



ISSN: 2993-8759

Iris Journal of
Educational Research

DOI: 10.33552/IJER.2024.03.000572

Iris Publishers

Review Article

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A Preliminary Study of the Values and Benefits of Community-Based Play Hubs

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Received Date: July 02, 2024

Published Date: August 05, 2024

Abstract

Free and unstructured play is widely recognized as crucial for children's holistic development, yet opportunities for such play can be limited in city environments like Hong Kong. In recent years, the Hong Kong government has sought to develop a family and child friendly environment and more emphasis has put on play based learning by increasing the number and variety of public playgrounds and require more free play time at kindergarten curriculum. Alongside these efforts, a growing network of private, community-based "play hubs" has emerged, offering flexible, child-led play spaces that are welcomed by many parents and educators.

This study employed a mixed methods approach to investigate the distinct features and benefits of these community play hubs from multiple stakeholder perspectives. A survey was conducted with Hub staff to understand their perceptions about the Hub and free play philosophy. Qualitative interviews with kindergarten teachers and focus groups with parents revealed insights into the hubs' facilitation philosophies, operational challenges, and the motivations of families who utilize these spaces.

Analysis of the hub environments and programming highlighted key characteristics, including their emphasis on free, unstructured play, opportunities for social interaction, and affordability for families. These findings suggest that community play hubs can meaningfully supplement Hong Kong's evolving play infrastructure, aligning with broader policy goals around child wellbeing and healthy child development. Recommendations are provided for strategies to sustain and expand this growing network of community-based play resources.

Introduction

The importance of free, unstructured play in child development is well-documented [1]. Opportunities for children to freely explore, experiment, and interact with their environment in self-directed ways have been shown to foster critical cognitive, physical, social, and emotional skills (Singer et al., 2006; Ginsburg, 2007). Through play, children learn to problem-solve, regulate their emotions, cooperate with peers, and develop their creativity and imagination - all of which contribute to healthy developmental trajectories [2,3].

In Hong Kong, children's access to sufficient play opportunities can be limited [6]. Factors such as reduced green space, limited public

recreation areas, safety concerns, and the demands of structured academic and extracurricular schedules can constrain the time and space available for free play [4,5]. In response, the Hong Kong government has in recent years sought to enhance its play infrastructure through initiatives aimed at increasing the number and variety of public playgrounds. Alongside these efforts, a growing network of private, community-based "play hubs" has also emerged, offering flexible, child-led play spaces that may help address the free play deficit experienced by many Hong Kong families with young children. Understanding the distinct features and perceived benefits of these community play hubs can provide



valuable insights for efforts to better support children's play and, in turn, their holistic development.

The Play Hub

Alongside the Hong Kong government's efforts to expand public play infrastructure, a parallel network of privately-operated "play hubs" has emerged, often supported by charitable organizations, and situated within less-affluent communities. These community-based play hubs are specifically designed to offer free, accessible play opportunities for children from low-income families who may have limited access to recreational resources.

In contrast to traditional playgrounds, these play hubs are intentionally outfitted to provide children with a diverse array of play experiences. In addition to open-ended play areas, many hubs incorporate dedicated spaces for messy play, water play, and sensory-rich activities like sand pits. These specialized play environments are curated to stimulate children's creativity, problem-solving, and physical skill development through hands-on, multisensory engagement.

Crucially, the community play hubs are also staffed by trained professionals, including social workers and early childhood educators, who facilitate the play sessions and support children's learning and social-emotional growth. Through their supervision and guidance, the hubs aim to maximize the developmental benefits of free, unstructured play for participants.

By locating these play hubs within low-income districts and offering their services at no cost to families, the initiative seeks to provide equitable access to high-quality play opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach. This targeted outreach to underserved communities represents a novel approach to enhancing children's play experiences and overall wellbeing within Hong Kong's densely populated urban landscape.

Research Objectives

This study sought to investigate the community play hub model from multiple stakeholder perspectives to understand its distinct features and perceived benefits better. Specifically, the research had two main objectives:

Staff Perspectives: The study aimed to explore how play hub staff approach facilitating free play experiences for children.

Parent and Educator Perspectives: The research evaluated the quality and impact of community play hubs from the viewpoints of parents and early childhood educators.

Methodology

The researchers used a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys with focus groups, observations, and interviews, to investigate the community play hub model from diverse stakeholder perspectives. This enabled them to gather broad quantitative data and in-depth qualitative insights, allowing triangulation of findings and a more comprehensive, nuanced understanding of the play hub model.

Participants

Survey participants consisted of approximately 30 staff members from 5 different community play hubs located across Hong Kong.

Focus group participants included parents and early childhood educators. Focus group Interviews were conducted with 6 mothers and 2 kindergarten teachers from one of the communities play hubs.

Data Collection

Survey with Hub Staff

Surveys were administered to staff members from 5 community play hubs situated in different districts of Hong Kong. The surveys explored the hubs' philosophical approaches to free play, programming considerations, operational challenges, and strategies for engaging with families.

