

**DRAFT**

**Mapping Literacy in Tasmania**

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**Jenny Overton**

**University of Tasmania**

**Launceston Campus**

**Email: [Jenny.Overton@utas.edu.au](mailto:Jenny.Overton@utas.edu.au)**

**Abstract**

*Over the last 25 years Schools in Australia have seen changes in the teaching of literacy. The Tasmanian context is no different. This paper, based on early work toward a PhD thesis, reviews the literacy policies and practices evident in early childhood classrooms in Tasmanian government schools over the past 25 years. In more recent times the Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE) has implemented a variety of specific literacy programs in the Early Childhood years. Some of these programs have been 'imported' into the Tasmanian context - such as Reading Recovery and Spalding, while others have been developed by the DoE - for example the Flying Start program and the Program of Additional Support and Structure (PASS). An analysis of the content of the most prevalent of these programs will examine areas of intersection in practices and theoretical frameworks. A mapping of literacy programs in Tasmanian gives an overview of the policy and practice changes and an understanding of literacy discourses circulating in the state.*

## **Introduction**

This paper forms part of the work being done toward a PhD about teachers and literacy curriculum. It begins with a description of the range of documents that have been evident in Tasmanian primary schools over that last 20 – 25 years with a specific focus on the areas of literacy and early childhood. A brief description of these will indicate the chronological progress of policy and document production in Tasmania. The second part of this paper will focus on the most prevalent literacy programs and projects that are being used in schools and will look to a basic content analysis of these. The final discussion will centre on the reviewing of these programs as they are for teachers and the current literacy discourses, challenges and assumptions.

## **Policies and Documents**

This section contains a synopsis of the documents and policies that have been influential for primary and early childhood teachers in Tasmanian government schools since the end of the 1970s. Not all of them are specific to literacy, but because literacy comprises such a large component of the work of teachers, some have been included because of their impact and influence on school life.

From 1979 – 1988 the Tasmanian government education department (then called the Education Department of Tasmania) published a series of four documents that were prepared by the Committee on Primary Education (COPE). These four documents were: ***The Growth and Development of Children, (1979); Learning Spaces, (1980); Let's Look at Children, (1983)*** and ***Play, (1988)***. While not specifically linked to the teaching of literacy, these booklets were indicative of what was happening to support and encourage teachers in their classroom practice. All four booklets have a developmental approach to children and reflect the direction of education in that period.

*The Growth and Development of Children, (1979)* has 36 pages of referenced description about child development, with a focus on how language and thinking relate to development. It is Piagetian in outlook and reflective of the era of education.

*Learning Spaces, (1980)*, written in a similar, user friendly format establishes ways that teachers were to be "developing their learning areas in the best interests of their children" and "tries to indicate procedures in making the best use of what is available" (p.3). Children's language development is listed as one of the benefits of thoughtful classroom organisation.

*Let's Look at Children, (1983)* affirmed for teachers the ways in which observations of children could give them "clues to children's growth, development and learning" (p.4). It espoused the benefits of observations of children and set out what to look for, and how to structure observations and how to record what the teacher observes. It then went on to note that, from observations of children, teachers could "extend their knowledge and understanding of individual differences" (p.27) and thus adjust the program that was offered for students. Viewing each child as an individual and developing learning programs that cater for students' individual needs was the underlying message of this document.

*Play, (1988)* was a slightly different format in that it was a formal encouragement to teachers to be using play as a process to enhance student learning. Interestingly it is the only document that formally validates the use of play in the primary school as a way to "take advantage of the power of play" (p.24). No such official authorisation has been written since. The importance of children's play has been mentioned in a variety of documents, but not as convincingly as it was in this document.

Overlapping in time with the production of the above-mentioned booklets, in a similar format and also produced by the Education Department, came a series of six booklets under the heading of "**Children and Language**". These included:

*Developing a Language Program*, (1982a);

*A School is a Language Place*, (1982b);

*Children and Books*, (1983a);

*Parents, Children and Language*, (1983b);

*Understanding Reading and Writing*, (1984); and

*Children, Language and The Arts*, (1985).

