

LITERACY IN PRE SCHOOLS *(Branch Conference 1998)*

A. Introduction and Overview

The Australian Education Union Victorian Branch has agreed that defining literacy is a complex and contentious task.

In schools reading, writing, spelling, comprehension, speaking and listening are encompassed by various frameworks and benchmarks. Growing recognition has also been given to technological literacy, cyber literacy, cultural literacy and critical literacy.

In preschool programs literacy wears a less familiar and recognisable face. This is because in the preschool program learning experiences that promote literacy are deeply embedded in the context of play and interactions, and for this reason and because of the integrated nature of the preschool curriculum may seem less obvious.

Preschool programs build upon the foundations of literacy developed in the home from birth. Parents stimulate language development with meaningful and appropriate verbal interactions with their child; act as speech models; read to and with their children; and encourage children to become readers and writers by modelling reading and writing behaviours and the enjoyment and rewards this behaviour brings.

Young children become aware of the purposes and functions of literacy in their environments as they are immersed in play and life experiences (Crombie et al, 1996).

The AEU Victorian Branch, as does international research, recognises the crucial contribution of preschool programs to the literacy development of young children, and as a foundation for their later learning.

The AEU Victorian Branch is committed to pursuing the State government to provide adequate resources to ensure universal access to these programs which cultivate early literacy. Funding must be provided in order to meet the real costs of a high quality preschool education system with full participation of children regardless of their family's economic circumstances.

B. The Beginnings of Literacy

The learning and development associated with literacy begins at birth.

Young children's experiences at home are highly significant to achievement. Parents significantly influence their children's learning.

Young children who grow up in a family where people read will come to feel that reading is an experience worth striving for. In the same way, the child's participation in family letter writing and receiving, and the like, can focus the child's attention on print and its capacity to capture human speech.

Through observing others using literacy for real purposes, children learn how everyday visual and auditory symbols are combined to express meaning. Adults who engage with children in print related activities (reading stories, letters, magazines, newspapers, books, shopping lists, birthday invitations, visits to the library etc.) and provide a purpose for its use, help them become aware of the role of print in their daily lives (Raban & Ure, 1997).

C. Pre-literacy Skills Develop in Preschool

Preschool is for many children the first year of a continuing process, extending through primary, secondary and possibly tertiary education levels.

A preschool is a place where children learn about themselves, about other people and about the world around them. Young children are active learners who construct their own understanding of the world. In preschool children learn through play.

Play is vital to the normal development of a child. A child learns more through play than by any other means, since at play the child learns because they are personally involved in what is worthwhile to them. Therefore the knowledge the child acquires is more valuable because they gain it from their own experience.

Each activity brings about some change in the child's ideas, feelings or actions.

The AEU Victorian Branch recognises that literacy starts before entry to school and that preschool programs are a key to early literacy.

In the preschool program learning experiences which promote literacy are deeply embedded in the context of play (Crombie et al, 1996). For example:

children participating in dramatic play in the homecorner 'writing' whilst listening on the telephone

block play where they child's vocabulary is extended to include "more than", 'longer than', 'higher than', 'half as big as', 'twice as long as'

puzzles and manipulative materials, amongst other experiences, helping eye-hand co-ordination necessary for writing

at painting where the link is made between a child's symbols and the shared symbols of writing when a teacher asks the child to tell them about their painting and then writes what the child has said.

Young children are learning to communicate their experiences in many ways, both verbally and non-verbally. Effective preschool programs provide children with the opportunity to develop further competence in and understanding of language (Colmer et

al, 1996).

Programs which are rich in oral and written language, art, dance, drama and music will foster children's understanding and use of verbal and non-verbal communication (Colmer et al, 1996).

With the understanding that the provision of literacy related experiences have important developmental ramifications, early childhood teachers provide and plan for:

- speaking with and listening to others, viewing visual texts and exploring reading and writing.
- the development of fine motor skills necessary for controlled rhythmic movements of writing, for holding and manipulating a writing implement, to turn pages, hand grasp, finger dexterity, finger/thumb opposition etc.
- the mastery of eye-tracking movements left to right and top to bottom appropriate to the way in which written language (English) proceeds
- the understanding of concepts such as front and back; beginning and end; an awareness of shape, form, line and direction
- listening and talking in small and large groups
- developing and using a growing vocabulary with increasing fluency to express thoughts and convey meaning
- listening and responding to stories, songs and poetry
- making up their own stories and participating in role play
- enjoying books and being introduced to the pleasures and purpose of reading and to the way in which books are organised
- handling books with care and respect
- developing an appreciation of books and practice in using them as a source of enjoyment, information knowledge and new words
- developing and demonstrating the visual skills necessary to recognise objects, details of objects and notice change in visual stimuli
- sorting and matching symbols
- developing the auditory skills necessary to listen and differentiate between sounds and to respond appropriately to verbal symbols
- recognising symbolic and pictorial representations and the printed word
- demonstrating and understanding that words and pictures carry meaning
- recognising their own name and some familiar words
- perceptual motor activities, etc.

