literacy assessments. This indicates that all students were achieving at similar levels on school entry regardless of the type or lack of early childhood education they had experienced. Tables 5 to 8 show the mean scores, standard deviations and *t*-values for each group at Time 1.

#### *Literacy Achievement at Time 2, age 6 years*

At Time 2, differences were found between the different ECE cohorts. At age 6, students who had attended Parent Mentoring Playgroups achieved higher scores on all four literacy measures compared to students who experienced Other Formal ECE and to students who had experienced No Formal early childhood education. These differences were significant on CAP, Reading Level and LID between the Parent Mentoring Playgroup (PMP) cohort and the Other Formal ECE cohort, and on CAP, Reading Level, Word and LID between PMP students and students in the No Formal ECE cohort. The differences were educationally significant (i.e., effect size above 0.4) between the PMP cohort and No Formal ECE cohort on CAP, Reading Level, LID and Word, and approached educational significance between the PMP and Other Formal ECE group on LID and CAP. Tables 5 to 8 show the means, standard deviations, *t* values and effect sizes (*d*) for each student cohort at Time 2.

No significant differences were found on achievement scores between the Other Formal ECE cohort and the No Formal ECE cohort.

Table 5: Mean student achievement on LID for each ECE experience cohort at age 5 & 6 years

LETTER ID	T 1: 5 years				T2: 6 years			
	N	Mean	SD	t value	Mean	SD	t value	d
Other Formal	176	17.69	17.0	-0.005	46.93	11.39	3.48*	0.38
PM Playgroup	72	17.68	18.35	1.28	50.83	6.14	2.75**	0.67
No Formal	42	13.36	16.76		43.31	16.70		

\* $p = 0.001$ , \*\* $p = 0.007$

Table 6: Mean student achievement on CAP for each ECE experience cohort at age 5 & 6 years

Concepts About Print	T 1: 5 years				T2: 6 years			
	N	Mean	SD	t value	Mean	SD	t value	d
Other Formal	176	6.55	4.29	-0.005	14.53	4.63	2.14*	0.30
PM Playgroup	72	6.26	3.76	-0.51	15.88	4.42	2.74**	0.52
No Formal	42	5.83	3.92		13.64	4.07		

\*  $p = 0.03$ , \*\* $p = 0.007$

Table 7: Mean student achievement on Word for each ECE experience cohort at age 5 & 6 years

WORD	T1: 5 years				T2: 6 years			
	N	Mean	SD	t value	Mean	SD	t value	d
Other Formal	176	1.05	2.11	0.03	8.86	4.88	1.87	0.43
PM Playgroup	72	1.06	2.14	-0.16	10.07	4.51	2.14*	
No Formal	42	1.12	2.02		8.00	5.23		

\*  $p = 0.03$

Table 8: Mean student achievement on Reading Level for each ECE experience cohort at age 5 &amp; 6 years

Reading Level	T1: 5 years				T2: 6 years			
	N	Mean	SD	t value	Mean	SD	t value	d
Other Formal	176	1.53	1.15	-1.31	8.84	6.24	1.93*	0.26
PM Playgroup	72	1.36	0.84	-0.096	10.43	5.75	2.43**	0.46
No Formal	42	1.52	0.89		7.83	5.35		

\*  $p = 0.05$ , \*\* $p = 0.01$

Post hoc analyses were conducted to examine the contribution that mothers' educational level may have had on these findings. They revealed that the higher achievement levels obtained for the PMP children could not be attributed to higher educational levels amongst the mothers of these children. On the contrary, mothers of children who had attended a Parent Mentoring Playgroup tended to have lower educational levels than mothers of children in either of the other two cohorts. For instance, 21% of PMP mothers had not completed high school, compared with 6% of mothers whose children had attended Other Formal ECE and 14% of mothers whose children had experienced No Formal ECE. Only 18% of PMP parents had a tertiary qualification, compared with 29% of parents of children who attended Other Formal ECE and 19% of parents whose children had had No Formal ECE experience.

These findings indicate that at age 6, one year after school entry, the PM Playgroup children consistently outperformed those with No Formal ECE on all literacy measures. The findings also indicate that at age 6 the PMP children outperformed those who had experienced Other Formal ECE, although differences between these two cohorts were, for the most part, of moderate educational importance. These differences could not be explained by higher educational levels amongst PM Playgroup children's mothers. No meaningful differences were found between students who had experienced Other Formal ECE and those who had experienced No Formal ECE.

#### *Literacy Achievement at Time 3, 7 years*

Students were assessed at Time 3, aged 7 years, on STAR in March of the year they entered Year 3. Sample size at Time 3 had diminished, with fairly low numbers of students remaining in the No Formal ECE cohort and the PM Playgroup cohort. Comparisons of mean scores for each cohort on STAR revealed that the Parent Mentoring Playgroup cohort obtained a higher mean score ( $M = 18.7$ ) than either the Other Formal ECE cohort ( $M = 16.72$ ) or the No Formal ECE cohort ( $M = 15.58$ ). Mean differences of 3.12 were obtained between the PM Playgroup cohort and the No Formal ECE cohort and of almost 2 points between the PM Playgroup cohort and the Other Formal cohort.



These differences were not statistically significant. However, it is possible that the small sample size in the No Formal ECE group and the PM Playgroup cohort may have increased the chance of Type II error. Table 9 shows the mean scores, standard deviations, *t* values and mean difference scores for each ECE cohort on STAR.

Table 9: STAR total mean scores by ECE group at 7 years (Time 3)

ECE Experience Grouping	STAR total mean scores at 7 years				
	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> value	Mean difference
Other Formal	149	16.72	10.39	1.27	1.98
PM Playgroup	56	18.70	9.72		
No Formal	31	15.58	9.77	0.16	3.12

Note: Six students in the sample were absent for STAR

The mean score obtained for the PM Playgroup cohort equates to scores in the upper band of stanine 4 for STAR Year 3 (when administered between February and March), while those obtained for the other two cohorts are in the mid range of the band for stanine 4.

Reading level scores were obtained for students at Time 3. Comparisons of mean reading level for each group showed that the PM Playgroup cohort had a higher mean reading level than either of the other two groups: Mean reading level for the PM Playgroup cohort was 18.63 compared to 17.37 for the Other Formal ECE cohort, a mean difference of 1.26, and 16.38 for the No Formal ECE cohort, a mean difference of 2.25. These differences were not significant. Table 10 shows the mean scores, standard deviations, *t* values and mean difference scores for each ECE cohort.

Table 10: Mean Reading Level by ECE cohort at 7 years (Time 3)

ECE Experience Cohort	Mean Reading Level at 7 years				
	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> value	Mean difference
Other Formal	151	17.37	6.27	1.48	1.26
PM Playgroup	56	18.63	5.08		
No Formal	31	16.38	5.92	1.81	2.25

Note: Reading level data were unavailable for 4 children

Findings for literacy achievement at Time 3, while not significant, mirror the trend observed at Time 2, showing that the PM Playgroup cohort had higher mean scores on literacy achievement measures compared to the Other Formal ECE cohort and the No Formal ECE cohort.

#### *Numeracy at Time 1, age 5*

At age 5, higher proportions of children in the Other Formal ECE group were at NumPa Stages 1 -2 (53%) compared to the other two cohorts. Similar proportions of students in the PM Playgroup cohort and the No Formal ECE cohort were at NumPa Stages 1 – 2, with 39% and 40% respectively. Table 11 shows the percentage of students in each cohort at each NumPa stage at age 5 and age 6.