Interestingly the then Director of Primary Education, Kenneth Axton wrote in the Foreword to *Developing a Language Program*, (1982), "It is important that teachers understand the theory behind language acquisition, and its relevance to day to day practice, so that a consistent approach can be developed". This series was seen as an attempt to do several things. Firstly, it was what is currently called 'professional development' - that is, a way to ensure that teachers have the knowledge required to keep pace with the changes in educational theory. They were to be guidelines, "based on widely accepted thinking, practice and research about language over the past twenty years." (Foreword) [written in 1982]. Secondly, then, they were a set of theory and philosophy statements indicating the current thinking and practice in educational contexts.

1987 saw the publication and dissemination of the Department of Education and the Arts' **(DEA) Pathways of Language Development, (1987)** - the twice revised edition of which resulted in a 249 page book containing both a practical and theoretical guide to the teaching of language in Tasmanian schools. Don Levis the then Deputy-Secretary of Education stated in the Foreword of the 1989 edition that the document "draws attention to the highly individual nature of language development", (p.v) thus mirroring the focus of the 1983, *Let's Look at Children* document. It also echoed the practice of the individualisation of teaching and learning programs evidenced in the *Children and Language* series of booklets (1982 - 1985) and sought to "provide teachers with a sound basis for a serious examination of their educational philosophies...", (p.v). It also explicitly stated that the document might "call into question some of the traditional ways in which language development and achievement have been measured...", (p.v). *Pathways* also signalled the advent of an outcomes based education, with the use of indicators and characteristics of language development and in this sense was influential in the progress towards the creation and acceptance of later documents.

The DEA continued with its production of series of booklets as statements to guide teaching and learning in the state. In 1991 a new primary school based policy guide was published – **Our Children: The Future** – which contained five booklets that "provide a cohesive sense of direction to our schools and a framework within which they can develop programs", (DEA, 1991a, p.2). They were to be linked to other documents, providing a statement of educational principles for K-12 (Kindergarten to grade 12). In the Introduction the policy sets out its audience as primarily for teachers, but also of interest to parents and the wider community. This indicated the shift from knowledge and policy held and controlled exclusively by schools to one of the potential for community interest and involvement in decision-making. In the rationale for a new policy guide, the document states that, "some misconceptions have developed about the role of the school and about the role of the

teacher", (DEA, 1991a, p.3). Presumably this policy was to rectify these misconceptions. The booklets were as follows:

*Our Children: The Future. An Introduction to the Primary Education Policy.* (1991a)

*Our Children: The Future. Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.* (1991b)

*Our Children: The Future. Teaching and Learning.* (1991c)

*Our Children: The Future. A Curriculum for Children.* (1991d)

*Our Children: The Future. Successful Schools.* (1991e)

*Our Children: The Future. Monitoring and Assessing Children's Learning.* (1991f).

These documents saw the beginnings of the use of five 'capabilities' and competencies as indicators of students' success. They indicated 'essential learnings', and the issues of resourcing and self-management and the accountability of schools were also discussed.

In 1992 the DEA produced ***Learning to Read and Write. From Theory into Practice: critical principles for teachers (1992)***. The Preface to the 68 page book acknowledges the importance of literacy – the term 'literacy' is used for the first time here - and its place in importance in the light of the national curriculum. It goes on to say that a coherent but eclectic approach to teaching and learning is what is important – that one single theoretical perspective can in the long term be counter productive. It sets out 49 key principles and their implications for schools and teachers. Once again it acknowledges that the target audience is teachers, but that others may welcome its advent. It states that its main focus is to, "re-focus and re-direct teaching and learning strategies towards an active, detailed and interventionist approach to the teaching and assessment of reading and writing", (1992, p.v). As a document it aroused much interest in the teaching community, but was not widely used or acclaimed by teachers. It was, however, a document written with the specific focus on literacy – reading and writing – and as such was an acknowledgement to teachers of the importance of literacy in 1992. Interestingly the Concluding Remark section indicates that, "it [the document] has largely removed possible debate about which, if any, single method is 'best', believing approaches of this type to be ultimately counter-productive and potentially damaging", (p.61).

