Issues in literacy prior to school

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Introduction

This paper is based on research for the Early Literacy and Social Justice Project funded by the NSW Department of Education and Training and Department of Community Services. The focus on literacy in the years before school arose out of the increasing focus on the social context of learning, the relationship between literacy and life opportunities and the growing recognition of the importance of the early years.

Increasingly interest has focused on the years prior to the commencement of formal schooling in the development and strengthening of children's foundational understandings of literacy. It is in the earliest years that notions about what it means to be literate begin to develop as children participate in literacy events within a 'community of practice'. As Schickedanz (1999, p.1) notes, even though most children appear to learn to read and write conventionally in the first years of school, "these achievements really represent the end result of years of literacy learning". Children's understandings of what it means to be literate emerge within families and communities as literacy is created, interpreted, recreated and negotiated as a cultural tool for communication (Bruner, 1986).

Changing perspectives of literacy as sets of social practices that begin from birth, as well as broad definitions of literacy that integrate viewing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, reading and writing also make a focus on literacy in the years before school highly relevant.
The research includes Stage 1: *Mapping Literacy Practices in Early Childhood Services* (Makin, Hayden, Holland, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz, & McNaught, 1999) and Stage 2: professional development. A resource package based on the perspective of literacy as social practice and including five core principles for early literacy learning has been developed. This package, including a video and modules based on each principle, will be distributed to all children’s services in New South Wales early in 2001.

**Methodology**

In Stage 1, 79 prior to school settings that were situated in areas designated by the departments to be of social and economic disadvantage were visited.

Three data collection methods were used to investigate staff and family beliefs and attitudes about early literacy and to observe current literacy practices in early childhood settings:

- Rating of the literacy environment in each setting using *The Early Childhood Language and Literacy Scale (ECLLS)*. This is based on the revised Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale developed by Harms, Clifford and Cryer (1998), adapted by the researchers to include a greater emphasis on language and literacy.
- Interviews with two staff members working with the four year olds.
- Focus group discussions with parents.

**Findings**

The observations of the settings, plus interviews with staff and parent focus group discussions, revealed that while there was generally a focus on interactions and oral communication, in most cases there was not a strong focus on literacy. While most settings had a reading area and writing centre, and included language at "group time", literacy was not included at other times of the day nor in other areas of the curriculum. For example, only 11% of staff mentioned including literacy materials in dramatic play settings as a literacy experience. Furthermore, where literacy resources were provided educators did not engage in interactions with children to extend literacy.

Few settings included poems, rhymes and letter-sound relationships in their program. Although some educator's expressed the view that metalinguistic skill development is important and included planned and spontaneous discussions around concepts such as rhyme, these were the exception. Few educators were observed or discussed drawing children's attention to sounds and rhyming patterns in language as a literacy teaching strategy.

In some settings there were effective partnerships between staff and parents, with shared understandings about literacy and shared expectations for children's literacy learning. There were many strategies to initiate and maintain communication between staff and parents in these settings. Staff knew about and valued children's home and community experiences with literacy and integrated them effectively into the program.

However, communication was generally one-way, from the setting to the home, with staff seeing their role as one of informing parents about literacy issues. In interviews, 30% of staff indicated that they did not know children's home and community literacy experiences and 20% suggested that "not a lot happens at home". There were many
deficit assumptions held by staff regarding children's home experiences. For example, concerns were raised by staff in interviews that parents don't read books to children, don't visit the library, allow children to watch too much television, and don't engage in conversations with children.

Many teachers held narrow views of literacy as book-based and in English. Diverse literacies were generally ignored or devalued. For example, although many settings included bilingual children, in 79% of settings there were few resources that reflected cultural and linguistic diversity. Technology was also not included in most early childhood settings, despite the fact that many parents expressed the view that computers, television and videos were effective literacy learning tools for their children.

For most children then there was little congruence between their home and community literacy experiences and those of the early childhood setting. Educators were generally not aware of the diverse literacy experiences of children's homes and communities and did not extend children's literacy experiences in the setting.

These findings led to the development of the professional development materials piloted in stage 2 of the project.

Stage 2

Stage 2 consisted of a professional development program for 15 of the 79 settings involved in Stage 1. Five core principles of early literacy, emanating from the findings of Stage 1 as well as current views of literacy as social practice, were piloted. The five principles are:

1. Exchanging literacy information with families
2. Building on literacy information from home at the early childhood setting
3. Planning for individual literacies
4. Integrating literacy throughout the day
5. Scaffolding literacy understandings.