Preschools provide a physical environment which is conducive to children engaging in appropriate and meaningful literacy experiences (Crombie et al, 1996). They provide an environment rich in symbols such as words, numbers and images and model positive language, reading and writing. It is recognised that children will have a greater likelihood of exploring language when the environment enthusiastically and deliberately supports it.

Importantly many of the preschool experiences help children to gain an understanding

that reading and writing are a means of relaying messages and information, a means of capturing human speech, of transforming speech into written symbols and re-converting it. Children develop an understanding about the purpose and form of print.

They help children gain confidence in their use and manipulation of language, and to feel comfortable with language and their control over words. More importantly the activities provided in the preschool program reinforce the rewarding nature of reading and writing, stimulate the motivation and desire to become a reader and encourage the desire to want to write.

D. Research Recognises the Value of Preschool to Literacy Development

Research and longitudinal studies recognise the value and contribution of quality preschool programs to the development of literacy in young children.

Children who have knowledge about print, understanding its nature and purpose, have been shown to have greater success with literacy development on entering school (Raban 1997). Children who commence school with this understanding demonstrate more independent exploration of print and more advanced thinking when presented with print related materials in the classroom setting (Purcell-Gates and Dhall 1991). A study in Britain, by Osborn and Millbank (1987) assessed the long term effects of preschool provision by comparing the children who experienced nursery education with those who did not, and found that children exposed to early educational programs tended to fare better on measures of reading and other cognitive tasks at 5 years and 10 years of age. The Perry Preschool Study, probably one of the most significant studies undertaken, amongst its comprehensive results found that children who attended the high quality preschool program compared to those who did not showed higher levels of general literacy at age 19.

Research from several nations has indisputably provided the basis for the conclusion that the provision of early childhood education does have a positive impact on learning success in later years and also in fact on life success in later years.

E. Greater Access to Preschool Programs Needed

Auditor-General Department's statistics (April 1998) indicate that the proportion of four year olds attending kindergarten has declined from 94 per cent to 90 per cent over the past five years. The decline is most apparent among the poorer sections of the community as they struggle with fee payments which have, according to the Auditor-General's Department Report, risen to 120 per cent of the 1993 rate. The Report also noted the under-representation of children from low income families, children from non-English speaking backgrounds and Koorie children and identified the need for the government to develop strategies to facilitate and encourage their participation. Further, it also identified "a need to assess any impact on the participation of children from low income families of the shift in recent years of a large portion of preschool operating costs from the Government to families."

These are the very families whose children most benefit from preschool programs.

This change has resulted from the massive cuts in 1994 to the State governments funding of preschools. As a result, a system based upon universal access has been transformed into one in which children and families are being denied access on the basis of inability to pay.

The restoration of access to preschool programs is necessary to provide opportunities for children to participate in and benefit from the early literacy experiences they provide. Access to such programs enables children to enter school with good language and cognitive skills, positive self concepts, and a strong desire and motivation to become literate.

Such programs are particularly important where parental involvement in their child's literacy development is limited, whether by their attitude and beliefs about their role in this development; by their perceptions and confidence of themselves as readers or as competent English speakers; or by their capacity to provide a 'language rich environment' (encompassing books, stories, time to spend with their children etc.).

F. Resources Needed

In 1992-93, Commonwealth Grants Commission data reveals, Victorian spending on preschools was 12.3 per cent below the Australian average. Expenditure per head of population was \$15.78.

Immediately following its election to office, the Kennett Government cut 11 per cent from the preschool budget, and in 1994-95 expenditure per head of population plummeted to \$13.89.

In 1996-97, Victoria spent 28.7 per cent below the Australian average and is ranked lowest of all Australian states and territories. Its 1996-97 spending level is, in fact, lower than its spending in 1994-95.

In five years, the Victorian Government has reduced spending on Victorian preschools by over 13.6 per cent of the Australian average.

G. Conclusion

Recent government expressions of concern for young children's literacy skills and their commitments to improved literacy ring hollow without a simultaneous commitment to improved resources for preschool programs.

The AEU Victorian Branch recognises the crucial contribution of preschool programs to the literacy development of young children, and as a foundation for their later learning.

Victoria spends less than any other State/Territory on preschool education. In 1995/96

Victoria's expenditure was \$12.68 per capita of population, less than 70 per cent of the Australian average of \$18.57. During the tenure of this government expenditure has fallen by more than 17 per cent.

Conference notes with profound disappointment the failure of the government to provide in the recent State Budget any of the \$23 million identified by the Grants Commission in 1997 as necessary to bring the funding of the Victorian preschool system to the Australian average.

Conference calls on the State government to support its rhetoric about improved literacy standards by providing adequate resources to ensure universal access to preschools and the early literacy programs they provide.

The AEU Victorian Branch is committed to vigorously pursuing this outcome.