1993 and 1994 saw the dissemination of the nationally produced Statements and Profiles. This step towards the national curriculum produced a series of documents in eight of the key learning areas to provide a framework for curriculum for schools and systems throughout Australia. The literacy documents, ***English - A Curriculum Profile for Australian Schools (1994)*** and ***A Statement on English for Australian Schools (1994)*** were then issued to Tasmanian teachers and was thus used to direct the classroom practice with the specific focus on achieving outcomes and was a formal embodiment of the shift to an outcomes based education system. The Profiles, a set of learning outcomes, "describe the progression of learning typically achieved by students during the compulsory years of schooling (1 – 10)" (p.1) and the Statements are frameworks of what might be taught to achieve those outcomes. Within the English Profile, there are three strands – speaking and listening, reading and viewing, and writing. Pages 3 & 4 of the document also set out eight underlying assumptions about the English profile. Like the Tasmanian based KILO document the English profile has outcomes listed at levels that do not correspond directly with grade levels. There are eight levels to cover the ten compulsory years of schooling. For

many early childhood teachers the profile caused contention with the KILOs starting at Kinder and Prep, and the Profiles beginning at Grade 1.

In 1993 the DEA produced the **Framework for curriculum provision K-12 (interim statement), (1993a)** which was to be used in the development, planning and evaluation of schools' and teachers' educational programs. Designed to be updated and revised regularly, it contained four sections – the Department's curriculum requirements of schools, how to implement these requirements, the types of learning opportunities for the four bands and strands of education [presumably mirroring the 'bands' and 'strands' in the national statements and profiles]. This document indicated the eight key curriculum learning areas and schools responsibilities as well as outlining the five areas of students capabilities in the curriculum.

The DEA's **Literacy Policy (1993b)** became public in the same year. A relatively brief document – only 6 pages – it contains a definition of literacy, a rationale (based on the 'Hobart Declaration'), a set of governing principles and provisions, a section on literacy outcomes which refers readers to the Key Intended Literacy Outcomes (KILOs) and the National Profiles for English (see below), a section on implementation of the policy and references to the documents to assist teachers in the process of implementation.

Published in tandem with the *Literacy Policy (1993b)* the DEA published the **Key Intended Literacy Outcomes, Kindergarten to Year Eight (1994)** – (commonly referred to as KILOs and revised in 1994). This document's preamble states that it was intended to complement the key ideas and principles in *Learning to Read and Write* (DEA, 1992) and the DEA's *Literacy Policy (1993b)*. It was a set of outcomes towards which students were to move. They were stated in two-year levels and were "identified as the minimum that Tasmanian students need to achieve in order to become independent learners" (1994 edition, p.2). The document is quite explicit in its statement that the outcomes were not to become a prescription for literacy curriculum, but rather "a safety net for the identification of students whose future progress in learning is likely to be at risk" (p.2).

1995 was the year of publication for the folder of the DEAs policies. These were to be updated and revised as appropriate and it was in 1997 that the **Literacy Policy (1997)** was added to this folder. [The DEA had had a name change during this interval and in 1997 was known as the Department of Education, Community and Cultural Development (DECCD)] This literacy policy contained a brief statement of the policy, a background and rationale, a definition of literacy and goal of the policy, and a section on the requirements to achieve this goal and the responsibilities of the people and groups involved in the process of the goal achievement. Interestingly the persons responsible for the literacy policy enactment include: teachers, school literacy leader, Principal, District Superintendent, Office for Educational Review (OER), collectively the Teacher and School Development Branch and Equity Branch as well as Human and Personnel Services. The two appendices make interesting reading; the first indicated 'dimensions' of literacy, the second outline two important principles, "central to the provision of an effective literacy policy", (p.7).

It was in 1997 that the Tasmanian government released its framework for the future of education in the state. Called 'Directions for Education' it states that all schools were to monitor and report their progress in achieving improvements in students' literacy outcomes. The government had undertaken to be involved in a national plan to improve student literacy. This plan included assessment of literacy needs, early intervention where appropriate, assessment against national benchmarks, at years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and from 1998, reporting against those benchmarks.

In May 1998 the DECCD published its ***Tasmanian Literacy Plan 1998***. This document was to direct the more practical budgeting strategies for literacy. It discussed the six key strategies that were designed to ensure the achievement of literacy outcomes and went on to outline the priorities and target populations with a detailed financial plan for both primary and secondary schools. It was based on and builds upon the Directions for Education statements.

In terms of policies that were relevant to early childhood teachers, but not specific to the teaching of literacy, 1999 saw the DECCD's publication of the ***Early Years Curriculum Framework***. Some three or four years in the making and written with considerable consultation with teachers, reference groups and specific individuals, the 50 page book contains a rationale, statement of principles for teaching and learning, the learning areas, capabilities and outcomes for the pre-compulsory years of schooling. Driven by the conflicts between documents for and those excluding the pre-compulsory years and drawing on the ideas of capabilities (taken from the DEA's *Framework for curriculum provision K-12*, (1993a) and *Our children: The future*. (1991)), it was an attempt to link and relate together outcomes from the KILOs, maths outcomes, social skills and from the 'Kindergarten Development Checklist'.

