



PROFESSIONAL

V O I C E

Spring 2008

EARLY YEARS
EDUCATION

Volume 6
Issue 2

RRP \$10





P
I*
V

EDITOR

Nic Barnard

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Ross Dean, John Graham, Ann Taylor and Nic Barnard

DESIGNER

Peter Lambropoulos

PUBLISHED BY

The Australian Education Union Victorian Branch

PRINTED BY

GEON

PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER

Cover: 310g Re-Art Gloss

Text: 105g Re-Print

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

\$25 within Australia (free to financial AEU members). Please contact the AEU Publications Unit on **03 9417 2822** for further information. A subscription form is available in the back of this issue or downloadable from www.aeuvic.asn.au/publications.

BACK ISSUES

\$10 within Australia

Advertising is accepted according to AEU guidelines. Please contact Lyn Baird for further details. Phone: 03 9418 4879. Email: lyn.baird@aeuvic.asn.au. A rate card is available for download at www.aeuvic.asn.au/publications.

Editorial correspondence should be directed to Nic Barnard, Professional Voice, Australian Education Union Vic Branch, PO Box 363, Abbotsford VIC 3067. Phone: 03 9418 4841. Email: nic.barnard@aeuvic.asn.au.

Copyright is held by respective authors. The opinions of the authors are their own and are not necessarily the policy of the Australian Education Union Victorian Branch. For authorisation to reproduce any article in part or whole, please contact the editor.

The AEU Victorian Branch can be contacted at:

PO Box 363, Abbotsford 3067

Tel: 03 9417 2822 **Fax:** 1300 568 078

Web: www.aeuvic.asn.au

ISSN:1445-4165



**EARLY YEARS
EDUCATION**

c o n t e n t s

7 **Editorial: In from the Cold**
John Graham

11 **A New Era for the Profession: The national agenda for reform of early childhood education**
Christine Ure

After decades of disjointed and unco-ordinated services, the federal and state governments' national reform agenda gives the opportunity to create integrated provision for the 0-8s.

17 **Keep These Banners Ready: The challenges of the new early childhood agenda**
Michaela Kronemann

The welcome commitment to preschool for all raises important questions about privatisation and equity, as well as creating challenges for recruiting and retaining enough qualified preschool teachers to deliver the goal.

23 **The Importance of Transition in the New Early Years Learning Framework**
Sue Dockett

The transition from preschool to primary is a pivotal time in a child's life, and getting it right is important to educational success. But transition should be seen as a process, not event, and building strong relationships is the key to making it work.

29 The Australian Early Development Index: A national measure of early childhood development
Mary Sayers

National trials suggest this new assessment program will prove a crucial tool in tracking young pupils' progress and identifying vulnerable children. Mary Sayers, part of the development team, outlines how it was devised and how it works.

35 Celebrating Literacy: Why a US phonics program failed and what we should do instead
Ken Goodman

Any attempts to improve literacy standards will only succeed if they draw on best practice from a wide range of approaches — as George Bush's politically motivated phonics-based Reading First program has demonstrated.

41 Early Intervention - Fashion, fad or progressive concept?
Tony Pitman

Early intervention literacy programs now have a proven record of success with prep and Grade 1 students. But don't write them off when it comes to older children and even adults.

45 Reflections on Five Decades in Education
Lorraine Wilson

We now know more than ever before what works in education. But moves to introduce a national curriculum, testing and league tables will put teachers into a strait-jacket and create a system of winners and losers.

51 Ben Levin on the challenges facing public education
Interview by John Graham

57 Notes on contributors

Editorial:

In from the Cold

JOHN GRAHAM

EDUCATION IN THE early years (ages 0-8) has become central to a reform agenda being promoted by all governments around Australia. In December 2007, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a partnership between the states and the Commonwealth “to pursue substantial reform in the areas of education, skills and early childhood development, to deliver significant improvements in human capital outcomes for all Australians”.

While the language may be derived from Adam Smith — early years education is valued only because of its economic outcomes — the agreement itself is seen as bringing this phase of learning in from the cold. Michaela Kronemann begins her article in this edition of *Professional Voice* with the comment: “At long last there is a national agenda for early childhood education in Australia.”

In August 2008 COAG followed up the partnership agreement with the publication of a discussion paper — *A National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*. The discussion paper proposes a new national quality framework consisting of a set of national standards for all early childhood education and care services and an Early Years Learning Framework.

The wider significance of this new framework is to do with its starting point — from birth. It proposes to bring some sort of coherence into the fragmented sectors of childcare, preschool and the early years of school. According to the discussion paper, for the first time there will be a national framework which “recognises that children learn from birth and that learning in school builds on these foundations”.

Victoria has taken up the national COAG agenda with much gusto. It is now seen as being hand-in-glove with the Rudd Government in pushing the agenda forward

in all areas of education and training, including the early years. On September 2 the Brumby Government launched the *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*. In the Premier's Foreword to this document he states that one of his first and most important decisions as premier was to bring early childhood development into the Department of Education.

This decision, Premier Brumby writes, marks a new approach to learning and development based on an understanding that "children's learning and development starts from day one and that their early experiences have a direct impact on their future wellbeing. There is now overwhelming evidence that giving children the best possible start in life improves their educational, social and economic prospects."

The new Blueprint contains a raft of initiatives related to the early years. These range from COAG policies such as a 0-8 years Learning and Development Framework, Commonwealth funding priorities for multi-service children's centres (community hubs) and co-location of early childhood centres on school sites, transition-to-school plans for all children, improved access to learning opportunities for children in child-care, improved qualifications for childcare workers and the provision of joint professional learning opportunities for preschool and primary school teachers.

These national and state developments provide the context for the articles in this edition of *Professional Voice*.

Our first article is from Christine Ure who describes the background history to the "disparate and unco-ordinated services" provided to families and children across the early childhood years. She sees the National Reform Agenda as an opportunity to address these issues and "put an end to the silos that have developed around different services".

In order to achieve these goals Ure identifies the need to improve the supply and retention of qualified staff, reconcile the different approaches to learning and development (and provide transitions) from birth to 8 years of age, and increase the level of investment in children's services.

Michaela Kronemann views the Commonwealth and Victorian Government agendas in terms of longstanding AEU policy in this area. The problem with both agendas is their lack of explicit support for public provision, particularly with the rise of large scale for-profit companies now dominating child care. How will Governments ensure that equity and inclusion are guaranteed in the new arrangements?

Like Christine Ure, Kronemann identifies staffing issues as central to making the proposed reforms work on the ground. Without attention to qualifications, conditions of employment, working conditions and salaries, the people needed to usher in the new era will not be there.

Sue Dockett's focus is more specific. She concentrates on the "pivotal" transition to school. She identifies the characteristics of good transition processes which are less about what children need to know as they start school and more about relationship building: "Building positive connections and networks that provide support, particularly for the children starting school, but also for the others around them."

She contrasts adult concerns about continuity in the transition to school process

to those of children, who are often more interested in the changes they will experience when they enter 'big school'.

Mary Sayers introduces the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), a major initiative aimed at increasing community understanding of how children in Australia are developing in the crucial early years. The index covers physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge. It is applied to children in their first year of school.

The AEDI will be rolled out across Australia in 2009 as part of the Commonwealth's early years reforms. It is anticipated that the outcome will be a solid evidence base for communities to improve their programs and services to better meet the needs of young children.

Our first international contributor to this edition is Ken Goodman, a renowned American expert in the teaching of reading. He provides a critique of the Bush Government's reading program — Reading First — which received \$1 billion per year for six years and, according to Goodman, failed to deliver any real improvement.

He identifies the characteristics of what a replacement to the narrowly phonics-based Reading First program should look like. His recommendations for a new research-based literacy (rather than reading) program have relevance to both federal and state developments in Australia.

Tony Pitman introduces a note of caution in concentrating resources and programs in the early years, particularly if it is at the expense of other "critical periods" of development such as adolescence. While intervention may be most cost-effective in the early years, those who have difficulty in mastering literacy skills at that stage of their schooling need support and resources to enable effective remediation later on.

Lorraine Wilson began her life as a primary teacher in the 1950s when Grade 6 boys chopped wood for classroom fires! She takes us on a history lesson from the 1950s to the present, identifying changes to the curriculum, pedagogy and the role of teachers. For Wilson the 1970s and 1980s were "the heady days" for primary teaching with enquiry learning, school-based curriculum and respect for the professional expertise of teachers.

She sees the present situation as detrimental to the best interests of young children. An increasingly narrow and centrally-prescribed curriculum, rampant testing, a wrong turn on literacy education, an under-valuing of play and the removal of professional responsibilities from teachers, all of these add up to a lesser education for students and, in some ways more importantly, a shortening of childhood.

The final section of each *Professional Voice* is devoted to our interviews with noted educationists; this time it is with a recent visitor to Australia — Ben Levin from the University of Toronto. He provides a Canadian perspective on many of the issues which are now driving state and federal agendas in Australia.

A New Era for the Profession:

The national agenda for reform
of early childhood education

CHRISTINE URE

THE NATIONAL REFORM Agenda developed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2007 signals a new era for early childhood services in Australia. The reform agenda has been developed in response to the growing body of research evidence linking the quality of children's early life experiences to indicators of health, social wellbeing and economic viability in the adult years, and concerns that early childhood services in Australia are under-resourced and undervalued. Australia's investment in early education is one fifth of the average for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), placing this country at the bottom of the ladder of developed nations (OECD, 2007).

The COAG reform agenda has prompted a nationwide review of all elements of early childhood provision including regulations, staff qualifications, curriculum, views about young children's development and learning, partnerships with parents, and community expectation of these services. The framework for the review is set out in a discussion paper prepared by the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations: *A national quality framework for early childhood education and care*; public comment has been invited.

Until now, the development and regulation of early childhood services in Australia have not been guided by a systematic set of principles but evolved in response to

changing views about families, women and children. Consequently, the current organisation, standards and expectations of services are dated and not consistent with research about children, families and their needs. The current reform agenda provides an unprecedented opportunity to review the values and frameworks that influence and guide the provision of early childhood services. It will provide an opportunity to examine how early childhood services link to the broader goals of Australian society.