Table 11: Percentage of students in each cohort at each NumPa stage at age 5 and age 6

NumPa Stage	0		1		2		3		4	
	5y	6y	5y	6y	5y	6y	5y	6y	5y	6y
Other Formal	47%	4%	46%	27%	7%	43%	0.6%	23%	-	3%
PM Playgroup	61%	1%	35%	36%	4%	42%	-	15%	-	6%
No Formal	60%	5%	26%	29%	14%	57%	-	2%	-	7%

#### *Numeracy at Time 2, age 6*

At age 6 (Time 2), similar proportions of children in each cohort were at NumPa Stages 2-4. The Other Formal ECE cohort had a somewhat larger proportion (69%) of students in Stages 2-4 compared to the No Formal ECE cohort (66%) and the PM Playgroup cohort (63%).

#### *Numeracy at Time 3, age 7*

Analysis of GloSS data obtained for students at Time 3 showed negligible differences between the three groups (See Table 12).

Table 12: Mean GloSS Stage by ECE cohort at 7 years (Time 3)

ECE Experience Cohort	Mean GloSS stage at 7 years				
	N	Mean	SD	t value	Mean difference
Other Formal	150	3.35	0.99	-0.32	-0.05
PM Playgroup	56	3.30	0.89		
No Formal	33	3.41	0.98	-0.51	-0.11

Note: GloSS data were unavailable for three students

### *Attitudes to Learning at Time 1, age 5*

Students who had not experienced any formal ECE prior to school entry scored lower (total mean score = 37.2, SD=5.6) on the Attitudes to Learning scale at age 5 compared to the other two groups (PM Playgroup cohort total mean score = 39.4, SD=5.2; Other Formal ECE total mean score = 39.4, SD=6.1). Differences were significant on attitudes to learning between the PM Playgroup cohort and the No Formal ECE cohort on the total scale score ( $t=2.04$ ,  $p=0.04$ ) and on the scale item, *I like reading with the teacher* ( $t=2.61$ ,  $p=0.01$ ), and between the Other Formal ECE cohort and the No Formal ECE cohort on the total scale score ( $t=2.24$ ,  $p=0.02$ ) and on the scale items, *I like reading with the teacher* ( $t=2.39$ ,  $p=0.05$ ) and *I like starting a new book* ( $t=1.93$ ,  $p=0.02$ ).

### *Attitudes to Learning at Time 2*

Students in the PM Playgroup cohort tended to have more positive attitudes to school at age 6 (total mean score = 40.9, SD=3.9; scale range 9-45) compared to students in the other two cohorts (Other Formal ECE total mean score = 40.1, SD=4.4; No Formal ECE total mean score = 39.5, SD=4.7). Differences were significant between the PM Playgroup cohort and the No Formal ECE cohort on the scale items, *I like reading with the teacher* ( $t=1.95$ ,  $p=0.05$ ) and *I like to learn about numbers* ( $t=2.02$ ,  $p=0.04$ ). Overall, total mean scores for attitudes to learning were high for all 3 cohorts.

### *Attitudes to Learning at Time 3*

At Time 3, age 7 years, the Parent Mentoring Playgroup cohort maintained a marginally higher total mean score (40.7, SD=3.9) on attitudes to learning compared to the No Formal ECE cohort (39.8, SD=5.8). Differences did not reach significance levels. Results for the Other Formal ECE cohort showed no difference in total mean score (40.7, SD=4.4) compared to the PM Playgroup cohort. Overall, findings suggest that at Time 3, most students had positive attitudes to learning.

It appears that at Time 3 the scale suffered from ceiling effects evidenced by the clustering of scores for each cohort at the upper limits of the scale. Ceiling effects are not uncommon when Likert scales are used over time. Strong ceiling effects limit the possibility of finding significant effects.

### *Transition to School at age 5*

PM Playgroup students received slightly more favourable ratings (total mean score = 38, SD=5.0) from classroom teachers upon entry to school with regard to factors relating to transition to school compared to the Other Formal ECE cohort (total mean score = 37.3, SD=5.2) and to the No Formal ECE cohort (37.1, SD=5.7). Differences were not statistically significant.

### *Summary of quantitative findings*

In sum, quantitative findings on outcomes across the three years of the evaluation suggest that students who attended a Parent Mentoring Playgroup prior to school had greater gains on a range of literacy achievement measures over the first two years of schooling compared to students who attended Other Formal ECE and those who had No Formal ECE. Similar gains were not evident for numeracy: On the diagnostic numeracy assessment students who had experienced Other Formal ECE tended to be at higher stages at age 5 and 6 compared to the PM Playgroup students and the No Formal ECE cohort. At age 7, all students tended to be at the same stage. However, as noted previously, diagnostic tests are inadequate tools when summative evaluation of achievement is the goal.

PM Playgroup children had more positive attitudes to learning than children who had not experienced any formal early childhood education. They also tended to have more positive attitudes compared to children who had attended other formal ECE at ages 6 and 7. However, few differences were found to be statistically significant. Parent Mentoring Playgroup children received the most favourable ratings from teachers on transition to school.

The findings presented here provide evidence to answer the first and second evaluation questions. To understand why and how participation in Parent Mentoring Playgroups has contributed to better achievement outcomes for children we turn to qualitative evidence on the key characteristics of the Parent Mentoring Playgroup project in schools to address evaluation question three.

## **4.2 Qualitative findings**

This section brings together qualitative findings from previous reports and presents other findings from qualitative data sources. It incorporates analyses from data triangulation processes. These findings are further elucidated and evaluated in the Discussion section of this report and are considered in the light of quantitative findings.

The focus of the qualitative analysis presented here is on the identification of the key characteristics of the Parent Mentoring Playgroup project contributing to successful learning outcomes for students and effective involvement of parents, evaluation question 3. Given this goal, analysis is focused on similarities across PM Playgroups rather than differences between them.

Information on Parent Mentoring Playgroups presented below was obtained from observations of Playgroup sessions, interviews with CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, school teachers and school principals and from focus groups with Parent Mentoring Playgroup parents. Together, these data provide a

picture of the Parent Mentoring Playgroup project in Manukau. We begin by describing aspects of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups in Manukau, outlining their operational and organizational features.

### ***Parent Mentoring Playgroups in Manukau***

#### ***Hours of operation, ages catered for and CLW training***

The Parent Mentoring Playgroups had idiosyncratic hours of operation, which ranged from 5.5 to 13 hours a week, and from 2 to 5 days a week. Some CLWs/Playgroup Leaders spent additional time preparing and planning sessions.

Most PM Playgroups had sessions catering for children from 0 to 4 years of age, with one Playgroup providing a “preschool” programme for 4-year-old children only, although parents could bring 3-year-old children with them if they took responsibility for them. Two other Playgroups ran separate sessions for 4-year-old children and for younger children.

Four of the Playgroups were led by Community Liaison Workers with no formal qualifications as an educator, although one of these had begun training in early childhood education and another had worked as a teacher aide and ‘Four Minute Reading Programme’ teacher. Three of the Playgroups were led by programme leaders (Playgroup Leaders) who were qualified primary school teachers, and the other two Playgroups were led by qualified early childhood educators.

CLWs and Playgroup Leaders had mixed views on training and education for their role. Most noted that workshops and guest speakers were available from time to time that provided information, for example, on healthy eating, ideas for play around maths and science etc., messy play, completion of resource application forms, and the like. Some CLWs noted that they could not always attend the workshops as they were located in the central city and it was too far to travel. Ministry support and liaison personnel also visited the Playgroups now and then and gave demonstrations on play options and CLWs could request that support as needed. CLW meetings also occurred where CLWs/Playgroup Leaders could share what they were doing with each other.