In 1999 the *Early Years Curriculum Framework* (1999), the Early Childhood Review was a two-part publication that had implications for early childhood teachers. ***The Early Childhood Review: Curriculum Issues in Research and in Action*** (MacNaughton, 1999) and the ***Early Childhood Review: Structural Issues in Education and Childcare*** (Davis & MacNaughton, 1999) were both published under the banner of 'discussion paper for consultation'. They were authored by academics from interstate and were written to "reflect the concerns and interest of the Tasmanian Education Department.", (MacNaughton, p.1). They sought to establish current models of curriculum, outline the content of the curriculum, delineate the learning outcomes in the early childhood years and discuss the role of teachers in this process. The *Early Childhood Review* (Davis & MacNaughton, 1999) addressed such issues as the optimum chronological age for starting school, class size, program hours and approaches to grouping children in early childhood. As a discussion paper to promote further discussion it had potential, however many early childhood teachers have felt that, perhaps because of changes in government and personnel, it failed to reach its potential.

The year 2000 saw several documents produced that impacted on the teaching of literacy. Similar to the early childhood Review and the *Early Years Curriculum Framework* (1999) in that it is not specific to literacy but nonetheless related to the teaching of literacy in that it impacts on teachers programs, the now renamed Department of Education (DoE) produced a "draft vision of education, training and information systems in Tasmania" (p.iii) called ***Learning Together*** (DoE, 2000). A glossy 50 page document written to initiate educational discussion, it set out to "ensure we have a world class education, training and information system" (p.iii). This booklet establishes a "set of goals and principles for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" and contains a section that outlines why learning is important. It also contains three sections that outline the priorities for achieving the goals in the education, training and information systems. Essentially it is a government publication outlining a plan and direction for education. Probably because it followed the previous *Directions in Education* document, it has been viewed somewhat cynically by teachers and only given cursory attention.

In a similar format to the 1998 produced *Tasmanian Literacy Plan*, (DECCD, 1998) the year 2000 saw the publication of the ***Tasmanian State Literacy and Numeracy Plan, 2000-2002*** (DoE, 2000b?) (No date or publication information is provided in the official document, however it is available online). Like its predecessor this document contains a theoretical framework and information about programs and budgets. It has however been the

underpinning of both literacy and numeracy in Tasmania since 2000 and as such remains current. In the Introduction the document states that the plan "sets out the policy directions for literacy and numeracy; coordinates and maps literacy and numeracy projects across the state and; outlines the specific goals and outcomes set by the Department of Education" (p.1). The background section links students' progress in literacy with numeracy progress and indicates that grade 5 students' (at ten years of age) performance in reading had fallen from 1976 to 1993. However, by 1996 student progress had taken a turn for the better and that the *Literacy and Numeracy Plan* was an attempt to maintain this improvement. The book also outlines the goals and outcomes of the document – indicating such intended achievements as, "That 90% of all students achieve appropriate Tasmanian Literacy Outcomes in Strand 1, *Reading Texts*, Strand 5, *Writing Texts* and Strand 7, *Spelling* in years 3, 5, 7 and 9." (p.4). It outlines mechanisms for the reporting and monitoring of students progress – to ensure that "outcomes at school levels are defined, measured and reported" (p.4). The document also indicates the four key principles that inform the planning and allocation of resources – equity, effectiveness, efficiency and local management (pp 4-5). In the same manner as the previous literacy plan, this one also allocated some suggested specific 'strategic interventions' that might be used by teachers, principals, district officers, central officers and parents. It also included an outline of the membership and tasks for committees and teams involved in literacy and numeracy. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the document is the final section which lists a brief descriptor of the literacy and numeracy programs being funded in 2000 and the amount of budget allocation for those programs – some of which are funded over an extended period.