Although the early childhood years are internationally recognised as being the ages 0-8 years, services in Australia for children and families across these years continue to be disparate and unco-ordinated. Until the 1980s, organised provision for this age group involved kindergarten services for three and four-year-olds and the early years of schooling. Very young infants and children, particularly those in the 0-3 age group, were expected to be at home in the full-time care of their mothers. Working mothers resorted to making care arrangements with families and friends. Changes in social attitudes to working mothers and the increasing number of mothers entering the workforce created pressure for the development of the childcare industry. Since the early 1980s, childcare services have been provided through community care and the private sectors, while kindergarten services have been government operated.

The development of the early childhood sector has been strongly influenced by economic factors — the cost of services — and uncertainty about the value attributed to care services for children. Questions about the concept of care and education for young children, quality of service and beliefs about the amount of time children should spend in care and at home have all been widely debated in both the research literature and public media. These issues have resulted in a lack of clarity about the need for staff qualifications and the focus of the early childhood curriculum, and they have prevented the integration of early childhood services with the school sector.

At present preschool services for the 0-5 age group are separated from school services for the 5-8 year-old age group, and kindergarten/preschool education services for four-year olds remain distinct from childcare services for the 0-5 year-old age group. Similarly, the supply of degree-qualified early childhood staff is largely limited to kindergarten service, while long-day care services have become staffed by two-year diploma, TAFE-certificated or unqualified staff. Curriculum design and expectations for children's learning across school and preschool have become differentiated. Childcare and kindergartens focus on development, play and socialisation, and schools focus on learning in the key curriculum areas of literacy and numeracy. Very limited attention is given to children's transition across these services.

The National Reform Agenda provides an opportunity to move early childhood services forward to meet the needs of children and families in the 21st Century. It provides a much needed framework to review evidence about what matters for young children. Hopefully it will put an end to the silos that have developed around different services. The reform presents an opportunity to forge a common set of understandings about:

- Community needs/benefits; and fostering an understanding that the social and economic well-being of Australian society is of central concern to all service

providers. Quality early childhood programs add value to children, families and the broader community

- Rights of children and families to universal provision of high quality care; and accepting that parents of growing families need and have a right to work, and that they are able to access high quality care for all their children
- The early childhood curriculum and preparation for schooling; and that the goals of high quality programs should address the personal, social and academic competence of children and improve their readiness to cope with the demands of schooling.

COMMUNITY NEEDS/BENEFITS

Internationally there has been increased recognition of the importance of the community benefit from investing in early childhood. The early years of life are recognised as the time of most rapid learning and development. Development in the early years has an impact on all domains of development and there are long-term implications for the academic and social outcomes of children.

Research conducted in the 1980s and 90s through the *Head Start* and *Perry Preschool* projects in the USA demonstrates that an investment in quality early childhood programs creates long-term benefits for the children who attend these services. Moreover, benefits accrue to the broader community as these children grow up and become more productive and well adjusted citizens.

Educational research confirms the lasting importance of quality early childhood experiences to children's later development and success. An analysis of the rates of return to human capital from investing across all age-groups reported by Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1994) indicates that the benefits of high quality early childhood programs for the broader community are cumulative. That is, earlier high levels of investment in early childhood services are associated with greater levels of social and economic gains in later life. Early childhood services must therefore be evaluated for their contribution to the broader economic and social benefits to society. Narrow perspectives related to the care of preschool children while parents work only serve to restrict our understanding of the significance of these services.

RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES TO UNIVERSAL PROVISION OF HIGH QUALITY CARE

A persistent problem in early childhood is the supply and retention of qualified staff, particularly in rural and remote areas. The early childhood teaching and care workforce currently comprises both qualified and unqualified staff, with the greatest area of shortage being qualified staff. Only a small number of qualified staff currently have a degree in early childhood. Staff turnover is high, with 20 per cent of staff leaving the industry every year. Supply issues are likely to escalate further with the recent surge in birth rates, and any steps to increase access rates to improve universal provision of services will exacerbate these problems. Low remuneration for staff is a problem as is job satisfaction. Unqualified staff are not adequately prepared for many of the

tasks they are required to do, including dealing with difficult child behaviours and responding to the needs of working parents.

An important response to the program for the national reform of early childhood services will be to rapidly improve the skill level of the workforce. A question that urgently needs to be answered is whether there is any place in early childhood services for unqualified childcare workers. The research evidence consistently indicates that staff training (Frede, 1995) makes a difference to services provided to children and families. Staff development and education are the most important discriminators between mediocre and good care in early childhood (Pasha and Wesley, 1998). Sylva et al, (2003) have concluded from their longitudinal study of the Effective Provision of Preschools Education project (EPPE) in Europe that the impact of service provision on children's progress at age 7 is clearly linked to those settings that have staff with higher qualifications.

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM AND PREPARATION FOR SCHOOLING

A vital element of the reform agenda will be to find agreement on the curriculum and learning outcomes for children and to build an evidence-based approach to children's learning. A working group with representatives from the Australian Government and all states and territories has been established to consult and draft the national early years learning framework. The challenge in developing this framework will be to clearly articulate the roles of play-based learning in the development of communication and language for early literacy and numeracy, as well as for personal, emotional and social development.

The new early years learning framework will need to address children's learning needs from birth through to five years of age, be able to ensure children's preparation for formal schooling and transition to school, and be universally applicable. The framework will need to provide quality assurance indicators and measures of children's development and performance. These issues will not be resolved easily. A wide range of curriculum guidelines for early childhood programs already exists. These guidelines vary significantly with differing philosophical approaches to children and their developmental needs. The different approaches to curriculum lead to differences in program design, pedagogy, monitoring and assessment and in the interactions with children and families. Very few curriculum guidelines for early childhood services articulate directly into the school-based curriculum and there are differences in the expected outcomes of preschool and school-based learning.

The current agenda for reform and the consultative process have generated a high level of interest and discussion. The agenda has raised the need for higher levels of investment in children's service. Governments can no longer afford to separate care and education services for young children. There is a clearer focus on the need to address the early childhood years through to 8 years of age, beginning with a much stronger emphasis on the first three years of life. The agenda will create immediate challenges to improve universal access to services and to raise the qualifications of

the early childhood sector. Most importantly the reform agenda means that children's need for care cannot continue to be separated from learning or from the broader needs of Australian families and children.

REFERENCES

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *The National Quality Framework for Early Education and Care: a discussion paper*, http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/early_childhood/policy_initiatives_reviews/coag/discussion
- Edwards C, Gandini L & Forman G (1993/1998), *The Hundred Languages of Children*, Greenwich, Connecticut, Ablex.
- Frede EC (1995), The role programme quality in producing early childhood programme benefits. *The Future of Children*, 5(3), pp115-132.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2007), *Education at a glance 2007*, Paris.
- Pasha SA and Wesley PW, Improving quality in early childhood environments through on-site consultation. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 18(4), pp243-254
- Sylva K, Melhuish E, Sammons P, Siraj-Blatchford I, Taggart B & Elliot K (2003), *The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project: Findings from the preschool period, summary of findings*. DFES research brief, Institute of Education, University of London.

Keep Those Banners Ready

The challenges of the new
early childhood agenda

MICHAELA KRONEMANN

AT LONG LAST, there is a national agenda for early childhood education in Australia. While governments had been working together on early childhood issues through the National Reform Agenda for some time, it is only with the election of the Rudd Government that there is now a federal commitment to a national plan for early childhood education and care. Despite the recognition by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) that early childhood issues should be a national priority, the Coalition had made clear in the lead up to the 2007 federal election that they considered funding for preschool education to be a state matter.

The Rudd Government has committed to providing universal access to 15 hours of government-funded early childhood education in the year before school, to be provided by university qualified early childhood teachers. National standards are to be established through a national quality framework, including an Early Years Learning Framework.

Funding will be provided to establish 260 early learning and care centres, including six autism centres, located at primary schools, TAFE institutes and other

community spaces. A National Early Years Workforce Strategy will be developed, including additional university places in early childhood education. The 2008 federal budget provided for a 50 per cent HECS remission for early childhood education teachers working in regional, remote or disadvantaged areas, as well as fee exemptions for Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas delivered by TAFE. There will also be additional childcare places, an increased childcare tax rebate and a range of other measures including the rollout of the Australian Early Development Index.

In total, the 2008 budget committed \$2.4 billion over five years for early childhood initiatives. In addition, both early childhood education and care have been made the responsibility of the new federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

The Victorian Government has been a leading player in the development of the National Reform Agenda, and early childhood education has at last become a priority in this state. The establishment last year of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) marked the long-awaited recognition of the rightful place of preschool education within the education system, and the need to increase participation, particularly among disadvantaged groups, and to enhance early intervention programs.

The plans to develop schools as children's and community hubs, to improve transition programs and the networking of services, and to develop a 0-8 learning and development framework are all positive and important initiatives. Also of importance are the measures taken to improve the affordability of preschool education for low income families and to increase access by three and four-year-old Indigenous children. The revised regulations, which are intended to improve quality standards through measures such as improving staff-children ratios and qualification levels, will be in place by May 2009 although their content has not yet been determined.

These new directions are long overdue. Other countries with similar early childhood structures historically, such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand, are well ahead in the process of reform and increased funding of early childhood education and care. The recently released OECD *Education at a Glance* report indicates that in 2005, Australia spent 0.1 per cent of GDP on pre-primary education, compared to an OECD average of 0.4 per cent and a European Union average of 0.5 per cent. Both the 2001 OECD review of early childhood education and care in Australia and the 2004 Independent National Inquiry into Preschool Education found that early childhood education was fragmented, inconsistent, and of varying quality.

The Australian Education Union must be acknowledged for the determined and strong campaign it has waged both nationally and perhaps most particularly in Victoria for a national plan for universal early childhood education as an integral part of a high quality public education system. Many of the key elements of the AEU plan released a decade ago in *Towards a National Plan for Preschool Education* have been addressed in the new directions offered by governments.