#### ***Facilities***

The facilities provided by the schools for the PM Playgroups varied from purpose-built areas that included a classroom and outdoor play areas, to shared spaces, such as the school hall, that required equipment to be set out and put away each session, or, in one instance, what appeared to be a large corridor. Most Playgroups were housed in unused classrooms. In some instances, the Playgroups incorporated large spaces, while others had relatively small, somewhat cramped spaces.

### **Attendance**

According to CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, the number of children regularly attending sessions fluctuated, particularly over the winter months, due to winter illness. Inclement weather also impacted on Playgroup attendance where families did not have transport. Five of the PM Playgroups had between 20 and 25 children attending sessions on a regular basis, although several of these had up to 40-50 children on their roll. Two Playgroups had 10 to 15 regular attendees, and the other two Playgroups had less than 10 children regularly attending. The latter two Playgroups appeared to have reduced numbers due to the CLWs having been absent over an extended period of time, one due to illness and overseas travel, and the other due to maternity leave.

Parents or a family member were expected to attend the entire session with their child at all of the PM Playgroups and according to CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, for the most part, they did. Occasionally, however, a parent dropped their child off for an entire session or for part of a session, and this was generally tolerated. At one of the PM Playgroups, parents of 4-year-olds children were allowed to leave their child for the entire session. The Programme Leader of this Playgroup believed it provided an opportunity for older children to develop independence, in preparation for school. Observational data showed that the ratio of adults to children was no more than one adult to every two children.

### **Recruitment**

Parents learned about the Parent Mentoring Playgroup by word of mouth from friends and neighbours, or directly from the school, through school or church newsletters, and occasionally via community outreach activities.

### **Programmes**

#### ***Aims of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups***

The aims of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups, according to CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, were to engage children and parents in learning, to increase their familiarity with school and their confidence for school success. More specifically, the aim was to prepare children for school, to ensure they had the requisite skills and building blocks for school success. For CLWs/Playgroup Leaders these included knowing how to hold a pencil and a book, knowing the alphabet and how to write their name, and being confident enough to talk to teachers and ask questions.

*“[The aim] is to get our children ready for school. I think that is our main purpose, to help our children to be ready for school. What I mean by ready for school is to be able to write their*

*name, hold the pencil, use the scissors, you know, be confident with their hands and independent in looking after themselves,...and you know, aware of ABCs” (Playgroup Leader)*

CLWs and Playgroup Leaders were clear that their aims encompassed both children and parents. In this regard, easing the transition to school for both children and parents was an important aim:

*“Basically, our aim is to have the children, when they start school, the transition to school life is easy, it’s smooth, to have them confident learners with a certain skill set, you know, like being able to write their name etc when they go to school. But more than that, with the curiosity and the confidence to ask questions so that they can learn...Our goals don’t stop with the kids, and I think that that’s the strength of the programme, that we get to work alongside families not just children...easing the transition process from early childhood to school isn’t just about the child, it’s also about the parent transitioning...so our aim is the parents also will be confident within a school environment.” (CLW/Playgroup Leader)*

Specifically, CLWs/Playgroup Leaders saw their role as assisting parents to gain skills and confidence in supporting their children’s learning and to feel confident in the school environment.

*“I would like parents to help their children as much as they can. I have told them, the more they talk to their children in their own language, the more they learn and guide them.” (CLW/Playgroup Leader)*

As one CLW explained, a key aim was *“to empower parents, to make them really the first teachers of their children”*. She saw her role as providing parents with the tools to achieve this.

The aims for PM Playgroups articulated by CLWs and Playgroup Leaders were similar to those outlined by school principals, which were: to provide education for parents to support their child’s learning; to provide basic skills to support preschoolers’ transition to the classroom and achieve synergy between early childhood experience and school; to fill the gap for children not accessing other formal ECE; to increase parent engagement in school and to familiarise children and parents with school.

### **Language**

The use of other languages in addition to English was a feature common to most of the PM Playgroups: One of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups, attached to a school offering a bilingual educational programme, incorporated a bilingual session once a week using Māori and English. In four PM Playgroups, CLWs/Playgroup Leaders were observed using other languages besides English during sessions: Māori, Tongan and Samoan in one, Māori and Samoan in another, Samoan in one, and Māori in the fourth. Parents at the PM Playgroups were heard speaking to their children in

Pasifika languages from time to time, a practice accepted if not encouraged by the CLWs/Playgroup Leaders.

### ***Programme practices***

Observations of Parent Mentoring Playgroup sessions showed that all but one Playgroup incorporated a mix of free play and structured, teacher-led whole group activities. This division of session time into free play and structured learning time was a regular and deliberate feature of the PM Playgroups according to CLWs and Playgroup Leaders.

*Free play periods:* All nine Playgroups incorporated a free play period in their session facilitated by the CLW and/or Playgroup Leader lasting between half an hour to an hour and a half, depending upon session length and planning. A range of resources and activities were available during free play periods including playdough, painting, drawing and writing materials, puzzles, blocks, books, dress-ups, games, family play, and a range of materials for physical play (e.g., slides, cubby houses, climbing frames, tricycles) and children were observed to engage with these freely. During this time, parents watched on as their child played, played alongside children engaging in parallel activities, or facilitated and supported children's play. CLWs/Playgroup Leaders moved around the various areas of play, interacting with children and facilitating play as needed, asking open-ended questions of children about activities (e.g., what children were making or drawing, colours children were intending to use), or engaged in setting up and preparation of other areas of play.

*Structured, teacher-led, whole group activities:* These periods were usually referred to as 'mat time' by CLWs and Playgroup Leaders and ranged from 15 to 40 minutes. They were regularly and deliberately included within the session and children were encouraged to participate as a group. Children and parents alike expected mat time and most stopped play when the signal was given and moved to the mat area. Mat time was led by the CLW or Playgroup Leader who sat on a chair at the front of the mat area facing the children seated on the mat. Sometimes it began with roll call. Children were encouraged by the CLW/Playgroup Leader to "look and listen". A range of language and literacy rich activities occurred during this time. Typical activities included teacher-led talk around print-based and/or pictorial media involving identification of things like children's names, colours, shapes, weather, days of the week, numbers and letters of the alphabet; teacher-led use of song sometimes accompanied by actions, identifying, for example, children's presence at Playgroup, letters of the alphabet or using counting. During these events, CLWs/Playgroup Leaders incorporated words in Pasifika languages and/or Māori. Shared story reading was a common feature wherein the CLW/Playgroup Leader read a story aloud to the group and engaged children in activities such as discussion of the text and pictures or prediction about what might happen next.



During mat time, parents generally sat near their children or close to the mat area and watched on or participated in activities along with the group, such as singing songs.

In some instances, mat time was followed by a writing time where children practised writing their names or letters of the alphabet in exercise books or on tracing sheets. The writing activity for the session was discussed during mat time and rehearsal given for expected practice. During this time, parents sat with their child and encouraged them or praised their efforts, or assisted them to form letters or write their names, for example, by sounding out the letters.

Physical activity time: Some Playgroups regularly included a short physical activity time, space and weather permitting. This might involve the CLW/Playgroup Leader leading the children in ball play (catching and bouncing) by demonstration and instruction incorporating language denoting body position. Or it might include free outdoor play on climbing frames and the like.