The year 2000 also saw the publication of the revised KILO document – the ***Tasmanian Literacy Outcomes (DoE, 2000c?)*** (known as TLOs). (The hard copy of this document, in a loose folder form, contains no information about publication date or place however it is available online.) The TLO document indicates that it is the reviewed and modified outcomes from the previous KILO document. It contains seven organising strands – 1) reading texts, 2) reading structures and features, 3) reading strategies, 4) reading and writing contexts, 5) writing texts, 6) writing structures, features and strategies and 7) spelling. "Developed by classroom teachers, program managers and departmental officers" (p.1), it outlines the outcomes for the end of Prep, years 2, 4, 6 and 8 and indicates that "eighty-five per cent of students across the state will achieve the TLOs by the end of [the respective years]", (p.1). Each of the outcomes is accompanied by indicators of achievement and schools are encouraged to develop their own indicators.

Developed as a companion document the Devonport Primary School ***Work Samples: Support Materials for the Tasmanian Literacy Outcomes (DoE, 2001b)*** sets out 72 samples of student writing from K – 6. With each of the authentic samples of students' work is an annotated description of the activities that generated the work, teachers notes with reference to the specific TLOs and indicators, summary comments and an indication of the focus of future teaching for that child. In this sense then the document has been a useful resource for school and teachers to moderate their outcomes and indicators against the examples provided in this text – thus looking for continuity across the state's schools.

The ***Flying Start Refocus Report (2001c)*** was released this year. The document has reviewed the Flying Start Program (see below), its purposes, goals and targets, structure, implementation and management. With considerable consultation it has identified areas of concern and made 31 recommendations for the continuation of the program. These recommendations are listed under the headings of 1) program purposes, goals and targets, 2) program structure, 3) professional learning, 4) program management and 5) budget and resources

The following section looks in greater depth at the most prevalent programs and projects in use in contemporary Tasmanian schools. It discusses the Flying Start program, PASS, the Spalding Method and Reading Recovery, describing the basic elements of the programs and how they are utilised in the Tasmanian context.

### ***Literacy Programs and Projects in Use in Tasmanian Schools***

The DoE has endorsed the use of several literacy programs for use in Tasmanian schools. From the current website under the heading *Classroom Literacy*, the DoE lists three programs – Flying Start, Reading Recovery and Spalding. In addition to these, there are also other literacy programs and projects in use – the Program of Additional Structure and Support (PASS), and pilot programs with the use of Stepping Out and First Steps, the Bridging the Gap (Bridges) programs, some use of Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills, (THRASS) and Letter Land and variations of the Victorian government funded Early Literacy Research Project's publications the Early Years Literacy Program P-4. In addition, the DoE offers schools the opportunity to either openly tender for funding with a predetermined focus or to directly select their own initiative and apply for funding for that. Funding through the Initiatives Based In Schools (IBIS) projects can be up to \$50,000 per school and contain minimal guidelines for their implementation and assessment.

#### **Flying Start**

Over the period from 1993 onwards the Education Department in Tasmania introduced a program to provide additional support for literacy in the early childhood years. Initiated as the "Prep Literacy Program" it provided additional teachers in schools to assist classroom teachers in the teaching of literacy. It was extended, and in 1996 it encompassed not only the Prep year through to grade 2, but also extended the scope beyond literacy. By 1997, and now known as the Flying Start Program, it involved children to the end of grade 2 as well as literacy, numeracy and social skills. The *Tasmanian Literacy Plan 1998* set out specifically how and in what ways the program was to be implemented. It was to focus on involving parents in their children's education, and to provide explicit teaching of literacy, numeracy and social skills. The program essentially provided an extra, fully trained teacher for each early childhood classroom for about 45 minutes every day with the specific focus on teaching of literacy. The importance of the program from its inception was the recognition that it is the work of early childhood teachers in the initial stages of schooling that sets the tone for success throughout a student's education. Establishing a solid foundation and supporting the teaching and learning in the early stages of schooling was seen to be an advantage for students life long learning.

#### **PASS**

Originating in 1998 and working within the Flying Start program, the Program of Additional Support and Structure (PASS) was to provide a "structure within which informed, focussed explicit teaching can take place to cater for all children's needs and provide more intensive support for those children 'at risk'", (DoE, 2000d). For 2001 elements of PASS have been absorbed into the Flying Start program. PASS has been based on a combination of literacy practices including the Early Literacy Project (funded by the Victorian state government and

supervised by Peter Hill and Carmel Crevola which in turn drew on the 'Success for All' program developed by Robert Slavin in the USA).

In 1998 the main elements of PASS included a whole staff commitment to the program, daily two-hour literacy block, coordination of the personnel involved in student learning and the establishment of professional learning teams. It also included a three wave attack on the teaching of literacy – good teaching in Prep year; intervention for those 'at risk' in grade 1 (through Reading Recovery) and further referral and special assistance for those still struggling in grade 2 (DoE, 2000d).