However not all of the AEU's policy objectives have been addressed in full. While the move to 15 hours of universal access for one year is a great step forward, the

2007 AEU Early Childhood policy calls for the development of a plan to provide access to 20 hours of free preschool education for two years for all children in Australia.

AEU policy called for priority to be given to Indigenous children in providing two years of early childhood education. While the Victorian Government has determined to provide free access for three-year-old Indigenous children, as indeed most other states also offer, the Federal Government has been conspicuously silent on this measure, despite the fact that this is a goal already endorsed by CoAG.

Moreover, the new directions in themselves pose some challenges for the sector and for members. And we can be certain that there will be at least some devilry in the details.

The Federal Government has made clear that early childhood education will be offered in a range of settings, including specific programs offered by childcare providers. The aim is to end the historical divide between education and care. This is a laudable goal, which is also recognised within AEU policy, since many children in childcare are currently missing out on early childhood education. It is disappointing however that there appears to be little interest in providing explicit support for public education as the priority for governments in ensuring an inclusive, equitable and democratic view of education. The Federal Government has dismissed issues related to public and private education across the sectors but that does not mean that the problems go away.

In the early childhood sector, the reality is that the majority of childcare places are now provided by large scale for-profit companies listed on the stock exchange. Education has historically operated on a not-for-profit basis and the inclusion of for-profit providers is unprecedented. The potential implications for affordability, quality, equity and for the capacity for early childhood services to network and collaborate need to be explored. Will community-based stand-alone preschool centres be supported to enable them to provide longer hours care? Will for-profit centres be the only provision in some areas? Could parents be forced to enrol their children in private long day care centres in order to access early childhood education? Will public preschool education be privatised over time?

The federal commitment to provide an additional 260 early learning and care centres on school and other community sites is silent on the types of providers that may be involved. The decisions about their location will be made in partnership with state governments. Most states already have co-located or integrated preschool provision in schools and in some, such as Tasmania and the ACT, community childcare centres are also co-located in a number of schools.

Victoria has also made a commitment to expand the role of schools as community hubs and to locate early childhood centres on school sites. It will be important to encourage the co-location of these federally funded centres on to school sites in Victoria and to ensure that they are government or community-run so that the services can work together comfortably. While integration, rather than simple co-location with schools, carries some challenges (such as the need to retain early childhood leadership positions), it would ensure far greater support for staff and programs and would

deal with the current issues around centre management as well. Victorian proposals to encourage local networks of early childhood providers are welcome, but these must be properly resourced. Experience elsewhere indicates that relying on the goodwill of over-stretched practitioners to maintain these links is not sustainable.

The ALP federal election platform proposed that all four-year-olds would be eligible to receive 15 hours of government-funded learning programs, which seemed to indicate that it would be free. Subsequent statements have described the aim as making it “affordable”. There has been no detail as to what this will mean although it is clear that the funds will be directed to the states for dispersion. If the preschool year is not going to be fully funded and free, will the existing inequities between states be maintained? In NSW and Victoria, where preschool education has not been fully funded as an intrinsic part of the public school system, government subsidies have been paid to centres and costs to parents without access to health care card related concessions are much higher than in other states. In Queensland the sessional preschool year offered in state schools has been translated into a full-time prep year and fees there too are high for children who access a pre-prep year of early childhood education through community and private providers. So will the preschool year be made free for all children and if not, how will equity be delivered within and across systems, and how will costs be curtailed in the for-profit long day care centres?

The commitment to 15 hours of early childhood education is a positive and welcome move, but there are of course professional and industrial issues to be resolved. Any effort to increase teaching hours would exacerbate existing workload pressures and have an impact on the capacity to recruit and retain staff in the sector. In Victoria there have already been reports of preschool teachers moving into school employment and of high burnout rates and turnover of staff in long day care centres. It would also of course have an impact on quality, which is one of the priorities of the new framework.

At the same time, further casualisation or underemployment in an already precariously employed workforce is unacceptable. The move to increase hours for children must be implemented with sufficient funding to ensure both the wellbeing of existing staff and an ongoing capacity to attract and retain teachers and other staff into the sector. The sector is already experiencing shortages across the board, particularly of qualified staff.

The Victorian Government has established scholarships to help attract teachers into long day care centres and into early childhood education in disadvantaged areas. These are welcome strategies but the bottom line is that all early childhood services will be unable to retain early childhood teachers if there is no parity of pay and conditions with teachers in schools. It is already hard enough to attract and retain teachers in preschool settings; it will be even more difficult to attract and retain them in long day centres unless the pay and conditions are significantly enhanced. That in turn would require significantly increased funding. One significant step that would assist in beginning to address these issues is, in consultation with stakeholders, to transfer the employment of early childhood teachers and assistants to DEECD.

Even with these various measures, it is going to be quite a challenge to recruit and train enough new teachers over the next five or so years. While some childcare educators may be encouraged and supported to undertake enhanced training to become teachers, there will also be additional demands for diploma qualified staff in childcare settings. Given recent government discussion about abbreviated teacher training for university graduates in the schools sector, the challenge will be to ensure that there is no diminution in the requirements to achieve qualified teacher status. Teacher registration could assist in this.

The concept of a national Early Years Learning Framework is in principle a positive one, provided that it is agreed by stakeholders, is sufficiently flexible to allow local educational needs to be met, and is adequately resourced. A national quality framework is also proposed and the issues there will be about what is included and how it is assessed. Staff qualifications, child to staff ratios and group sizes are key indicators of quality but other issues being considered include leadership and management; relationships between staff and children; family and community partnerships; differentiated play-based curriculum; and physical environment. The challenge here will be to ensure not only that minimum standards are not set too low (especially as they can sometimes then become the norm) but also that states are unable to undercut any agreed standards. A quality rating system is also proposed for consideration, although the potentially negative impacts are at least acknowledged. One question is whether that would or should apply to all early childhood settings. Consultations have been occurring and members should ensure that their voices are heard in the ongoing processes.

These are exciting times for the early childhood sector but clearly there are many issues still to be resolved. Some will undoubtedly be problematic so it is important to engage with the issues, stay informed, and keep the banners dusted — just in case.

The Importance of Transition in the New Early Years Learning Framework

SUE DOCKETT

WITH THE ELECTION of the Rudd Labor Government, there has been considerable focus on the importance of the early years and early childhood education. Included in a raft of election promises — since taken up in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agenda — have been commitments to:

- Universal access to a quality early childhood education program for all children in the year before formal school
- Access within five years for all Indigenous 4-year-olds in remote communities to a quality EC education program
- National rollout of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)
- National Quality Standards for child care and preschool
- A National Early Years Learning Framework
- Streamlined quality and regulatory arrangements.

A great deal of work has already occurred in preparation to meet these commitments.

One of the areas where there is and has been intense activity is in the development of the Early Years Learning Framework. The recent *National Quality Framework for Early Education and Care Discussion Paper*, produced by the Productivity Agenda working group for education, skills, training and early childhood development, noted that:

... [the] Early Years Learning Framework [will be] linked to national quality standards which will underpin early childhood education and care including universal access to 15 hours a week of affordable quality early learning for 40 weeks a year in the year before formal schooling. The framework will guide early childhood educators in developing quality early childhood programs. For the first time, Australia will have a National Early Learning Framework which recognises that children learn from birth and that learning in school builds on these foundations.

This statement affirms the importance of learning in the early years and prompts serious recognition of the nature and extent of children's knowledge, learning and experience before school as a major influence on what happens as children start, and then continue through school.

The transition to school is an important time for all involved — children, families, educators and communities. Within the discussions around the development of the Early Years Learning Framework, the transition to school is recognised as a pivotal time to continue to build on the learning and development that have already occurred and to promote children's (and families') continued engagement with learning through schools.

There are many ways to define transition. In some narrow definitions, the focus tends to be on the skills or attributes demonstrated by individual children and how these equip the children to function within a school setting. This focus reflects an emphasis on readiness and locates the purpose and function of early childhood services as largely ensuring that children are adequately prepared for school. From this perspective, supporting a positive transition to school would involve a curriculum focus on skills (often associated with literacy and numeracy), some form of assessment of children's skills, and the communication of that to the future educational setting.

Another definition of transition relates to a program delivered to children and/or families. This can involve a series of activities to help all involved become familiar with school and school expectations. There are many creative and worthwhile transition activities that occur across schools and prior-to-school settings each year.

However, the most effective transition programs do more than deliver a specific set of activities at a given time or adopt a narrow definition of transition. Rather, effective transition programs combine a series of intentional and purposeful transition experiences within an ongoing transition process. This broader definition of

transition as a process emphasises multiple participants and multiple perspectives, each contributing to the positive and ongoing engagement of children, families and educators in educational settings. From this perspective, transition is a process of relationship building — building positive connections and networks that provide support, particularly for the children starting school, but also for the others around them. Early childhood services, as well as families, communities and schools, all play an important role in this conception of the transition to school. There may well be some assessment of children's skills associated with this perspective, but this would also be complemented by recognition of what families, schools and communities provide to adapt to the differing needs, and strengths, of children.

Transition to school programs have been developed in many communities to support the view of transition as a process involving many different players. Over many years of working with different communities in many different locations, The Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2006, 2007) has developed a series of *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs*, which argue that such programs:

- Establish positive relationships between the children, parents and educators
- Facilitate each child's development as a capable learner
- Differentiate between "orientation to school" and "transition to school" programs
- Draw upon dedicated funding and resources
- Involve a range of stakeholders
- Are well planned and effectively evaluated
- Are flexible and responsive
- Are based on mutual trust and respect
- Rely on reciprocal communication among participants
- Take into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community.

Underpinning these guidelines is a focus on the relationships that support children in the transition to school, rather than a focus on what children need to know as they start school. Such relationships include those between and among children, families, educators in school and prior-to-school settings, and members of communities. The same focus on relationships is evident in the planning for the proposed Early Years Learning Framework. In the context of the transition to school, it becomes critical that the children, and the best ways to support them as they make the move to school, become the focus of these relationships.