Parent and Teacher Focus Groups

Focus group discussions elicited participants' assessments of the hubs' quality, perceived benefits for children's development, and suggestions for improvement or expansion.

All focus group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Observations

In-depth observations were conducted at 5 community play hubs.

By triangulating insights from hub staff, parents, and teachers, this mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the community play hubs' distinctive features and their perceived value for children's wellbeing and learning.

Data Analysis

This research employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques to synthesize the survey, focus group, observation, and interview data. This mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation and a comprehensive investigation of the community play hub from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The survey data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize and understand the tendencies and variability of the responses. Measures of central tendency, such as mean, median, and mode, will be calculated to characterize the overall trends in the data. Measures of dispersion, including range, variance, and standard deviation, will be used to understand the variability, and spread of the responses. The research team will also examine relationships between variables using correlation and regression analysis as appropriate.

Qualitative Data Analysis

For the focus group interviews, the research team will analyze the transcript of the discussions and identify key themes and

patterns that emerge. A thematic analysis approach will be used to code the data and categorize the discussion into meaningful themes. The observation data will be analyzed using event coding to compare the similarities and differences among the various community play hubs. The team will develop a coding scheme to systematically record and quantify the observed activities, interactions, and environmental characteristics of the hubs. This will allow for cross-case comparisons and the identification of common trends and divergences.

The integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings will enable a comprehensive understanding of the community play hub phenomenon from multiple perspectives. The mixed-methods approach will provide complementary insights and allow the research team to draw robust conclusions about the characteristics, usage patterns, and impacts of the community play hubs.

Findings

Survey

Aligning Beliefs and Practice: Staff Perspectives on Free Play

The study's interviews with community play hub staff revealed

a profound, shared belief in the transformative power of free, self-directed play for children's development. Across all participants, there was a strong conviction that the hubs' primary role should be to provide open-ended, unstructured play opportunities that allow young visitors the freedom to freely choose their activities, determine how to play, and decide with whom to interact.

Based on the information provided in Table 1, the responses from the Play Hub staff indicate that their perception of the free play environment aligns with the definition of free play.

Observation

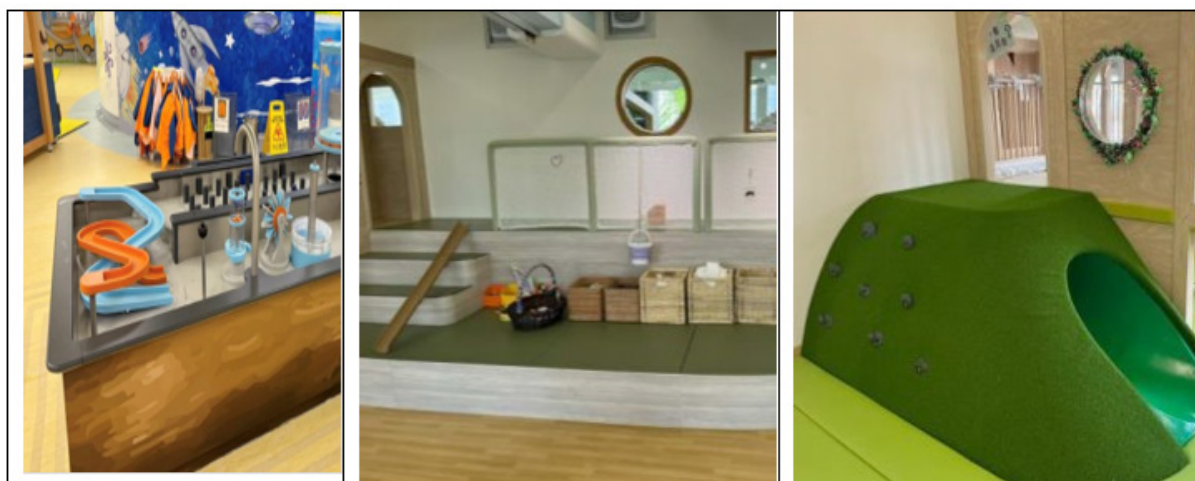
Translating Beliefs into Practice

The hub staff's strong commitment to free play principles was clearly reflected in their operational practices and assessments of hub quality. When evaluating the effectiveness of their play spaces, staff placed the highest value on indicators directly aligned with their free play philosophy. These included providing diverse, open-ended play materials and experiences to encourage exploration, designing flexible and non-prescriptive play areas, offering ample opportunities for child-directed and unstructured activity (ref to Table 2), and facilitating in a nurturing, non-directive manner by caring adult mentors.

Table 1: Hub staff perception of free play implementation in their Hubs.