Shared morning tea time: Each Playgroup had a morning tea time where children came together to eat morning tea often prepared by parents during the session.

The various periods within a session were usually signalled by instructions given by CLWs/Playgroup leaders, such as “clean up now for mat time” or “line up” or through the use of a bell to indicate a change in activity.

Other activities involved making visits to the new entrant classroom with the 4-year-old children and their parents. This was commonplace, particularly when children were nearing their fifth birthday.

### ***Implications of programme practices for children and parents***

The activities and practices observed during Playgroup sessions and described above show that CLWs/Playgroup Leaders provided opportunities for children and parents to interact with a range of language and literacy rich activities through the use of print media, reading and writing activities, number and counting activities, identification and describing activities, song, and through the use of other languages.

Many of the activities engaged in during structured, whole group time resembled school-like practices. The routine use of ‘mat time’ itself, involving teacher-led activities, is a common practice in many new entrant classes. Moreover, the use of rules and routines (‘look and listen’, lining up, cleaning up for mat time, bell ringing) all resembled practices commonplace in new entrance classrooms. The inclusion of these practices was deliberate, designed to prepare children and

parents for school and ease the transition process. These activities provide evidence in support of CLWs/Playgroup Leaders articulated goal of preparing children for school.

Through these activities, children and parents were becoming acquainted with school-like practices and were learning specific skills. This was evidenced by parents' explanations of what they saw their children learning, by CLW/Playgroup Leaders' claims about what children and parents were learning and by classroom teachers' claims about the skills they saw in PM Playgroup children when they started school. These are presented below in conjunction with identification of the key characteristics of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups and their contributions to successful outcomes for children and effective involvement of parents.

### **Key characteristics of Parent Mentoring Playgroups**

One of the principles of Parent Mentoring identified by Hucker (2001) was that *there is no 'one size fits all' solution to establishing a successful parent mentoring programme*. Given this principle and an apparent lack of a common set of guidelines for the running of Parent Mentoring Playgroups in Manukau, differences between centres would be expected. Nevertheless, a common core across the PM Playgroups was discernible. It is to this that we now turn.

To address the third evaluation question and identify the key characteristics of the PM Playgroups contributing to outcomes, qualitative analysis focused on identifying a common core across the Parent Mentoring Playgroups. Three main themes emerged from this process. The first was the inclusion of a structured, teacher-led, whole group learning time.

#### ***Structured 'teacher'-led mat time***

A key characteristic of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups was the inclusion of a structured teacher-led learning time referred to as 'mat time'. All but one CLW/Playgroup Leader incorporated this regularly into their sessions. (The Playgroup that did not do so had very low numbers of families.) As the qualitative evidence presented attests, mat time introduced children to school-like practices and activities in preparation for school. One Playgroup Leader explained mat time in the following way:

*"[It's] a more formal time when they learn to write their name and draw pictures and talk about their news and all those sort of early school skills."*

The inclusion of a structured teacher-led time in which children experienced school-like practices was a primary reason parents gave for choosing PM Playgroup over other early childhood education options.

*“What I like about Playgroup is especially the mat time. The first thing they learn is the ‘abc’ with the sounds. It really helps, even my little son, he is already starting to spell the words by the sounds. So, I can see a lot of big steps for him, get him ready to go to primary and in the new entrants.” (Parent)*

*“When we didn’t have a car the other week I took my son to the [other ECE] not far from me, we walk up for one week and I can tell the difference, only just play, play, play, there was no writing or anything like that...I know it’s far but I still bring him here.” (Pasifika parent)*

Their choice was based on the learning they observed in their children. Parents saw their children developing new skills from their participation in Playgroup, such as knowing how to identify letters and recite the alphabet and learning how to write their names. These skills had their basis in the practices and activities children experienced in the structured Playgroup mat time.

*“[My child] is learning a lot, everything, the colours, the letters, the numbers, the shapes, all those things, writing the names, reading the book.” (Pasifika parent)*

*“I used to take him to kindy first and...during the days he doesn’t go to kindy I take him to Playgroup and he say, “mum, I don’t like kindy” and I say, “why” and he say, “I like Playgroup, I want to write ‘abc’ and my name”...he even knows, Playgroup is more structured and kindy they mostly play.” (Parent)*

From these activities, parents saw children developing an interest in books and reading. For instance, one parent described how, when at home, her son would chose books for them to read together.

Mat time provided parents opportunities to observe what their children were learning and to learn ways in which they might support their children’s learning at home, as the following quotes from parents reveal:

*“One thing I do like about the Playgroup, it’s like us parents come and watch our children, what they are doing. After ‘school’ we are going to do this and we are [remembering at home]. It is different from the kindy, we don’t know what they are doing over there. But [here] we just help them for the numbers and ‘abc’...like reading.”*

*“In the Playgroup you can take this stuff and apply them at home, just building on it.”*

*“It’s not just kids learning here really, it’s like parents as well getting the ideas.”*

The benefits of Playgroup children’s prior experience with school-like practices and routines obtained during mat time were acknowledged by others too: Teachers spoke of the impact of PM Playgroup children’s familiarity with typical new entrant school-like routines. Specifically, it contributed to the development of valued classroom behaviours, such as sitting still, listening and paying attention to the teacher, knowing the alphabet and how to write their name.

*“You could pretty much tell who had been to a Playgroup situation and who hadn’t because the ones who hadn’t just couldn’t sit still...they just didn’t know how to be in that situation in an appropriate way.”* (New entrant teacher)

*“It’s amazing, the kids who come from Playgroup are much more organized, they listen to the teacher, they can write their names, they’re more settled.”* (New entrant teacher)

School principals similarly acknowledged Playgroup children’s readiness for school:

*“They’re settled, they’re ready for school, they have an orientation to learning – they’re ready to start learning when they enter school.”* (Principal)

*“[Parent Mentoring Playgroup] gives them the initial things that they haven’t had experiences with at home, that’s the holding of pencils, being able to sit and concentrate for a short period of time, listening to stories being read to them...it starts off that fine motor coordination that they need...the oral language.”* (Principal)

*“[The benefits for Playgroup children] are both social and academic really, that they learn to sit on the mat and all those sorts of things, they also do learn academic things, like letters.”* (Principal)

Familiarity with the routines of classroom life were also identified by CLWs/Playgroup Leaders as a key part of what children learned in PM Playgroup, which contributed to their readiness to learn.

*“Their readiness to learn has just been like instant, and settled and just familiar with routines and things like that, and parents are also familiar with routines and the environment, and you know the learning can just happen immediately.”* (Playgroup Leader)

According to teacher reports, these behaviours distinguished Parent Mentoring Playgroup children from other children who had not had these experiences.

*“The ones that have [been to Playgroup], they come into the classroom with a lot more knowledge than the ones that haven’t been...the classroom behavior is completely different*

... [they] can follow instructions and the routines...and even just knowing the basic alphabet – they say, oh, we learnt this at Playgroup.” (Classroom teacher)

“The children that go to Playgroup know how to respond back to questions and are more aware of what is happening in the classroom and they know because they always refer back to their personal experience that they’ve had at Playgroup.” (New entrant teacher)

According to CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, parents and teachers alike, Playgroup children were exposed to specific literacy skills in mat time that later supported their learning in the classroom context.