The guidelines also emphasise the importance of collaboration across the transition. This collaboration is based on recognition of children's strengths and competencies, as well as the contribution of many different contexts to the learning and development of young children. Many families and educators have utilised a range of ways to document the competencies of young children. A characteristic of the most effective of these is the emphasis on multiple ways of knowing and understanding, rather than on checklists of discrete skills. Examples include the use of learning

stories, where dispositions towards learning, as well as a range of learning outcomes, are noted.

Further, the guidelines value diversity among children, families and contexts, suggesting that there is no one correct way to “do transition” — the processes of working collaboratively to support a positive transition will vary and it is the engagement in these processes themselves that is inherent in promoting a positive transition.

Effective communication is critical to a successful transition to school. The development of an Early Years Learning Framework has the potential to provide a common language for communication between children, families and educational settings. This will particularly facilitate positive connections between educators in the prior-to-school and school sectors as each moves to recognise not only what occurs in the different contexts, but also values the contribution this makes to children’s learning.

As a policy document, the proposed Early Years Learning Framework affirms the significance of learning in the early years and recognises the influence of this on later learning. It also promotes notions of continuity across educational sectors — from prior-to-school settings to schools. Most importantly, it sets the context for discussions about what continuity actually means. For example, by emphasising the importance of play-based curricula in the early childhood years, it sets the scene for discussions about how children learn through play, the ways in which educators can promote complex play and learning, the social contexts of learning and how these can all be reflected and incorporated in school-based curriculum.

Such discussions about continuity and what is meant by continuity will be important for children, families and educators. Adults involved in children’s transition to school often seek specific forms of continuity — for example, continuity in curriculum, continuity in levels of support for their children, continuity in relationships and contexts. Children themselves are usually excited about starting school, if also a bit worried about what might actually happen. They are not nearly as focused on continuity as adults — except perhaps in relation to wanting to remain with their friends. Rather, children are interested in the changes they will experience as they start school — the changes that signify that they are entering “big school”, growing up and becoming more independent. Promoting a positive transition to school involves balancing both continuity and change.

The preparation of and for an Early Years Learning Framework has opened up opportunities to consider the links between this framework and school curriculum and among educators across the different sectors. Transition to school is the focal point of these links and discussions. Some questions to ponder as the development of the framework continues include:

- How do we acknowledge the great deal of learning and development, as well as the diversity within this, that occurs in the early years?
- What implications does this recognition have for curriculum in the early years of school?
- How can we support positive transitions to school for all involved?
- What do we mean by continuity from prior-to-school settings to school?

- What value do we place on a play-based curriculum?
- How can we promote positive collaboration across the prior-to-school and school sectors to ensure that all children starting school have the best possible opportunities to successfully engage in education that is meaningful, relevant and worthwhile?
- What roles can parents and families have in their children's transition to school, and how do educators recognise and value these roles?
- What roles can communities play in children's transition to school?

The development of the Early Years Learning Framework provides opportunities to enhance children's transition to school. In particular, it provides a focal point for children, families, educators and communities to consider what is important as children start school, how prior-to-school experiences can be built upon and enhanced, and how schools can be responsive to their newest students. Recognition and use of the evidence-based *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* in the framework will help ensure that, in all these considerations, the focus remains on the children involved and the ways in which we can all work to promote a positive transition to school.

REFERENCES:

- Productivity Agenda working group for education, skills, training and early childhood development (2008). *National Quality Framework for Early Education and Care — a Discussion Paper*, found at http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/early_childhood/policy_initiatives_reviews/coag/discussion.htm (quick link: tinyurl.com/3nz9t7)
- Dockett, S & Perry, B (2006). *Starting School: A handbook for early childhood educators*. Sydney: Pademelon.
- Dockett, S & Perry, B (2007). *Transitions to School: Perceptions, expectations, experiences*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.

The Australian Early Development Index

A national measure of early
childhood development

MARY SAYERS

IN THE SUMMER issue of *Professional Voice*, Kathy Walker in her article "Building Bridges between Preschool and School" wrote: "We are now in exciting times where primary and preschool education have finally placed themselves together on the map as moving in the same direction and needing a greater level of shared understanding." This was written in the context of community and government initiatives that recognised the importance of early childhood education and experiences in shaping child development.

One major initiative in increasing understanding of child development from a population or community perspective is the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). The AEDI is a community-based measure of young children's development, designed to provide information about how children in Australia are developing during the crucial early years. Information obtained through the index will help communities, schools and governments to plan for services, resources and supports that young children and their families need to give children the best possible start in life. It is now known that investing resources and energy into children's early years, when their brains are developing rapidly, will bring life-long benefits to them and to the whole community.

DEVELOPING THE AEDI

The AEDI is based on the scores from a teacher-completed checklist consisting of over 100 questions in the five developmental domains of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge. These domains are closely linked to predictors of good adult health, education and social outcomes.

The AEDI checklist is derived from the Canadian Early Development Instrument (EDI), which was developed by the Offord Centre for Child Studies, McMaster University, Ontario. The EDI has been completed for more than 520,000 Canadian children, and has been extensively tested and compared with direct assessment results and parent reports. The index was adapted for Australia by the Centre for Community Child Health at The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne in partnership with the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Perth. After preliminary testing in Australia, the Canadian EDI was modified for use in Australia, and then pilot-tested in 2004. A national technical advisory group consisting of experts in child development, researchers and government policy makers advised on the adaptation of the AEDI checklist. This group also endorsed the decision to use web-based data entry, developed for the AEDI by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). This system includes secure data entry, online help, and administration that enables rapid downloading of completed data for cleaning and analysis by the AEDI National Support Centre.

The use of the index is subject to ongoing research and development. Data from 750 children in the 4-year-old cohort of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) have been used in the AEDI/LSAC Validation Study, confirming the validity of the AEDI as a population level indicator of children's developmental status. From 2007 to 2010 the capacity of the AEDI to predict children's health, social and educational outcomes will be investigated through the AEDI/LSAC Predictive Study.

The AEDI has been adapted for Indigenous children as part of the Indigenous

TABLE 1: THE AEDI DOMAINS

Physical health and wellbeing	Social competence	Emotional maturity	Language and cognitive development	Communication skills and general knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical readiness for the day • Physical independence • Gross and fine motor skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall social competence • Responsibility and respect • Approaches to learning • Readiness to explore new things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prosocial and helping behaviour • Anxious and fearful behaviour • Aggressive behaviour • Hyperactivity and inattention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic literacy • Interest in literacy and memory • Advanced literacy • Basic numeracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication skills and general knowledge

Australian Early Development Index (I-AEDI) Project being undertaken at Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, through its Kulunga Research Network and the Centre for Developmental Health at Curtin University; the project is jointly funded by the Commonwealth Government and Shell Australia. The AEDI Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) Study is also being conducted by the Centre for Community Child Health and will evaluate the AEDI implementation process, results and data usage for culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Recommendations from these two important studies will inform national AEDI rollout.

IMPLEMENTING THE AEDI

The AEDI was trialled between 2004 and 2007 in 60 geographic areas of Australia, in all states and territories except the Northern Territory. Since 2004, 2,157 teachers from 1,012 schools (both government and non-government) have completed the AEDI on 37,420 children in their first year of full-time school. Following the successful trial, and in recognition of the need for all communities to have data on early childhood development, the Commonwealth Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations is funding an Australia-wide implementation of AEDI, commencing in 2009. Funding from the Commonwealth covers the AEDI National Support Centre based at the Centre for Community Child Health, employment of state and territory AEDI co-ordinators, as well as teacher training and school funding for teacher relief time to enable the AEDI checklists to be completed.

As children start schools at different ages, the checklist is applied to children in their first year of full-time school, regardless of age. This will enable national consistency. Teachers use the simple web-based data entry system to complete the AEDI checklist for each eligible child in their class, based on their knowledge and observations of the child. The names of individual children are not recorded in the data sent to the AEDI National Support Centre, so individual children cannot be identified in the overall data. The AEDI does not score individual children, nor can it be used to reflect the performance of the school or the quality of teaching. Findings are reported at the population level, ie for whole communities, neighbourhoods and schools.

THE AEDI RESULTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

Results from the first four years of AEDI implementation showed that 25 per cent of the children surveyed are "developmentally vulnerable" in at least one domain of the AEDI, and that 12.6 per cent of children are vulnerable in two or more areas. Those children vulnerable in two or more domains would be considered at significant developmental risk. In some suburbs as many as 63.5 per cent of children are "developmentally vulnerable" on one or more domain. However most children were performing well in one or more areas.

The results to date have provided communities with a basis for reviewing the services, supports and environments that influence children in their first five years of life. The AEDI has helped communities raise awareness of the importance of early childhood development and provided them with information which assisted in devel-

oping strategic plans and initiatives to improve outcomes for children. By providing a common language for the community to discuss the needs of young children, the index has facilitated improved collaboration between agencies involved with young children and their families. AEDI results provide an evidence base for the development of community initiatives in various fields including parent support, family and pre-school literacy and nutrition, as well as providing evidence to support grant or funding applications. Knowledge of areas of strength and vulnerability enables communities to understand how well they are currently supporting early childhood development.

The AEDI has given communities a tool to help assess current initiatives or programs and what may need to change in their community to optimise the social, physical, emotional, and cognitive development of young children. AEDI mapping can promote other community mapping exercises, for example program and resource location. Combining the AEDI results with mapping of existing resources such as parenting and children's services and public transport has helped many communities to assess priorities and access funding for their region.

BENEFITS FOR SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

Teachers who have already completed the AEDI have found the AEDI easy to complete, beneficial to their work in the classroom and a good use of their time. The AEDI also provides teachers with the opportunity to reflect on all aspects of children's development early in the first year of school.

AEDI results facilitate the development of partnerships with community early childhood agencies such as preschools and childcare services to explore new ways of working together to benefit children. AEDI also provides information for schools and the community to look ahead to the supports that need to be developed to enhance children's capacity to be successful once they reach school.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The national implementation of the AEDI will provide a picture of early childhood development across Australia that will enable comparisons to be made about children's health, development and wellbeing in different communities or sub-populations at a particular time. It will also provide a baseline for communities, policy makers and governments to measure their progress in addressing identified needs in early childhood development over time. Communities throughout Australia will be able to use the AEDI results to determine what developmental areas require particular attention, to better focus further support and intervention measures for children in their first five years of life to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children Australia-wide.