As a result, considerable timetable changes were required in schools (with the 2 hour literacy block), students needed to be assessed individually, Guided Reading was introduced as a basic strategy for teaching, reading texts were 'levelled' so teachers could match texts with the reading skill level for each student and appropriate target outcomes were established. The assessment processes involved using the Marie Clay (Reading Recovery) observations survey: letter identification checks, running records for reading, concepts about print and writing and word checks. Testing also has been carried out using the Morrison McCall and South Australian Spelling Tests. Although it has been 'absorbed' into the Flying Start program, elements of PASS remain prominent in Tasmanian schools.

### **Reading Recovery**

Reading Recovery is an early intervention program to help low-achieving 6-year-olds

learn to read. Originally developed by New Zealand educator and psychologist Marie M. Clay, Reading Recovery provides an alternative to traditional reading practices for educationally disadvantaged and learning-disabled students (Lyons, 1991). There are three main components, a diagnostic survey, the teaching/tutoring sessions and the teacher training. Students are selected into the course – designed for students at risk of literacy failure – and given a daily, one-on-one session with a teacher for a specified number of weeks.

The Reading Recovery program emphasises meaning in reading and focuses on students' strengths. Students reading and writing are thoroughly analysed and on-going diagnosis is part of the program. Strategies are taught to help students connect with the text with meaningful decoding. Teachers are trained in the theories and practices of effective reading instruction. In the Tasmanian context, Reading Recovery is used in a variety of ways, but was originally aimed at grade one students who are considered to be struggling with literacy. Many of the elements of the Reading Recovery program are and have been used in the PASS program. Most schools use elements of the Reading Recovery program in conjunction with the Flying Start program, but some have a more specific focus on Reading Recovery.

### **Spalding**

The Spalding Method of teaching is a total arts program. It integrates the teaching of speaking listening, spelling reading and writing in a supportive a stimulating classroom environment. It combines auditory, visual and kinaesthetic senses through spelling which forms the basis of reading and writing. "The Spalding Method is a total language arts approach because it provides explicit, sequential, multi-sensory instruction in spelling (including phonics and handwriting), writing, and listening/reading comprehension." (*Spalding Education International, 2001*). The main aspects of its program include:

**spelling** - phoneme awareness, phonics with handwriting, dictation of high frequency words, and rule acquisition and application:

**writing** - simple, compound, and complex sentences; narrative, informative, and informative-narrative paragraphs/passages; and

**comprehension** - literary appreciation, passage structure, and mental actions. Designed to be effective for all students, the Spalding mission states its aim is to develop skilled readers, critical listeners, accomplished speakers, spellers and writers who are life long learners. Originally intended for students from grades 3 and 4, in Tasmania it is frequently used in the early childhood years. As training staff in how to use the method is costly – teachers are to undertake an intensive 2 week course – specific funding is available for schools who wish to use Spalding as a whole school, ongoing project in literacy. When used in these contexts, Spalding provides a structured timetable for students and explicit teaching of fundamental literacy skills in spelling writing and comprehension.

An overview of these programs indicated that the DoE has been actively encouraging schools to incorporate and adopt whole school literacy programs that have explicit teaching of literacy skills as their bases. The following section is a discussion the implication of these policies, projects and programs for teachers and schools. The dialogues and issues that surround the literacy discourse are vital to the progress of literacy in the state.

### **Reviewing the Policies and Programs**

That policy matters and is essential in the current times of education in Australia is not debated. Nor is the understanding that there is no perfect policy – in any educational arena. We, the educational body, implicitly assume that new and revised policies are an attempt to either rectify the limitations of a previous policy or to bring a new focus to the foreground. However with each new policy or set of policies comes the inevitable criticism and dilemmas.

The term ‘criticism’ though produces difficulties. On the one hand, for example, we are in trouble as friends or staff members if we ‘criticise’- implying negative connotations to our criticism. Yet we as teachers and thinking academics actively encourage the practice of critical reflection. Critical analysis and critique itself are in themselves skilled art forms. This paper then seeks to critique in the latter sense of the word. It sets out to analyse and to look beyond the descriptive outline of individual and comparative policies to take a broad view focussing on the implications for teachers and students in the government schools of Tasmania. It looks to the positive not the negative criticisms in that it seeks to find the challenges that these contexts provide for teachers.