### ***Effective transitions***

The second theme to emerge was *transitions* –the effect that Parent Mentoring Playgroup participation had on children’s transitions to school. Transitioning to school has been identified as a significant developmental milestone in children’s lives (Wood, 1998). A key characteristic of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups contributing to outcomes for children was the impact it had on the quality of children’s transitions to school. Various aspects of the PM Playgroups played a role in this. Qualitative evidence obtained in this evaluation sheds light on these and on the nature of PM Playgroup children’s transitions. In addition, it provides insight into how Playgroup experiences and the skills children learned enhanced their transitions to school.

As noted, most of the PM Playgroups provided opportunities for children nearing school age to make regular visits with their parent to the new entrant class. According to school and Playgroup staff, these opportunities supported Playgroup children’s transition to school in several ways.

Starting school, and the separation from caregivers that this entails, can be a strange and unsettling experience for young children. Classroom visits provided deliberate opportunities for both children and parents to develop a level of familiarity with school, the classroom environment and teachers, which assisted children’s transitions by reducing their anxiety upon starting school:

*“[The Playgroup children] will come for another visit to see what I am doing with the kids...When they come [to school] they sort of know me and they settle in...all of the kids from [Playgroup], no one arrives crying, and they just come inside and away they go. It’s really good.”* (New entrant teacher)

*“[Playgroup children’s transition to school is] very good,... for those who start from here, you never see them cry.”* (CLW/Playgroup Leader)

*“Children who attend the Playgroup are more familiar with the school and therefore tend to be more settled.” (Principal)*

According to school staff reports, this familiarity also contributed to PM Playgroup children’s confidence in interacting with them.

*“[Parent Mentoring Playgroup children are] more familiar therefore they respond better. They don’t have inhibitions, they can share stories with us.” (New entrant teacher)*

*“The {Playgroup} children were confident...anything you ask them, they were confident...because they knew all the classroom situations, and the rules and what to do.” (New entrant teacher)*

*“There’s the interaction, which I think is really, really valuable. We can definitely see when children have been through that experience and when they haven’t.” (Principal)*

The proximity of the Playgroup and its connectedness to the school meant that opportunities to visit the new entrant classroom were easily accessed. Having regular visits as children approached school entry age provided ample opportunities for Playgroup children to develop this familiarity with the classroom context and school environment. Some maintained this contributed to a “*sense of belonging*” amongst Playgroup children. Others claimed it meant they were more independent upon school entry, more confident in the playground and better prepared for classroom learning:

*“They already know the layout of the classroom...they already know the classroom and they know where things are, and know where the toilets are and things. And on their first day they just come in and sit down on the mat and we’re just off and running.” (New entrant teacher)*

*“I see, as they come into school, children that are happy, children that are settled. Children that are just familiar with routines, expectations – it doesn’t throw them...The new entrant teacher will say, “oh, they’re wonderful! They just get on and do, they are independent...yes, the independence and just the confidence in the playground.” (Playgroup Leader)*

*“The feedback I get is more based around how prepared the children are by the time they...are ready to start school...knowing that they are about to walk into some routines, what those routines might look like, what they mean.” (Principal)*

The value for schools and families of effective transitions and the familiarisation PM Playgroup children and parents developed as a result of regular contact with the school was highlighted by depictions teachers gave of children who started school without this familiarity:

*“The transition is much easier for [PM Playgroup children]. Ones that go to kindy or anything else are pretty good as well, but they’ve still got to go through that whole ‘new place’ – [those who have no formal ECE] cry and it can go on for a couple of weeks and a lot of the times it can be the parents that have got the problems, the parents just won’t leave them and let go.” (New entrant teacher)*

Some PM Playgroups had additional processes in place to support Playgroup children’s transitions to school, the function of which was to facilitate continuity between the ECE and school contexts:

One PM Playgroup held combined ‘mat-time’ with the new entrant class on a regular basis:

*“We also try and integrate the children in the Playgroup, for instance, they have a common mat time every day from 10 am to 10:15 am with the reception class. We open the curtain between the rooms and the children mix and mingle. Then the mat time is led by the Playgroup Leader and I read a story. It’s a nice time where we say “see how the reception class works”. They get to see how a proper classroom works so it sets up expectations” (New entrant teacher)*

This Playgroup also had a “transition programme” wherein the child and parent attended the reception class from 9 am to 12:30 pm three days a week for a couple of months before the child turned 5. The purpose of this was to increase children’s familiarity and thereby ease transition to school. As a teacher at this school explained,

*“They get to know the teachers and the kids in reception class, they interact with them. They see the classroom and books, there’s the whole feeling of familiarity...They get familiarized with the formal part of going to school.”*

PM Playgroups had clear programme links with the new entrant classes, increasing continuity. For instance, some CLWs/Playgroup Leaders regularly talked with the new entrant teachers about the topics and themes they were using in the classroom and then incorporated these into their own programmes. Classroom topics like ‘floating and sinking’ and ‘sea creatures’ were incorporated into Playgroup activities at the same time that they were informing classroom activities. The following testimony of one Playgroup parent acknowledged the value that she saw in the connections Playgroup had with school:

*“The good thing here as well is like, the thing that the school gets, we get it here as well. So, if they are on dinosaurs – you know, learning about animals – we learn about animals as well, the whole term. And then we go on trips as well to see what it is, so they are not*

*missing out. So, it is really good. It is not like that we are on our own. We are together with the school.” (Parent)*

The inclusion of school-like routines and practices, like ‘mat time’, and the kinds of activities that occurred in the structured teacher-directed parts of the Playgroup programmes, as discussed above, are also examples of the ways in which continuity between the Playgroup and classroom programmes was increased. As shown above, these programme links supported the development of knowledge and skills in Playgroup that assisted later school learning – things like “*alphabet knowledge...basic colours and shapes*”—upon which classroom teaching could build. It was programme links like these that were believed to contribute to continuity between the educational environments of Playgroup and school, supporting effective transitions to school for the PM Playgroup children.

*“The [Playgroup] has links with the school, it was established in that manner so we had the kids ready before they make the transition to school and it’s really good because the programmes are parallel with what we are doing here...it makes a big difference...[The Playgroup children are] also in the routines of school...to get used to going to school and the parents are very supportive of it.” (New entrant teacher)*

### ***Parent participation and engagement***

A third theme to emerge centred on the nature of parent participation and engagement in the Parent Mentoring Playgroup and the implications of this for child outcomes and ongoing effective involvement by parents. Several key features of Parent Mentoring Playgroup were identified across the Playgroups that impacted on the nature of parent participation and their level of engagement. These included the opportunities parents had to learn alongside their child and the nature of the learning that occurred there, features that Playgroup parents found particularly valuable and that contributed to their ongoing participation.

As noted, a requirement of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups in the evaluation was that parents attended with their children. According to CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, parents regularly did so. Parents confirmed this was an aspect of Playgroup that they valued. Parents were keen to attend and participate. It was important for them to feel that their presence was valued and welcomed. Evidence obtained showed that parents were choosing PM Playgroup because it gave them the opportunity to watch their child learn, and, importantly for them, an opportunity to participate with their child and learn alongside them.



*“If you stay at home you never know anything about what’s happening over here for your kids. But when you come here, you learn more what kids love to do”. (Parent)*

*“You learn to be a better parent as well and what you can teach them.” (Parent)*

As the name of the project indicates, parent learning through mentoring was a key aim. One of the expected outcomes of the Parent Mentoring Playgroup project was that parents would gain learning resources and information on how to support their children’s learning at home. According to parent reports, they enjoyed and valued the learning they gained through participation.