FURTHER INFORMATION CAN BE OBTAINED FROM:

The AEDI National Support Centre

Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Flemington Road,
Parkville, Vic 3052.

Ph: 1300 558 422 Fax: (03) 9345 5900

E-mail: australianedi@rch.org.au

Web: www.australianedi.org.au

Victorian State AEDI Coordinator

Cathie Nolan, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Ph: (03) 9096 8417

E-mail: Cathie.Nolan@dhs.vic.gov.au

Celebrating Literacy

Why a US federal phonics
program failed and what we
should do instead

KEN GOODMAN

A KEY PART of No Child Left Behind, the federal education program introduced by the Bush Administration in the United States, is Reading First, a phonics-based literacy program which became a one-size-fits-all federal mandate.

The US Constitution gives control of education to the states. Since World War II federal programs have supported affirmative action programs for minorities and efforts such as bilingual education. But NCLB and Reading First put the Federal Government in a much more controlling position. Any state that wanted the federal money had to submit a proposal which conformed to the law. Reading First was given about US\$1 billion a year for six years.

But from the beginning, although framed as reading reform, Reading First was negative, coercive and punitive. Failure to make adequate yearly progress became subject to increasingly severe punishment up to the closing of schools or firing and replacing of staff. Its implementation created a de facto blacklist of persons, methods, and materials.

According to the journal of the Manhattan Institute (a neo-conservative think-tank), Reading First was deliberately conceived as the counter to whole language teaching. Writing of National Institutes of Health chief reading scientist Reid Lyon and House education committee staffer Robert Sweet who drafted the legislation, the journal reported:

With the President's encouragement, Lyon and Sweet consciously designed Reading First to do an end run around the deeply entrenched whole-language movement.

Sol Stern, *City Journal*, Winter 2007

The law was written so that the phrase "scientifically based reading research" (SBRR) appears over 100 times. Funding for every aspect of Reading First is conditioned on the use of tests and texts which meet the SBRR criteria. The definitions in the law make clear that it is a euphemism for direct instruction phonics. But there is no consensus among reading educators or researchers on what the phrase means. No program was required to offer proof that it met the SBRR criteria. In reality the power to interpret which programs are acceptable and which are not was put in the hands of a small group centred on the special education department of the University of Oregon.

This group, as Department of Education consultants, controlled the review process for state proposals. They also were given control of regional assistance centres to support states in following the law. The Inspector General of the US Department of Education, in a series of reports, found blatant and massive conflicts of interest in this process. Essentially, states were pressured into using tests and texts produced by the people making the funding decisions.

Their excuse was that they and they alone had the expertise to produce SBRR-qualified materials. And the neo-cons agreed. In the Manhattan Institute's *City Journal*, Stern wrote:

If (the) sin was to lean on a state education agency or two to promote a reading program backed by science over one that wasn't, well, that's just what the RF legislation intended... Yet this program for lifting reading achievement, always the apple of George W. Bush's eye, is already delivering promising results.

City Journal, Winter 2007

The politicians who were disgusted by the profiteering in Reading First still bought the claims that RF worked.

But then the other shoe fell. On May 1, 2008 a federal report was issued that showed children who followed Reading First did no better in comprehension than children who didn't.

Congress, which had reduced the program's funding by 60 per cent this fiscal year, responded by cutting out all funds for next year.

There is now a campaign led by the neo-cons and Laura Bush to save Reading First. At this point that seems unlikely to happen. What follows is an alternative literacy program that I have proposed to the Barack Obama campaign. To date I've had no response.

CELEBRATING LITERACY: A PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE TO READING FIRST

We propose a federal program to replace Reading First that celebrates literacy. We see it as a key part of a platform of celebrating American education. America has been among the leading nations in the world in expecting — and coming close to achieving — universal access to literacy. At our best we have had excellent community and school libraries. We have a vibrant publishing industry that produces a wide range of books for children and young people. Our teachers are among the best educated in the world.

Reading First became an unfortunate, self-fulfilling prophecy. There is no way to tweak Reading First and turn it from what it is to what it should be. It is too negative, too prescriptive, too absolute, too punitive. It turned reading into a hard-to-learn school subject. It mandated tests and materials designed to teach isolated skill sequences which were hard for young children to learn and then punished them for not learning.

We propose to celebrate literacy for what it is and what it can do for learners. Literacy, reading and writing, expands on what virtually all children achieve before they come to school: the ability to use one or more oral languages. We expect all children to have the same success with written language. In a highly literate society becoming literate is necessary for full participation. So the focus in a program of celebrating literacy must be on learning to make sense of and through written language. A program that celebrates literacy builds on the language strengths of all human learners.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL FEDERAL INITIATIVE

1. It should be positive not negative. In opening a Reading First staff development program, the leader said: "The reading wars are over and we know who won." This war metaphor is wrong. Reducing reading progress to a choice between two warring ideologies doomed Reading First. A positive program must encourage collaboration and reward success. Learners, teachers, schools, and communities should be treated positively and with respect.

2. It should not promise more than it can deliver. Reading First promised that every child everywhere would read proficiently by 2014. A new program should promise and produce progress. It should achieve literacy with the widest range of learners. But it should not be expected to overcome, in itself, the complex societal and economic realities that influence school success.

3. It should be inclusive not exclusive. In adopting Reading First, Congress bet \$US6bn on a single horse. In the process many successful programs were abandoned

because they were not acceptable to the DOE implementers. A new program should fund a wide range of viable alternatives based on the application of a full range of literacy research. It should tap all of the resources available. And it should serve all ages including secondary and adult literacy.

4. Literacy, not just reading. Any federal effort should be broadened to include not just reading but writing and all the new technologies — which some call the new literacies. Nothing in modern society is expanding faster than the uses of literacy. Ironically, students are more up-to-date than their teachers with these new forms. That shows their ability to achieve literacy when it is functional and socially important to the learners.

5. A new program should avoid a sense of crisis. Little good comes from putting pressure on teachers and learners for immediate, unrealistic results. That only creates resistance and too often cheating. There must be reasonable time for progress and change.

INCLUDING ALL KINDS OF LITERACY RESEARCH

The National Reading Panel only considered a narrow, restricted group of American experimental or quasi-experimental studies of reading instruction in the review that led to its recommendations. Many innovative and productive areas of modern literacy research were excluded. A new federal program should fund three kinds of research:

Research on literacy processes: How do people make sense through written languages? Effective reading instruction needs to be based on understanding what reading really is. In the past half century a lot has been learned about the reading process using a wide range of inter-disciplinary research methodologies from linguistics, ethnography, psychology and other fields. Most of this research is necessarily non-experimental. The purpose is to get at what people are doing to make sense of written language. Theories of meaning construction in reading have found support in studies of brain function.

Research on reading development: How do people become literate? Another major area of reading research that has been very productive has been the study of how reading is learned — how it develops as children become literate. Much of this research is multinational and most is non-experimental. Some of the most useful studies have been longitudinal and involve intensive studies of only one or at most a few subjects. As a result of such studies a lot is already known about literacy development. This research looks at much more than learning as a response to instruction. It looks at societal, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic aspects of literacy development as children grow up in literate societies. Grants would need to be multi-year and should encourage international collaboration.

Studies of reading instruction: So much money was wasted in Reading First on trying to make everybody in the country teach in the same way, ignoring much of what is known about what literacy is and how it develops. So much energy was wasted on forcing conformity. So much ill-will developed. And there was so much mean-spirited disinformation. There were too many hidden political agendas.

A program of celebrating literacy cannot aim toward a single simple methodology. Progress can come from encouraging the full participation of a variety of experts in seeking more effective ways of supporting learners to become literate. It can come from supporting a wide range of alternatives with examined assumptions and which make use of the research on the literacy processes and literacy development. While such alternatives may use published tests and texts they should not simply be trial and error use of canned programs without an examined rationale. Collaborations between schools and university-based researchers should be encouraged. Under Reading First they became almost impossible. All funded efforts should have ongoing third party evaluation built in.

This kind of research involves multiple classrooms in multiple settings and should be funded for several years. Federal funding should support development of innovative reading programs by collaborations of teachers, curriculum specialists and researchers. Another funding program should support all school districts that meet needs criteria to affiliate with a successful program and adapt the program to its schools. It would also be useful to fund innovative non-classroom contributions to literacy development such as school libraries, summer programs, and community outreach. Parents and community members should participate in classroom innovations.

A FOURTH DIMENSION: INNOVATIVE EVALUATION

This program of celebrating literacy offers an opportunity to support the production of state-of-the-art systems for evaluating literacy programs. Reading First encouraged self-serving testing based on ideology rather than scholarship. The best minds in the literacy field could come together to design evaluation systems that go far beyond paper and pencil tests that could be used to compare very different instructional programs, being fair to each. The knowledge exists. It needs to be brought together and applied in an atmosphere free of political agendas. Effective sampling techniques can provide all the information necessary while saving money and classroom time. Much of the useful assessment can be ongoing in the classroom, conducted by the teacher.

While evaluations could be used to compare programs, the purpose would not be to choose a winner to which everybody must switch but to provide useful information for school decision-makers to use in making choices, and for developers to produce better programs.

Funding of this whole program could be targeted in such a way that it produced little waste and funds went where they were most needed. The \$5.1bn a year spent on Reading First could buy much more and produce more demonstrable effects. Instead of punishing low achieving schools, funds should flow into such schools to support real innovation and encourage dedicated professional teachers to stay in such schools. Two-thirds of the funding of a federal program should go to implementation of innovative programs in schools.

One third of the funding should go to research on literacy processes and literacy development. And a few million dollars a year could go to developing and carrying out innovative evaluation.

PROMISES

If a program for celebrating literacy were authorised in 2009, it could *not* promise to have every child in every school reading proficiently by 2014 or any other year. But it could promise that at intervals of five years, or 10 years, or 20 years:

(a) We would continue to learn a lot more than we know now about literacy, how it develops and how to teach literacy in the most effective ways to support learning.