It was obvious at the initial viewing of the documents that literacy policy has come a long way. The journey has brought with it the changes in foci that have been evident across the gamut of education in Australia. Even the seemingly incidental things are evident in the policies. ‘Children’ are now called ‘students’. We talk now about ‘literacy’ instead of ‘language’, and ‘literacies’ and ‘multi-literacies’ The earlier emphasis on the developmental stages of children’s progress and the influences of the developmentally appropriate curriculum (Bredenkamp, 1987) in the 1980 are evident in these documents. The moves from a ‘whole language’ approach, when minimal skills were taught and an immersion in the joys of literature was the prime method for children acquiring language, have also signalled change. Currently we have the explicit teaching of literacy skills at the heart of our literacy policy. The swing towards an outcomes based system of education has had implications for literacy teaching and is most evident in Tasmanian schools this year as teachers and

schools are currently in the process of changing their reporting to parents documents to reflect the new Tasmanian Literacy Outcomes (TLOs) document.

The other obvious aspect in the current contexts of Tasmanian literacy teaching and learning is the focus on specific programs and projects. We see the Department of Education (DoE) in Tasmania giving schools the freedom to devise their own programs, use a combination of approaches or to opt into one of the specific programs available. In fact funding is available to support schools should they wish to use the more prevalent programs such as Reading Recovery or Spalding. On the one hand this is a bonus for schools – the DoE has not mandated and sanctioned a single method or program that all schools must use. Teachers and schools technically still have freedom and choices. However with the funding allocation it is also obvious that some programs carry more ‘status’ within the politics of the DoE than do others. All are equal – it is just that some are more equal than others.

Reviewing the policies and documents that have been produced by the education department in Tasmania, what is evident is that there are plans, strategies and policies, there are statements about what literacy is and its importance for students. What is it that is at the heart of what the DoE are trying to achieve and through which processes will they hope to achieve it?

- It appears that the DoE has **a focus on the explicit teaching of literacy skills**. It has not though taken the path of mandating one single program – there is a range of options.
- **The range of options though is for schools – not for individual teachers**. Teachers are expected to ‘tow the school line’ and – irrespective of their personal literacy philosophy, practices or beliefs – they are to teach using the designated school program. All schools are to have, for example, at least an hour of dedicated literacy time. Some schools are having ‘uninterrupted’ literacy time – without specialist lessons, PA announcements or other distractions allocated in that time.
- For all schools it is about **reporting and assessing** in line with national benchmarks and against the outcomes as specified in the new TLOs. Schools are being encouraged to record student progress on the SAM computer system (Student Assessment and Monitoring). Some schools have placed more emphasis on this than others, resulting in pressure on teachers – with a greater focus on the moderation of outcomes and the assessment and reporting of these outcomes.
- There is a focus on **accountability**. Teachers and principals are accountable to parents and the school community through the establishment of Partnership Agreements. These agreements are to be established within the school community, formally indicating such areas as financial and staffing information, professional developments student learning outcome data and information about the schools operation and performance. An annual report is written and all documents are ratified by a DoE representative. In most cases now there is a financial bonus for the Principal linked to outcomes as determined by the results of the annual review.
- **Professional development (PD)** is site and cluster-school based, with schools having the freedom to collectively determine the nature of their own profession development learning. Tasmanian teachers are required to annually engage in five days of professional development. The details of how, when and where these days are managed is determined by the school and is officially monitored by the district offices. Because teachers commence their school year three days prior to the students, schools usually opt to use two or three of these student-free days for whole

school PD. In addition most schools provide PD sessions in after school time – usually from 3.30 to 7.30 pm. This is to make up the five required days and thus usually occurs twice per term. Teachers however complain that the after school time is not an effective use of their time to maximise learning and collegial sharing. The alternative to this – offered by some schools - is the use of weekend time. Naturally this is not a popular option within the teaching profession. PD used this way becomes fragmented and an ineffective use of teachers time.

These are the contexts of policy and practice expectations in which Tasmanian teachers are operating and it certainly provides a challenging situation. From this information, this paper then seeks to gain a view of a big picture - for us as voyeurs of the situation and for the teachers involved in the discourses and practices.