*“It really helps when we learn from here. It’s not just a kid’s learning here really, it’s like parents as well, getting the ideas and coming back to [Playgroup] and doing it, it’s fun, even parents can do it.” (Parent)*

According to CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, through their participation in Playgroup, parents learned ways of interacting with their children that supported the development of learning valued in the school context. One example of this was learning how to support their child to become an independent learner. For many of the families attending, this appeared to be especially salient. CLWs and Playgroup Leaders commented that when parents first arrived at Playgroup, often they tried to do everything for their child even in play. With mentoring, CLWs/Playgroup Leaders helped parents learn to allow their children to be independent.

*“Often when an adult comes in, the adult wants to do everything for the child, but it’s as much about the adult figuring out how their child is learning as the child. So, I think one of the benefits for that is that the learning goes with them. It doesn’t stop at the end of our session because the adult and the child are both keyed into learning and figuring out how their child is learning best. Then it continues right throughout the day.” (Playgroup Leader)*

*“I think that the important thing that they learn is to let the child do things on their own, learn independence, because most of the parents do things for the children, even little things. It’s to allow the child to develop what they have. And when that happens and you see mum there and the child sort of moving away from mum.” (CLW)*

CLWs/Playgroup Leaders encouraged parents to stand back and watch their child, and allow their children to do things for themselves. When parents did this, CLWs/Playgroup Leaders said they were often surprised by what their child could do without assistance.

Parents also learned ways of talking with their children that supported learning. New parents to PM Playgroup often direct children to do things, according to CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, and often need to be coached to talk with their children about what they were doing during play.

*“One of the biggest things I am focusing on is getting the parents to talk with their children rather than just giving instructions, and for them to be involved in the learning rather than holding back and just letting the teacher do the teacher stuff.” (Playgroup Leader)*

Another important thing parents learned from participation, according to CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, is how to interact with their children effectively in learning situations. Parents learned through the mentoring provided by CLWs and Playgroup Leaders and through observation. During facilitated play and in the structured learning situations, parents were exposed to modelling of language and literacy activities by CLWs and Playgroup Leaders, like book reading and open ended questioning, and ways of providing children with support that allowed them to manage parts of learning situations independently.

*“Encouraging them to ask their children what they are doing, or what they’re making or what colours they’re using, what shapes they are cutting out. Get them to sit down and read books and go through poems.” (CLW)*

According to CLWs/Playgroup Leaders, parents learned practical things they could do at home to support their child’s learning of valued school-like practices: Parents learned how to encourage and assist their children with literacy practices at Playgroup which they then used at home with their child. For example, one CLW explained that she tells parents *“at home, at night, while your other children do their homework, give [your preschooler] pen and paper and she might like to do that at the same time.”*

Playgroup parents confirmed that they learned practices that they and their children used at home with their children.

*“At home, we take books and read. One sentence books [my son] can already read. The words [he knows from] here, he takes them and finds them, and he knows which words. Words he don’t know he ask me or he ask his older brother, ... and making his own sentences, he is already doing that.” (Parent)*

CLWs/Playgroup Leaders provided advice to parents on ways of engaging with their children in literacy tasks at home. Often parents lacked particular knowledge of how to engage their children in learning at home in ways that encouraged children’s participation. One CLW described a typical parent eager for her child to be ready for school who sought help from the CLW on how to encourage her child to write his name.

*“Parents do their part at home. We had a mum too, [who said] my son just don’t want to write, he just want to play and play...then I said spend about 2-3 minutes with him, 5 days...don’t force him...don’t sit him down for 20 minutes, he will get bored.”*

Parents acknowledged the learning that they gained from participation in PM Playgroup and how they could use what they learned at home to support their children’s learning.

*“We learn all the things that teacher does so we can do them too.”* (Parent)

*“In the Playgroup, you can take this stuff and apply them at home, just building on it. You come here, they get stuff and you back up on it, mostly you can do it at home. The learning doesn’t stop here...Plus, me and my son, we understand...together. It’s not like I am forcing him to do that...But if you both know what to do...”* (Parent)

The latter parent went on to explain that she and her child had learned through participation in PM Playgroup how to engage jointly in learning. Since then, rather than insisting that he engage in reading or writing activities, she encouraged and supported him. This benefitted both parent and child. Learning to engage together in this way supported the development of a love of learning between parent and child:

*“My daughter has definitely improved really well, so quickly with her writing and even like, she loves reading and wants me to read to her all the time.”* (Parent)

According to CLWs, parents gained confidence in knowing how to support their child’s learning. For some, this meant a growing confidence with the English language as parents and children interacted in English together in the Playgroup. For others, it meant feeling more competent about how to support learning. Parents confirmed that they gained confidence in knowing how to interact with their children through their participation in Playgroup, as the following parent’s testimony shows:

*“I find it helps me to interact with my child, also learning how to play with them, to teach, because the environment here, it creates that...it really helps, not only confidence for my child but also for myself as a parent.”*

Playgroup also provided opportunities for parents to gain confidence in communicating with those they perceived to be authority figures in the school. CLWs/Playgroup Leaders often found parents to be very shy and reticent at first. Through participation in Playgroup, parents developed a familiarity with the teachers of their children, both in Playgroup and in the school, enabling them to communicate with them around their children’s learning.

*"{Playgroup parents develop} confidence to actually talk with us...they actually feel they can approach you. You take away that sort of awe...Just confidence in coming to ask. One of the mothers today said, "oh, I've been reading a book at home that you gave me" – I'd given her a book for the little one, and they will tell me about it, whereas before that they wouldn't. They say, "now, is this the right thing to do, we are doing this and that, and they'll tell you what the children are doing and that they'd played games at home with them and how it's gone." (Playgroup Leader)*

*"Some of them, when they first start, they are very shy, and then they are more open." (CLW)*

Parents also became familiar with the school environment and developed confidence in the school setting:

*"They are meeting others in the school...the parents get to meet the principal, they get to meet new entrant teachers. The AP, DP even might pop up and they'll know him...they get to know all these people that have different roles in this environment that their child is eventually going to come in to." (Playgroup Leader)*

*"We've established some sort of a relationship with the teachers and the school throughout the years so that makes it comfortable here." (Parent)*

Parent participation and engagement in PM Playgroup appeared to be enhanced by another factor: The requirement that parents attend and participate alongside their child legitimized their presence there. They wanted to be there, but they also felt that their presence was valued, which helped them to feel a sense of place and belonging. Pasifika parents in particular, hold a certain deference for persons of authority, like educators, which may undermine their feelings about what they have to offer their children in learning contexts (McNaughton, 2001). However, at Playgroup the requirement that they attend with their children validated their presence in the learning environment and at the same time gave them skills that contributed to their confidence as a teacher of their child.