(b) Students, teachers and school decision-makers would be a lot happier and would be achieving at considerably higher levels.

(c) Some models would become increasingly more popular and more widely used and some less.

(d) There would be far fewer dropouts among students and teachers leaving the profession.

(e) The flight from public schools would diminish or disappear.

It's time for hope in our schools. Celebrating literacy can bring hope to the many children and young people our schools have been failing.

Early Intervention - Fashion, fad or progressive concept?

TONY PITMAN

RECENT YEARS HAVE seen a shift in emphasis for a number of issues in education. Early intervention has become one such "flavour of the decade" with child development, philosophy and economics all converging on the same conclusion, creating a swell of enthusiasm for changes in practice and resource allocation to everything early years.

But as with all fads, new fashions do not suit everyone or every situation and risk becoming passé through their ubiquitous adoption and over-use. Whether we are talking about clothing, architectural design, music or educational practice, there is a need to temper the latest flavour with the context in which we are applying it. It needs to work and be the best choice for the energy and resources available.

We have all often seen the latest fashion become so over-used that it quickly becomes last year's model. We have seen clothing fashions that simply aren't flattering on some people who in turn bring about the demise of that very fashion. Most fads and fashions grow initially out of good design, and are linked to where that good design works best. It is unthinking application and zealous following that kill off good concepts. Once good design becomes a fashion it is in its terminal phase. How often have we seen buzz words replaced to relabel concepts that failed to deliver once their

widespread application surpassed the original research-based intentions?

The very breadth of the goals in education forces a stretched workforce to accept many concepts across many domains as they are handed down with great authority. Lack of time and the various competing goals and priorities make it easy to be influenced by systemic trends on the assumption that full consideration has already been given to their application. Their use is assumed to be “best practice and wisdom”.

Early brain development is one example where new technology has produced some fascinating insights into the social and emotional development of children. Comparisons of traumatised children through modern brain imaging have made it strongly evident that neurological pathways are formed through the child’s contextual experience in those early years. Theory and practice have followed with renewed attention to programs for the young to strengthen their EQ, their resilience and to overcome early trauma.

Regrettably, far less attention is given to how the same imaging techniques demonstrate similar rates of social learning and brain activity in adolescence. This period of intensive developmental change provides us with a second chance to correct and strengthen the social functioning of adolescents, a critical period in every child’s development, yet most literature and round table discussion tend to focus on the early years of social emotional brain development, thereby potentially losing a valuable opportunity.

We are at risk of making the current focus on early intervention a lever of the early years movement, and thus a political priority, rather than a tool of education and child development.

If labels are to guide us then the old “Critical Periods Hypothesis” is perhaps more useful. This model suggests that there are predictable times for certain developmental tasks to reach optimum potential. Some developmental tasks have a number of critical opportunities, so missing the earliest opportunity should not be seen as a lost cause for the student. More importantly, passing the opportunity for a critical period does not eliminate the possibility of effective remediation later on. What is evident is that the most cost-effective intervention occurs during that critical period but we should not abandon those who have missed that opportunity purely for the sake of the economic argument.

Take literacy as an example. At Oz Child we developed a program for schools called Liff Off With Language. The program is based on the phonemic awareness skills required before the next steps of literacy can be developed — an absolute prerequisite to reading success. The program has a five year history with preps and Grade 1 students of producing significant improvement (around one standard deviation on average per grade) by focusing on skills which would be developed in normal activities by children in their preschool years. The reasons for developmental delays in this skill are varied and include lack of exposure, middle ear infections and others. The critical value of the program is that it is based on the truly great contributions of speech pathologists’ understanding of the importance and the sequence of these developmental skills and by working in the classroom alongside the classroom

teacher to put these skills in place. It is strongly research based. What is particularly interesting is that workshops with both parents and teachers show that many adults still have difficulty with these prerequisite skills but that they can be easily taught at any age. Yes, there is a critical period but many older students and parents have only minimal mastery of these fundamental skills — but later in life they can still be easily taught.

Because these skills are expected to be learnt naturally throughout normal childhood, the Liff Off With Language program “supercharges” the development of children who score low on these skills while also boosting those who are already age appropriate — that is, children who have developed to the normal range see their skills advance to above average. Post-test results show the whole class improves significantly above the standardised age average for these literacy prerequisite skills. Even though these children may have passed the optimum period for acquisition of these skills the intensive input takes them from below average to above through direct instruction in this critical skill.

What does this mean for the current focus on early intervention? There is little doubt from the evidence that students will learn any skill in the most cost effective way at the critical developmental stage. We have to be careful however that we do not assume that the effort required to remediate later in life is so costly in time, resources and energy that we should see it as a waste of valuable resources that would be better deployed elsewhere.

Two points need to be addressed here. First we have an obligation to help every child reach full potential, so if a critical period has been passed or if we are intervening later in a child’s life it is still valuable and a part of our responsibility, even if it is not economical.

Secondly it is wrong to assume that skills normally learnt earlier in life become resource heavy if instilled later in life. Oz Child also provides a program to secondary schools (called Reading Works) for students who have failed in literacy throughout their school life. We do this because we believe that every child deserves the chance to shine. We also believe that while there is strong evidence for the critical periods hypothesis in areas of child development there are also many later opportunities which are still highly cost effective.

The message of this paper to educators is that the current focus on early intervention has huge research support and should be a part of educational thinking. There are two interpretations of early intervention in both education and in welfare. One suggests that the earlier we intervene in a child’s life the better the outcome. The second is that the earlier we intervene in a given problem the better the outcome. Both these can be subsumed under a critical periods hypothesis, ie there is a best possible time to intervene because all the natural forces are working with you. In adolescent counseling this may be when the client is ready for change. In education, “when the student is ready the teacher will appear”.

Neither of these interpretations however suggests that we cannot or indeed should not support students outside these easier to tackle, higher return on investment periods.

We need to be careful that we are not seduced by the concepts of early intervention as the rationale for our contribution to education and the deployment of educational resources. Even if the myth that early intervention was ubiquitously the most economical model, we are not in the business of economy. We are in the business of developing all students as fully as the research tells us is possible. It is important for us therefore to look first at what the research tells us works to maximise every student and then determine how resources need to be deployed across the whole system.

The wisdom of research tells us that early intervention does have a highly valuable role in many situations. The challenge for us as educators is to use its lessons as a science and not a fashion and to then take the same lessons into the accepted philosophy of “education for all”, regardless of their advantage along the developmental journey. Research and philosophy need to come together, ahead of economy, in the best interests of every student in our care.

Reflections on Five Decades in Education

LORRAINE WILSON

I STARTED TEACHING in the late 1950s, as a trained infant teacher. I continue today doing some work in Victorian classrooms. In the 1950s Victorian Courses of Study set out what was to be taught for each grade level. The subjects were taught separately. There was no appreciation at that time of the link between language and learning, of language across the curriculum. Reading was taught separately from writing, in fact Preps did not write at all. Class sizes were considerably larger than those of today. School staff meetings or professional development programs for teachers did not exist. A teacher was trained or received the requisite knowledge for teaching while in teachers' college. After graduation one did not need further knowledge.

Some, but not all, of this knowledge was enlightened. Infant classes commenced each day with developmental play. As the children entered the classroom they chose from a rich range of activities such as water play, sand play, puppets, building blocks, book corner, home corner with dress-ups and dolls. Play was valued highly as was creativity through art, children's literature, drama and music.

The curriculum was wide and varied with the arts and physical education considered important. In many infant classrooms there was a piano for use in singing and musical movement sessions.

Schools had wonderful trained teacher librarians and trained art and craft teachers. Each district had trained visiting music specialists. One heard much singing and other music in classrooms.

In the 1950s in Victoria there were no statewide standardised tests.

Nor were there before and after-school programs for children of working parents, which meant many children spent a much shorter day on the school site.

1970S, 1980S

As time passed, research revealed how children are not passive recipients of other people's knowledge but rather active participants in making their own meanings; that learning is social, that learners talk themselves into understanding; that each child is different. This saw the release of new Victorian curriculum documents in the 1970s, based on enquiry learning.

Parallel with this was the introduction of the school-based curriculum. Rather than the state determining what was taught and when, each school together with its community became responsible for developing its own curriculum.

This meant teachers were treated as professionals who not only taught a curriculum but developed and evaluated it. They were free to plan a curriculum best suited to the needs of their students. Principals were seen as educational leaders rather than today's business managers. Children's language and cultural experiences could be incorporated into planned classroom learning programs. Educationally these were heady days. We saw diversity in school programs; hands-on experiences such as establishing school vegetable gardens, caring for school pets, and frequent excursions into the local neighbourhood were features of the school week.

In writing their school policy, teachers could describe their community and students and highlight the ways in which their students were unique.

For evaluation, teachers planned for progress for each individual child taking account of his existing strengths and needs. For this purpose teachers kept cumulative files of children's work which included evidence of that progress.

Schools were permitted 10 pupil-free days each year to provide time for the planning, writing and evaluation of school-based curriculum. Professional development was extremely important in this process. It was recognised that professional learning is ongoing — teachers too are active in their learning. So teachers worked collaboratively with fellow staff members, identified their learning needs and planned PD activities accordingly; that is, teachers were in charge of their own learning. During this period, Victorian teachers became very knowledgeable about teaching and learning.

In these early decades of my career I remember much joy and laughter in schools.

Then came the 1990s with the state once again assuming control of curriculum. Statewide standardised testing was introduced in Victoria for the first time. A mandated literacy program was introduced for the first three years of school. Schools which queried the validity and worth of this program were denied their literacy funding, amounting to tens of thousands of dollars.

Teachers lost the professional freedom they had experienced and were even told how to organise their timetables. Reading in infant classes was to be taught at 9am each morning in each school. Instruction in the teaching of writing commenced at 10am. Local knowledge, such as knowing that in a particular locality many young children arrived late and 9am was not a prime teaching time, had to be ignored. The teaching of reading was separated from the teaching of writing despite what research says about the interrelated nature of their development.