During the pilot researchers worked with individual settings to support them in developing and implementing action plans relevant to their setting.

At the conclusion of the pilot a video was filmed in 5 of the 15 settings and support materials for each of the principles were developed. These were then trialled in 12 early childhood settings not previously involved in the research and the materials were revised based on feedback. The *Literacies, Communities and Under 5s* package is currently in production and is due for release early in 2001.

Implications for Professional Development

Much of the literacy learning and practice promoted in early childhood settings and classrooms has been found to be neither based on nor related to the literacy activities commonly experienced by families and communities (Bloom, 1987; Heath, 1983; Street, 1995). In essence therefore, it appears that there has been little congruence between the literacies of the home and settings, a situation which has the potential to marginalise some children's educational opportunity. Cairney and Ruge (1998) note that mismatches between the literacies of families and settings with regard to cultural, communicative, social and interactive factors are possible explanations for poor academic achievement. Furthermore, the acknowledgement and celebration of
only those literacies acceptable to the 'mainstream', may, albeit unwittingly, also contribute to academic failure (Makin, Hayden, Holland, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz & McNaught, 1999).

Supporting children's early literacy has been the subject of much research in recent years (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000; Taylor, 1997). Delgado-Gaitan (1991) and Epstein (1996), have stressed the importance of communicating with families to support children's early education and incorporating relevant literacy artifacts from homes into experiences offered in early childhood settings. Moreover, as literacy is part of the everyday lives of most children, it is essential that all experiences include a literacy component reflecting the diversity of literacy types and uses typically found in a community, including environmental print, popular culture and technology (Marsh & Hallet, 1999; Whitehead, 1999; Morrow, 2001). Recognising the individual and personal nature of children's literacy experiences is required for planning and programming to maximise support. Vygotsky (1978) and Rogoff (1991) have stressed the collaborative nature of learning as teachers and families scaffold children's understanding. Given that language and literacies develop with a community of practice, support for literacy must be effected in the same manner.

Gaps between research and practice in education have been an issue for many years and our research has implications for the way early childhood educators support early literacy. Ways of supporting and fostering effective change in attitudes and approaches to teaching have met with some resistance in the past, a matter confounding many researchers. It has been thought that one reason for staff resistance could be the ineffectiveness of traditional professional development models arranged around workshops which incorporate a 'top down' model of a good presenter (Abbott, Walton, Tapia, & Greenwood, 1999; Lieberman, 1994). Typically, it is assumed that the motivation to use ideas and the skills necessary for their implementation will emerge as sessions are presented.

Moreover, it has also been pointed out that traditional top down educational research models, where researchers target problems to be explored and devise the solutions to the problems, have not often produced effective change (McNaught, Clugston, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz, Ashton, Hayden & Makin, 2000). It has been found that research based on questions with little relevance to staff's professional lives holds limited interest, and that solutions created by others are frequently ineffective in specific settings. The research results, traditionally disseminated in professional publications, can also be a disincentive to change if they require translation into teacher friendly and workplace specific formats.

Recent studies have reported success in professional development models that redefine the old ideas of in-servicing or staff development. Central to the changes have been the notion of staff as adult learners and reflective practitioners, engaging in continuous inquiry into their professional lives, and of building supportive and collaborative networks (Pascal, 1999; Lieberman, 1994; Woods, 1994). Successful efforts in staff development have involved a mixture of training, consultation, feedback and collaboration. Partnership with parents and consultants are seen to be particularly effective in supporting and fostering change (Pascal, 1999; Abbott et al., 1999).

Given the findings from the first stage of our research and the success of the professional development pilot and trial, it is imperative that teachers begin to reflect on their current practices and reconceptualise their understandings of early literacy and how it may be supported equitably. Lasting, constructive change will only occur
over time. Moreover, change is unlikely to result from any professional development, unless teachers see its relevance for their daily practices, construct context specific meanings and welcome new literacy possibilities. The\textit{Literacies, Communities and Under 5s} package is designed to support professional change specific to each setting. Because of its collaborative focus it is hoped that it will engender enthusiasm and encourage staff engagement at a personal level.

Unless children's individual and diverse literacies are recognised and built upon, mismatches between the literacies of homes and settings will continue to promote inequities in children's educational and academic achievement.

\textbf{References}