In some instance, parents also learned that they had particular skills to contribute. One CLW reported on how she drew on the expertise in her Playgroup to add to the experiences for all:

*"As a group I sat them all down and I said 'I know all of you's have got something hidden that you can show us. You have got hidden talents there somewhere. [One mother] could do artwork, she was so particular about artwork and really creative...while the parent was doing the artwork the other parents were getting some ideas from that parent so they were*

*learning, they were taking that home, they were sharing that with their child. Because, as I said, I would give a piece of paper to the child, piece of paper to the parent. The child would do a flower, the parent would do a flower and they started mixing the colours. The child would see the colour the mother is using. I don't know what it is about children but they love their dark colours, and sometimes they will just do one colour, everything is blue, everything is black and they wouldn't add colour, but when they saw mum adding colours to her flower they would start putting extra colour in and I thought, well you know, without realising it that parent was teaching. The parent that knew artwork was teaching the parent to teach the child."*

Other features of Playgroup clearly influenced parents' participation in Playgroup. Firstly, as noted earlier, a major reason for parents' choice of PM Playgroup for their children was the access it gave their children to the kinds of experiences they valued: These parents wanted their children to acquire the skills that they believed would ensure their child's school success. School success was very important to them because they wanted their children to have more opportunities than they had. They believed that through PM Playgroup and the structured learning opportunities it provided their children would gain access to these skills. This was vividly shown in the report by one CLW of what happened when she asked parents what they wanted for their children:

*"[Parents said], "we want our children to do well; we don't want them to be cleaning like we are. We want them to - sky's the limit" they said. I said, "I can only give you the tools but you have to use the tools...I can give you a crayon but you have to show the child how to use the crayon to do the drawing"...[Parents said], "no, no, we don't want that, we want more...We want our children to write their name, know their ABC, be able to stand up and have confidence to be able to say, read a book, or do something." (CLW)*

The inclusion of structured learning in PM Playgroup sessions over free play activities appeared to be preferred particularly by Pasifika families. While an emphasis on free play is commonplace in early childhood centres, and indeed considered best practice, many PMP parents did not want this for their children who they believed had ample opportunity to play at home. Not only did they see free play in ECE as taking away opportunities to learn key skills that would help their children at school, but they did not approve of certain free play activities. As one CLW explained, Pasifika parents in her Playgroup did not like their children engaging in free play involving water where their children might get wet, or activities that used consumable resources, as this was considered wasteful. The following quote explains this stance.

*“[There are] days we will have [just] play because [Ministry adviser] came and she says, “Oh, your playgroup is too structured. You need to build their minds and let them think.”... I got some [soap] flakes out and mixed them with warm water. It got all gooey and the children went to put it to their ... I said to the parents, “this is what [is recommended]”. They said, “no, we don’t want our children sneezing and eating the flakes”... even though the Ministry is paying for it, they see the soap flakes as a waste...because [the children] could go home and start playing with all the soap powders”*

The qualitative findings presented here highlight three key characteristics of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups in Manukau schools – structured, teacher-led learning, effective transitions, and the nature of parent participation and engagement – that have contributed to outcomes for children and effective participation of parents. The implications of these findings are discussed in the next section.

## 5.0 Conclusion and Discussion

Quantitative findings obtained in this evaluation showed that students who participated in Parent Mentoring Playgroups had higher achievement scores on literacy measures over the first two years of schooling than students who experienced other formal early childhood education and those who experienced informal or no early childhood education. These differences were significant and meaningful on most of the literacy measures at age 6 years. Differences between students who experienced other formal early childhood education and those who experienced informal or no early childhood experience were not significant at either age 6 years or at age 7. Moreover, the findings showed that children who attended Parent Mentoring Playgroups tended to receive more favourable ratings by teachers on the transition to school scale at age 5 years and tended to have more positive attitudes to learning at age 6 and 7 than the other two groups, although for the most part, these differences were not significant. Hahn's (2005) study of the impact of participation in Parent Mentoring Playgroups in Manukau, which compared the literacy achievement of PM Playgroup children with that of children who had received some other form of ECE and those who had not, obtained similar findings.

Although not all differences obtained between the PM Playgroup children and the children in the other two groups were significant, overall, there was a clear trend towards higher literacy achievement, better transitions and more positive attitudes to learning for students who attended Parent Mentoring Playgroups compared to those who experienced other formal ECE and those who had no or informal ECE. These differences could not be explained by mother's educational level. Moreover, the pooling of student group data across schools controlled for potential bias from teacher effects.

To understand these findings, we draw on the qualitative evidence and the key characteristics of the Parent Mentoring Playgroups identified that contributed to successful learning outcomes for students and effective involvement of parents, and consider these against the research literature.

Qualitative evidence revealed that Playgroup participation had positive effects on children's transitions to school. According to qualitative data sources, Parent Mentoring Playgroup children generally transitioned well to school, often noticeably better than other children who did not have the same early childhood educational experiences. It should be noted that this finding is supported by the quantitative findings on transitions obtained in this evaluation that showed that Parent Mentoring Playgroup children received higher ratings than the other children in the sample from classroom teachers on the transition to school scale upon school entry.

The successful transitions made by Playgroup children were attributed to their familiarity with school, teachers and the classroom learning environment resulting from the connectedness of the PM Playgroups to the schools and the access Playgroup children and parents had to the school and classroom context. Additionally, Playgroup children's transitions were believed to have been enhanced through the familiarity they developed with school-like practices and routines experienced in Playgroup, and the programme links that existed between Playgroup and the classroom. Such links and experiences created continuity between settings for Playgroup children and contributed to the development of shared knowledge about learning across these two contexts.

According to research and developmental psychology, this kind of continuity is key to successful transitions. Educational researchers like Dyson (1997) contend that transitions are enhanced where connections can be made between activities and learning contexts. The inclusion of school-like practices and activities, such as the structured, teacher-led mat time that occurred in Parent Mentoring Playgroups, provided just this sort of connection for Playgroup children. In this way, Playgroup provided practices that ensured continuity between settings, providing children with experience of the conventionalized ways of participating in classrooms.

McNaughton's (2001) *framework for studying transitions from ECE to school* provides further support in understanding the effect of continuity and shared knowledge on transition to school. According to McNaughton, "the development of shared understanding with educators about specific literacy activities and about the nature of educational guidance is an important component of effective transitions for children from diverse communities" (p. 50). Given the high number of ethnic minority families attending the Parent Mentoring Playgroups in Manukau, this is particularly salient. An indicator of an effective transition is early school progress, according to McNaughton (2001). The fact that we found both of these outcomes for Parent Mentoring Playgroup children in this evaluation is encouraging.

The relationship between children's and families' familiarity with school and successful transition to school has additional support in the research literature: The importance of familiarisation activities for children and families through school visits was identified by Peters (2010), in a recent review of the transition literature, as a key strategy ECEs and schools can employ to support children's transitions to school. Research has shown that "having many opportunities to become familiar with school was important in overcoming some of the potential difficulties children may face" and that "children who have experienced the school through repeated visits or contact are more likely to hold realistic expectations about school, which can help their transition" (Peters, 2010, p. 69). Evidence suggests that this is important for Pasifika families: In a study of Pasifika children's experiences of transition to school by Podmore, Wendt Samu and the A'oga Fa'a Samoa (2006, cited



in Peters, 2010), Pasifika parents highlighted the importance of children's familiarity with the school setting: Having the ECE that the children attended situated in the school grounds was also key. We believe that the fact that the Parent Mentoring Playgroups were situated in, and strongly connected to, schools were an important factor in the outcomes for children and involvement by parents.

The nature of the contact that Playgroup families had with schools prior to school entry is another important factor: This is because when children and families have personalized contact with schools in advance of children beginning school, transitions for children are optimized (McNaughton, 2001).

These research insights provide support for the findings in this evaluation on Playgroup children's and parents' familiarity and contact with school gained through Playgroup participation and the meaning this had for children's transitions.

Peters (2010) identified other areas where familiarity impacts positively on school transition: children's familiarity with school rules has been shown to be beneficial as it provides explicit assistance on 'doing school' that can help children to develop a sense of belonging, a key feature of successful school transitions. Additionally, familiarity with the school environment and school routines and practices most likely contribute to a new entrant's confidence. Reportedly, PM Playgroup children developed a familiarity with school-like rules and routines.