In other words teachers were de-professionalised; their professional knowledge and experience were ignored. Teachers were not trusted. What they could and could not do in their classrooms as far as literacy acquisition was concerned, was mandated by state authorities. School funding was tied to compliance. Teachers were “trained” in the implementation of the early years program.

Now in 2008, national testing has been implemented and a National Curriculum Board is meeting to develop a national curriculum.

When one looks back over nearly five decades in education one sees many changes, but are they all what is best for children? What impact do they have on the lives of young students? I note below some issues of concern.

1. THE NARROWING OF THE CURRICULUM

The curriculum today for young children is much narrower than several decades ago. Successive governments of differing political allegiances promise voters higher and higher literacy and numeracy scores. The focus for schools must be to improve performance in these areas. Statewide testing and assessment of progression points take valuable teaching time. No-one argues that literacy and numeracy are not important but one wonders about the sincerity of governments who ignore the best advice of literacy educators, who deprive disadvantaged schools of important resources, and who want to publish and compare the results of children across the country.

Teachers are now spending time training students in how to pass tests. There is no longer time for developmental play where children’s language, imagination and creativity can be developed. Creative endeavours such as music and the visual arts are no longer valued by system heads. Schools no longer have trained primary art and craft teachers or trained teacher librarians; nor do they benefit from the services of qualified district music advisers.

Surely what should be of utmost importance in primary schools is the development in students of a lifelong passion for learning and a belief in themselves as learners. Different students have different interests and different strengths. The narrower a curriculum becomes, the more students the school system disenfranchises.

Which students are being advantaged by what remains in today’s curriculum? Which children are we dooming to failure through this narrow view of learning? And what right do education systems have to ignore the different strengths and interests of so many children?

Control of children’s learning has gone from their local school communities to state authorities and is now to go to federal authorities. Decisions about what and

how Australian children will learn are being made by people further and further removed from them.

2. WINNERS AND LOSERS

Education is now seen as a race, with those gaining the highest scores at the finish line being cheered as the winners. Each year there are photographs in the local papers of those students who receive the very highest VCE scores, despite the fact that not all children start at the same point.

Education is not a race. Education is a lifelong journey with a myriad of possible pathways. As with a journey, the person who takes several detours or a slower route may ultimately have a more enriching experience.

Governments are putting pressure on teachers and students to improve standards, with talk of teachers being moved and “better” principals being transferred to under-performing schools without due consideration of the social context and conditions in which students and teachers work.

With this comes pressure not only on teachers, but also on younger and younger children to achieve and to pass tests. In my own family, the long-awaited introduction to school for two five-year-olds at two different schools was to turn up at an appointed time and sit alone with the teacher while she administered the Prep assessment test, which continued until the child made five consecutive errors. What a heartbreaking introduction to school!

3. LITERACY

Literacy standards are used as a whip by governments to threaten schools and teachers. One wonders why. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is the largest program of its kind, assessing the 30 member nations of the OECD, consistently shows Australia performing in the top five nations. What is significant is that Finland always outscores all other nations while the USA is far below Australia on the ranking table.

One would assume that Australian officials venturing overseas to investigate school improvement might go to Finland. (One interesting fact related to education in Finland is that children do not start school until they are seven.) Why then is our federal minister for education trying to impose on Australia teaching reforms from New York?

Literacy is about living. We read and write as we accomplish daily life activities. For example we read a manual to find out how to set up a new DVD player; we read captions on displays when we visit our local museum; we curl up with a book to read and relax at the end of a busy day; we read a report on carbon trading to be better informed for a meeting we have to attend with local manufacturers. Reading and writing are activities we undertake as part of our day lives.

Thus reading and writing are meaning-centred. Unfortunately the progression points used to assess Prep, Year 1 and Year 2 children in Victoria are counts of words read accurately. This has little to do with the construction of meaning and thus is of

very little value. Note also, the type of reading able to be measured on a machine-marked statewide test is trivial in nature.

4. DEPROFESSIONALISING TEACHERS

We hear politicians arguing for better, more intelligent teachers while at the same time removing professional responsibilities from teachers' hands. The issue of student evaluation is one example. All teachers across Victoria have to use the same reporting system. Sentences for inclusion on reports are available on the system website, so that many student reports read the same. In other words, teachers don't even have to generate their own sentences for report writing.

In an area where many parents do not speak English well, a collection of student work over time may be a preferable and more concrete way to communicate with parents their particular children's progress, than a computer-generated report.

5. THE UNDERVALUING OF PLAY.

This issue is also part of the narrowing of the curriculum. It is sufficiently important to be detailed by itself.

Undirected, unstructured, unlimited play has its own secret language. When children are given the freedom to play in this way, they usually have no goals in mind and the playing is an end in itself. By creating a world that they can understand and master, children make sense of the world they live in.

Angela Rossmanith, 1997, p13

When children experience new things they need time to process and make sense of these experiences. There are a variety of ways children process their experiences. They talk, write, draw, construct and play. For young children, play is a natural, easy way to create their worlds and by so doing come to understand them. Play is not time wasting. When playing, children are thinking, talking, imagining, sharing and socialising with others.

When playing, children not only create their existing worlds, they create alternate worlds. A piece of material on a pole becomes a flag on a pirate ship, and a story is played out. Such stories can be the first drafts of written narratives.

Play should be an integral part of the primary curriculum.

LOOKING FORWARD

The world today is not the same as 50 years ago. Schools cannot remain the same nor should they. Year 6 boys no longer chop wood for classroom fires. In this current, highly technological society, young students competently research information on the internet and engage with diverse computer programs.

However we need to ask whether current school practices are challenging and exciting for children; whether children experience joy in coming to school; whether

children experience a range of creative endeavours; whether each school is able truly to plan for the all-round development of each of its students; whether each school is free to plan so that each student experiences success.

Childhood is becoming shorter. The mass media and pop culture target younger and younger children with what were previously the interests of teenagers. Magazines currently sold in newsagents for 6 to 10-year-old girls include free make-up.

Are schools also curtailing childhood with persistent pressure to reach progression points, to pass tests and to complete hours of homework?

NOTES

Rossmannith A, 1997, *When Will the Children Play? Finding Time for Childhood*, Mandarin, Australia.

Ben Levin

The challenges facing public education



INTERVIEW BY JOHN GRAHAM

BEN LEVIN IS a Professor and Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. He was interviewed by John Graham by email following his visit to Melbourne as part of an Australian speaking tour in June-July 2008.

JG: What in your view are the big issues for public education at present?

BL: In my view the biggest issues are how to provide quality education for all children while building public support and maintaining educator morale. The challenge is to improve performance steadily, because we know we can do this, but to do so in a positive, sustainable way. There is evidence from a number of places, including the last few years in Ontario, that this can be done.

JG: How do you build up public support for public education?

BL: One — treat the people we work with well every day. How we treat students and parents on a daily basis matters a lot. Every negative interaction, such as failing to return a phone call or dismissing a parent's views about her child, affects how people think about the schools, and unhappy people tell others, too. We have to demonstrate every day that public schools are the kinds of places people should want to send their children and contribute their taxes.

Two — Deliver good education and tell people about it through effective, two-way communications. This means reporting publicly on a range of indicators of progress.

JG: What do you think are the major reasons for public concern about teachers and schools?

BL: People are more demanding about every institution today — largely as a result of being more educated, I might add. Education is seen as very important for our individual and collective future, so any shortcomings — and there will always be shortcomings in a large endeavor — will result in public concern. Public confidence in schools remains good, but there is always room for improvement.

JG: There is a push for greater "transparency" in the information parents can access with regard to schools. This is linked to school league tables and

school choice. What is your opinion about these developments?

BL: The genie is out of the bottle on school-by-school results and on choice. We cannot any more tell people they aren't entitled to know, or have to send their children to a particular school. What we can do is give people multiple kinds of information so that they are less reliant on something like a single average raw test score to judge a school. Schools can report on other indicators such as retention in grade, value-added, proportion of students at various levels of achievement, and so on. It's also important to have strong networks of schools to counteract excessive competitiveness, which can have negative effects.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

JG: What do you think makes a good school?

BL: In my view there are five key things: effective daily instructional practice in all classrooms; strong and caring relationships between adults and students; a commitment to success for all children as shown in ongoing learning by the adults; recognition that students vary and require differentiated treatment; and strong outreach to parents, families and the broader community.

JG: What are some of the things you shouldn't do if you want to improve schools and student achievement?

BL: The key to improvement lies in the

above features. Changes in governance, in finance, in curriculum or in accountability systems will only help if they support the factors just mentioned. We've wasted a lot of time and money around the world looking for silver bullets; real and lasting improvement requires hard and sustained work by lots of people over years, with a consistent positive attitude but also a relentless desire for improvement and aversion to complacency. There is no magic answer.

JG: How important are standards and accountability in improving schools?

BL: Standards and accountability are important, but only if, as I said, they support improved instructional practice, good human relationships, and the other factors above. Accountability measures help us know where we are and where we need to improve, but they alone will not yield much improvement. People need to learn how to do better, not just be told to "do better or else".

TEACHING AND LEARNING

JG: There is a debate in political circles and in the community about a return to more traditional teaching and learning methods and curriculum content. Teachers tend to come down on the more progressive side of the argument. What can they do to effectively influence this debate?

BL: Although there is much progressive

language in teaching, the reality has always been more traditional than people, including teachers, think. The rhetoric has changed more than the reality.

People — especially parents — still largely trust teachers on education issues. There isn't any convincing evidence I've seen that more traditional teaching is more effective, but teachers also need to understand why parents are concerned, and to be active in the public debate over education in a way that is seen as professional rather than self-serving.

Using and sharing research evidence can be an important part of the work; as we accumulate more knowledge about effective educational practice, the profession should share this publicly (and embody it in our daily work).

I would like to see the teaching profession take on its own standards of practice, not just in the generic sense as at present, but outlining where we have knowledge of effective practice and insisting that our members live up to those standards, not just embody them in words. We could learn from the use of some well-supported standard practices in other fields. For example, in early reading we now know a lot about effective practice; teacher organizations should be insisting that all teachers use these practices. There is a real leadership opportunity here for the profession.