Questions	Hubs M (SD)					F/ means
	Hub A (n = 5)	Hub B (n = 9)	Hub C (n = 4)	Hub D (n = 14)	Hub E (n = 4)	
1. Abundant and diversified low-structured play materials can stimulate children's creativity.	4.60 (.55)	4.22 (.44)	4.50 (.58)	4.07 (.62)	3.50 (1.73)	1.45/4.178
2. Unstructured play is the true free play.	4.00 (1.00)	3.78 (1.09)	3.50 (1.29)	3.57 (.94)	3.50 (1.73)	.20/3.67
3. Children can develop learning motivation through free play.	5.00 (.00)	4.33 (.50)	4.50 (.58)	4.36 (.75)	3.50 (1.73)	2.05/4.338
4. Adult participation in children's free play can add value to the play.	4.20 (.84)	4.00 (.71)	4.25 (.50)	4.14 (.77)	3.75 (1.89)	.22/4.068
5. The experiences provided by the Play Hub are different from those at school and home.	4.80 (4.75)	4.22 (.44)	4.50 (.58)	4.29 (.73)	4.00 (2.00)	.62/4.362
6. The Play Hub is unique compared to other community facilities.	4.80 (.45)	4.33 (.71)	4.50 (.58)	4.14 (.78)	3.75 (1.89)	.95/4.304
7. The Play Hub can strengthen the connection between children, families, and the community.	4.40 (.55)	4.33 (.50)	4.50 (.58)	3.93 (.62)	3.25 (1.50)	2.38/4.082
8. I believe the Play Hub will maintain its uniqueness in the next five years.	4.80 (.45)	4.33 (.71)	4.50 (.58)	3.64 (.63)	3.25 (1.50)	4.02*/4.104

Note: *p < 0.05

Table 2: Some features of Play Hubs (<https://www.keysteps.hk/en/hubs/>).

Focus group interview

Unique Features of the Play Hubs

Parents and teachers highlighted several distinctive aspects of the community play hubs that set them apart from other play spaces in the local community. The indoor, climate-controlled facilities were viewed as a major advantage, allowing children to engage in free play year-round regardless of weather conditions. As one parent noted, "My kids love coming here because they can play freely without having to worry about rain or heat." The teachers also acknowledged that the hubs compensate for the limited play time available in the highly structured, curriculum-driven school environment. Overall, the combination of an all-weather, open-ended play setting was a valuable resource for children's holistic development.

Messy Play Experiences

Parents appreciated that the hubs provided opportunities for open-ended, sensory play with materials like sand, water, and art supplies - experiences that are often restricted in more controlled settings like schools and homes. As one parent expressed, "The kids can really get their hands dirty and experiment here in ways they'd never be allowed to do at home."

Professional Facilitation

Parents valued the presence of trained play facilitators at the hubs, feeling it created a safe and nurturing environment for their children's play. As one participant noted, "It's reassuring to know there are qualified staff here to engage with the kids and ensure everything runs smoothly."

Children's Enthusiasm

Across both parent and teacher perspectives, there was consistent reporting of children's deep enthusiasm for the play hubs. Parents shared anecdotes of their kids constantly talking about and eagerly seeking opportunities to return to the hubs, while teachers noted that the play experiences at the hubs tended

to leave a much stronger, more enduring impression on the children compared to school-based play.

Complementing Classroom Play

The teachers viewed the community play hubs as a vital complement to the play opportunities available in the school setting. By compensating for the limitations of the classroom context and providing qualitatively deeper play experiences, the hubs were making an invaluable contribution to young children's holistic development and learning.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the important role that community-based free play hubs can play in supporting children's holistic development, particularly in dense urban environments where traditional play spaces may be limited. The unique features of these hubs, as reported by both parents and teachers, demonstrate how they can complement and extend the play opportunities offered in the school and home contexts.

The emphasis on indoor, climate-controlled facilities that enable year-round, weather-independent play is a significant advantage, especially given the constraints often faced in crowded city settings. This allows children to engage in the kind of free, open-ended play that is crucial for their learning and growth, without the interruptions or restrictions that can occur outdoors or in the home.

The design of the play hub is crucial. Play hubs offer experiences that families and schools often cannot provide due to time constraints, setup logistics, and environmental maintenance. However, this unique play experience is essential for child development, as it expands their opportunities for hands-on exploration beyond storybooks and teaching aids."

The adults in the play hub also play a significant role. The trained hub staff, with relevant social work and early childhood experience, possess a good understanding of child development,

communication skills, and program design abilities. Their participation serves as a model for mothers and teachers, helping them understand how to implement free play effectively.

The maintenance costs of play hubs can be substantial due to the specialized play equipment setup and the need to hire professional staff. Currently, the hub operates as a free resource, making it accessible to economically disadvantaged families. Considering this, government funding becomes crucial to sustain these child-centered play hubs and ensure continued service to the community.

In conclusion, we hope that during the experimental period, more children's play stories can be collected and showcased. This display could attract funding support for play hubs of this kind. Additionally, it sheds light on the importance for local kindergartens to offer more free play opportunities for children.

Acknowledgment

HKJC Charity Fund.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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