As Peters (2010) notes, the relationship between the existence of peer friendships and effective school transitions is widely established. Although evidence on this is not reported here, children in the Parent Mentoring Playgroups had many opportunities to socialise with other children, most if not all of whom went on to attend the same school. Similarly, Parent Mentoring Playgroups provided ongoing opportunities for parents to network with other parents, gain mutual support and share information. Peters (2010) suggests that this is a key means by which parents can support children's school transitions.

The quality of the home learning environment has been found to have a stronger overall effect on academic and social development than that of other important influences (Siraj-Blachford, Taggart, Sylva, Sammons & Melhuish, 2008). While direct evidence of the quality of the home learning environment of the families that attended PM Playgroup is not available, information obtained on the nature of parent participation and engagement in Playgroup suggested that PM Playgroup parents developed skills supportive of children's learning, skills they used both at Playgroup and at home. This was a key characteristic of Playgroup participation. Further, evidence suggested that parents developed confidence in interacting with their children's educators. The skills, confidence and familiarity with schools gained through participation in Parent Mentoring Playgroup may have increased parents' ability to provide support for their children's learning once they started school

and participate more fully in their children's school learning. It is quite possible that this contributed to the higher achievement levels shown for PM Playgroup children over the first years of schooling.

Based on the evidence presented in this report, it is possible to speculate further on how the higher achievement levels of PM Playgroup children were achieved. As noted, characteristics of the Parent Mentoring Playgroup experience that appear to have contributed to the successful learning outcomes for students include the finding that PM Playgroups incorporated structured, teacher-led, school-like activities, including a range of literacy activities and classroom-like routines which parents found particularly favourable. By all accounts, these activities provided Playgroup children with opportunities to become familiar with school practices and routines. These opportunities and activities served to prepare children for school entry, easing their transition to school and providing them with skills and a readiness for learning valued by classroom teachers. It is conceivable that the existence of these skills and readiness for learning on the part of Playgroup children provided the foundations for school learning and thereby maximized their learning opportunities once they started school: In this scenario, the existence of these skills and experience enabled teachers to begin teaching these children at a more advanced level immediately since they did not have to spend time teaching basic skills. Moreover, having the foundational school-like knowledge at school entry meant that Playgroup students could make use of the teaching opportunities presented. Together, these factors may have provided Playgroup children with an educational advantage that, in conjunction with the support they received at home from parents, expanded over time, contributing to the higher levels of achievement attained.

Pasifika parents are more likely than parents of other cultural groups in New Zealand to believe that they do not know how to support their children in education, and are more likely to express reservations about teaching children in the absence of professional training as an educator than other cultural groups (McNaughton, 2001). In this regard, issues have been raised around the access that parents from minority cultures have to "privileged professional knowledge about specific activities" for literacy learning (McNaughton, 2001, p. 48), cultural capital, if you will. The large majority of families participating in the Parent Mentoring Playgroups in Manukau were Pasifika, most of whom had low levels of education. Evidence contained in this report suggests that through Playgroup, these parents were able to access valued knowledge for their children about activities to support school learning, information that they recognized they did not have and deliberately sought. Given the contention that providing opportunities for "access to professional knowledge through incidental observation" can have a significant impact on parental learning (McNaughton, 2001, p. 48-49), providing the kind of mentoring that occurred in PM Playgroup can be expected to be just as empowering and effective if not more so, particularly when it is sought by the learner.

It is important to note that this type of early childhood education option appeared to fit with the needs of the community in Manukau. In communities where the cultural capital for school success is readily available, this type of ECE option is unlikely to be effective or desirable.

It could be argued that an alternative explanation for the outcomes obtained for PM Playgroup students may be that Playgroup parents and/or children differed in some way unrelated to their Playgroup participation from other parents and children that contributed to the outcomes. For instance, parents in this group may have had greater aspirations for their children's academic success or a greater interest in their children's learning prior to Playgroup participation, which led to their children's academic achievement gains. If such differences existed, their effects were not discernible at age 5 upon entry to school. Further, the finding that mothers' level of education, an important predictor of child academic achievement, was lower for PM Playgroup mothers than other mothers does not support the suggestion of greater aspirations for, or interest in, children's learning by Playgroup mothers.

Given the inability to utilise an experimental design in the context of this intervention, care should be taken in ascribing causality. However, strengths of this evaluation are the mixed methods design employed and the multiple data sources that informed the study, which provide considerable confidence in the findings.

In conclusion, the findings presented here suggest that participation in Parent Mentoring Playgroup contributed to better literacy achievement for Playgroup children compared to peers who experienced other formal early childhood education and those who had no ECE, and effective involvement of parents.

## References

- Anderson, P., Lindsey, J., Schulz, W., Monseur, C., & Meiers, M. (2004). *An evaluation of the technical and methodological aspects of the School Entry Assessment Kit*. Report prepared by ACER for the Ministry of Education.
- Clay, M. M. (1993). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement*. Auckland, New Zealand: Heinemann Education.
- Creswell, J.W. & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007) *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Gorinski, R. (2005) *Parent Mentoring Initiative Evaluation*. Report prepared for the Ministry of Education, New Zealand.
- Hahn, J. (2005) *Parent Mentoring in Mangere and Otara. An analysis and interpretation of literacy data*. Report prepared for the Ministry of Education, New Zealand.
- Hucker, J. (2001) *Parent Mentoring: A literature review*. Report prepared for the Ministry of Education, New Zealand.
- Lai, M. K., McNaughton, S., Amituanai-Toloa, M., Turner, R. & Hsiao, S. (2009). Sustained acceleration of achievement in reading comprehension: The New Zealand experience. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44, 30-56.
- McNaughton, S. (2001). Co-constructing expertise: The development of parents' and teachers' ideas about literacy practices and the transition to school. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 1, 40-58.
- Ministry of Education, (2006). *Request for Proposals: An Evaluation of the Parent Mentoring Project in Manukau*.
- Peters, S. (2010). *Literature Review: Transition from Early Childhood Education to School*. Report produced for the Ministry of Education.
- Siraj-Blachford, I., Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Sammons, P. & Melhuish, E. (2008). Towards the transformation of practice in early childhood education: the effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38, 23-36.
- Wood, D. (1998). *How children think and learn*. Oxford: Blackwell.

## Appendices

# Appendix 1

## Attitudes to Learning

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_

Really like it!    Like it a bit    Don't know/  
not sure    Don't like much    Really don't like!

I like to learn new things at school.

I like to do my schoolwork.

I like reading books in school.

I like reading with my teacher.

I like starting a new book.

I like it when it's maths time.

I like to learn about numbers.

I like to do what the teacher asks me to do.

I like writing.

## Appendix 2

### Transition to School Survey

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

To be completed by the classroom teacher within the child's first 5 weeks of school.

Please tick the box to indicate your level of agreement about each statement for the child named.	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The child is eager to go to school.				
2. The child is upset about going to school.				
3. The child has friends at school.				
4. The child is pleased with their social adjustment.				
5. The child can follow school routines.				
6. Teachers are pleased with the child's social adjustment.				
7. Parents/caregivers are happy to leave the child at school for the whole day.				
8. The child separates easily from parents/caregivers.				
9. The child is able to communicate effectively with teachers and peers.				
10. The child is scared to talk to teachers.				
11. The child is curious to learn.				
12. The child is able to work independently.				