JG: What are the issues in assessment (and reporting) of student achievement?

BL: There are many, but two that stand out are: One — ensuring that we use assessment data to shape teaching and learning practices and in particular to help students and parents see what good work is and how students can improve.

Two — ensuring that students, parents and the public are given a well-rounded sense of how the system as a whole is performing, where we are doing well, and where we still have important gaps and challenges to address. While no single assessment measure tells us everything, without data we have no basis on which to improve.

CURRICULUM

JG: Australian governments (state and federal) have now decided to concentrate their curriculum resources on the development of a national curriculum. What's been the Canadian experience regarding a national curriculum? How important do you see the development of a national curriculum in terms of improving the quality of education?

BL: Canada has no national curriculum. I personally don't regard curriculum as being all that important, certainly in comparison with good instructional practice. The key task is to help thousands of teachers steadily analyse and improve their daily practices, based on evidence of success. Curriculum is only one part of that and we have learned that new curricula do not in themselves change teaching practice. I don't

think it matters whether a curriculum is state or national. That being said, I don't see any particular harm in a national curriculum; most countries have one. I would not spend a lot of time arguing about this point.

EQUITY ISSUES

JG: What are some effective strategies for improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for disadvantaged students with low levels of performance?

BL: If we knew how to do that we'd all be doing it already! However we do know some things. We know that expectations matter, and that it is natural for educators to lower expectations — often with the kindest of intentions — for poorer children. We know that positive outreach to parents matters even more in high poverty areas. We know that early intervention is important. We know that some target groups, such as some visible minorities, require particular strategies to address issues of systemic discrimination. So there are lots of things we can do. The most important single element is, as Robert Slavin puts it, "the relentless pursuit of success for students". There is so much evidence that students can do better than anyone expects when given enough support and encouragement.

JG: How do you increase the proportion of students who successfully complete their secondary education?

BL: Ontario developed a comprehensive

strategy to do this. I've written about it elsewhere. I summed up the key points as follows in a paper for the Queensland Studies Authority:

1. A focus in every school on student success, encompassing the creation of an environment which is safe, in which every student has a sense of belonging and of adult care, and where diverse student identities are affirmed.
2. A focus on improvements in daily teaching and learning practices across all classrooms and teachers, including improvements in student assessment policy and active engagement of students in their own learning.
3. Appropriate programs and pathways, including less specialisation in curricula, and varied pathways insofar as all of them provide real opportunities for meaningful employment and further education.
4. Connection of the school to the worlds of citizenship and work, including effective bridges and transitions to post-secondary education, employment, volunteer work, and the development of essential life skills beyond the standard high school curriculum.
5. Community engagement that brings parents into the educational process and engages the broader community in supporting students' learning and welfare.

The single most important element is that schools feel responsible for the success of every student, and that they have active and effective processes

for knowing how all students are doing and intervening early where there are problems.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

JG: One of the areas of increasing importance to both state and federal governments in Australia is early childhood education from 0-8 years of age. The aim is to develop a more integrated approach from birth to preschool and from preschool to school. What is your view of this development? Have there been parallel developments in Canada? Are there initiatives in this area which have produced positive outcomes?

BL: Early childhood is not my area of expertise. However there is compelling evidence that early supports for children and their parents (especially mothers), particularly from prenatal to age 2, can have very high payoffs. Examples include good prenatal health care and nutrition, early literacy supports, and efforts to reduce disabilities such as foetal alcohol syndrome. Canada, like Australia, has not done nearly enough in this area. In addition, too much of the current focus is, in my view, on ages 3-5 instead of on prenatal to 2.

PRE-SERVICE EDUCATION

JG: There has been a plethora of reviews and inquiries into pre-service teacher education over the past decade. Governments tend to think that the "teacher quality problem" can be

fixed in this way. Do you think improvements need to be made to teacher pre-service education?

BL: I don't think that pre-service education should be a priority for change because a) it is very hard to change; and b) new teachers don't change the schools they enter; they are changed by those schools. Given limited time and energy, this is not a good place to spend it. So while teacher education could always be improved, my advice is to focus on better development of teachers already in the schools, and especially in school teams, so that the work actually results in better instructional practice.

NOTES

contributors

SUE DOCKETT is Professor of Early Childhood Education at the Murray School of Education, Charles Sturt University — Albury. Sue has taught in the early years of school and has been the director of long day care and work-based care programs in Sydney. Since 1988, she has been involved in early childhood teacher education. Her research agenda is focused on the transition to school and the expectations, experiences and perceptions of all involved. She has published widely, both nationally and internationally, in the area of transition to school.

KEN GOODMAN is Professor Emeritus of Language, Reading and Culture at the University of Arizona. His 40-plus years of research on the reading process and his contributions to the pedagogy of whole language have influenced English speaking countries and beyond. He's an advocate for teachers and students and continues to fight against the "pedagogy of the absurd".

JOHN GRAHAM is a research officer at the AEU Victorian branch, with responsibility for researching curriculum and professional developments in education and training. He has written extensively about curriculum change, teachers and teaching as a profession, developments in education at an institutional, state and federal level, and on a range of other matters from funding to organisational review. John has been a teacher in Victorian government secondary schools, a researcher and writer for a national equity program, and a project manager and policy developer for the Department of Education.

MICHAELA KRONEMANN is a research consultant, a former AEU research officer in both the Federal Office and the Victorian Branch, and a life member of the AEU. She has worked closely with the National Early Childhood Committee and has undertaken considerable research on early childhood education. Her publications include the 1998 *Towards a National Plan for Preschool Education* and the 2006 *Where There's A Will It's Child's Play: The way forward to quality preschool education for all*.

BEN LEVIN is a Professor and Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. In addition to an academic career including four books and more than 150 other articles, he has served as chief civil servant (director general) for education in two Canadian provinces (Manitoba 1999-2002, Ontario 2004-2007).

TONY PITMAN is chief executive officer of Oz Child, a child welfare organisation with a history dating back to 1851. A former teacher and qualified psychologist, he joined Oz Child in 1992 from the Victorian Education Department where he was senior regional psychologist for the south-east metropolitan region, overseeing provision of welfare support in 550 schools. Tony managed and expanded Oz Child's education services until 1998 when he became CEO. He won the Innovation Award at the inaugural Equity Trustees' CEO Awards in 2002. Oz Child is a multidisciplinary organisation whose mission is to enhance the quality of life and future opportunities of children. www.ozchild.org.au



CALL FOR PAPERS

The next issue of *PV* will take the theme **Middle Years Education**, completing our series looking at the education continuum. Contributions are invited. Papers should be no more than 2000 words. Please contact Nic Barnard on Ph **03 9418 4811** or email nic.barnard@aeuvic.asn.au for further information. Papers should be submitted by **30 November 2008**.

MARY SAYERS joined the Policy and Service Development Unit, Centre for Community Child Health in early 2004. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree, a Graduate Diploma in Human Resources and a Masters by Research (focusing on the impact of labour market reform on women with young families in the workplace). Her experience before joining the centre was in project management in the area of family policy/programs with the Australian Government. Mary is currently national AEDI program manager for the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) program and since 2004 has been responsible for co-ordinating the project implementation through the AEDI National Support Centre. To date the AEDI has been completed in 60 Australian communities on over 37,000 children in the first year of school.

Mary writes here on behalf of the AEDI Partnership between the Centre for Community Child Health and the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. Partnership members are: Professor Frank Oberklaid, Dr Sharon Goldfeld, June McLoughlin and Mary Sayers (CCCH); Professor Fiona Stanley, Professor Sven Silburn, Professor Steve Zubrick and Sally Brinkman (Telethon Institute).

CHRISTINE URE is an associate professor and Associate Dean of Teacher Education at Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne.

LORRAINE WILSON taught for many years in Victorian schools. It was while she was vice principal at Helen Street, Northcote, that she began writing for children. Her first books, the "City Kids" series, featured many of the children from the Northcote school. Since then she has combined educational consultancy with writing. Her latest books, *Reading to Live: How to Teach Reading for Today's World*, and *Writing to Live: How to Teach Writing for Today's World*, have been published in America.



ABN: 44 673 398 674 112 Trenerry Crescent, PO Box 363, Abbotsford 3067
Tel: 03 9417 2822 Fax: 1300 568 078 Web: www.aeuvic.asn.au



TAX INVOICE

SUBSCRIPTION

Professional Voice is published tri-annually and aims to stimulate debate within the Australian education community. Covering issues of curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, educational practices and related topics, *Professional Voice* is positioned to build awareness of innovation, best practice and reform within educational settings ranging from early childhood, primary and secondary schools, as well as TAFE, adult provision and disability centres. *Professional Voice* is funded by the Australian Education Union Victorian Branch and is available free to financial members.



Name:

Address:

..... Postcode:

Daytime telephone number:

Email:

Please start my subscription from the current issue

Please start my subscription from the next issue

Please send me the next issue of *Professional Voice*

Please send me issue _____ of *Professional Voice*

Current issue \$10 / back issues \$10 / one year (3 issues) \$25 / overseas (airmail) +\$5 per issue / All prices are GST inclusive

Total amount payable: AUD\$ _____ (includes GST)

Please find enclosed my cheque (in Australian dollars payable to the Australian Education Union Victorian Branch)

Please debit my credit card: Visa Mastercard Bankcard

Card Number: Expiry:

Cardholder's Name:

Signature: Date:



Please use a separate form for each subscription.

ISSN Number:
1445-4165



Featuring essays by

A New Era for the Profession: The national agenda for reform of early childhood education

Christine Ure

Keep These Banners Ready: The challenges of the new early childhood agenda

Michaela Kronemann

The Importance of Transition in the New Early Years Learning Framework

Sue Dockett

The Australian Early Development Index: A national measure of early childhood development

Mary Sayers

Celebrating Literacy: Why a US phonics program failed and what we should do instead

Ken Goodman

Early Intervention - Fashion, fad or progressive concept?

Tony Pitman

Reflections on Five Decades in Education

Lorraine Wilson

Ben Levin on the challenges facing public education

Interview by John Graham