If the current focus of the DoE's literacy documents indicates that individual literacy programs that explicitly teach fundamental literacy skills are what is currently privileged – with funding available for schools to train and implement the Spalding and Reading Recovery methods - but only limited support (through the Initiatives Based in Schools, tendering processes) for a school's creation of their own, contextually appropriate program – is this useful for schools, teachers and students?

What are the overarching themes and emphases of the centralist discourses and intentions - meaning of the centralist discourses.

Allan Luke, in his address at the national Australian Literacy Educators Association conference in Hobart in July, 2001, asserted that teachers are *"struggling to run educational systems and teaching systems across this country that are composites of curriculum and assessment policies and practices that are latched together in a sometimes ad hoc fashion over the last 30 years"*, (Luke 2001, p.2). He goes on to say that if literacy teaching is to really make a difference, schools need three things: strong literacy leadership; balanced programs,

*"not shopping list programs, not single method programs but programs in which people have thoughtfully exchanged information, audited their staff expertise, got external help and critical friends where needed and balanced their program in relationship to what they know the needs of their kids are"* (Luke 2001, p.13),

and strong professional learning communities. In this paper I intend to discuss the latter two of these issues - balanced programs and the establishment of strong professional learning communities.

The issue of balanced programs is discussed in Luke's paper. In the current climate of re-focus on basic skills, with a general uncertainty about what those basic skills are and with pressure to achieve literacy outcomes, schools and teachers are at risk and need to be better prepared to deal with what Luke calls *"the pitches of pre-packaged curricular commodities which are being sold as universal cure-alls to literacy problems"*, (Luke 2001, p.3). Teachers and schools he asserts from his findings in Queensland were, *"being sucked down the chute of commodity purchase: buying into an assumption that if they just adopted this approach or bought this package it would solve these very complex problems, but often in the absence of evidence"*, (p.6). He was concerned at an unbalanced approach to literacy that was based on commodity purchase and single method programs. He was also concerned by what he referred to as the 'dumbing down' or 'infantisation' of the curriculum -

reducing the standards to minimum outcomes and providing schooling where substantial engagement with the content was not required. Basic skills are necessary but not sufficient – students need to critical intellectual engagement with knowledge and to see the connection between their worlds and their learning and knowledge.

On the issue of the balanced-ness of the whole school programs that are being used in schools, Luke asserts: *"We need to read and analyse our kids, know our school communities, demographically and linguistically, have a realistic analysis of who they are and what they can do when they enter school..."*, (Luke 2001, p.12). He also says that assessment of teacher expertise and community involvement is necessary. The balanced programs that he is encouraging also provide a coherent, consistent vocabulary for teacher literacy discourse. He also wisely advises that we "not descend into test-driven systems", (p.13). If Luke's assertions, plans for Queensland's education department and observations about what works in literacy are to be applied to the Tasmanian contexts then the encouragement towards single programs or methods and pre-packaged literacy programs needs to cease and schools need to be supported in the creation of individualised whole school programs that can meet the needs of their particular school and teacher communities.

After analysis of the documents, the issue of professional development within Tasmania also needs to be assessed. Luke's identification of the need for strong professional learning communities indicates that there is a need for professional sharing of information. He says, "The expertise is in the [school] building, but we actually need to set up conditions to get it exchanged", (p.13). He maintains that teachers know how to teach literacy – what works and what doesn't – but that the exchange of ideas and sharing of discourses is vital to this process of whole school literacy program development.

The current climate of work intensification and overloads on teachers mean that there is plenty of pressure. PD, as it currently occurs lacks, continuity and any sense of state-wide vision. While there is freedom for schools to determine their own PD focus, who is monitoring what kind or how much PD is happening in literacy outside the Spalding and Reading Recovery arena? From talking with teachers involved in early childhood literacy there seems to be the belief that the extensive PD that goes with the training for both Spalding and Reading Recovery provides a wonderful literacy 'shot in the arm' booster for teachers to both refocus on their literacy skills and to ensure that any personal knowledge gaps are filled. If the average age of Tasmanian teachers is currently 44, then it is probably some 20+ years since their initial training. Did that training – and the individual teachers educational background - provide sufficient literacy content knowledge to teach literacy? Are there gaps in teachers' knowledge and skills? Is now the time for a more extensive and formal encouragement that all teachers involved in literacy teaching (presumably all classroom based teachers) are to revisit their knowledge and skills and to be involved in updating their literacy skills. Teachers are expected to do this for computer and technology content. Literacy skills – with the extended focus currently on basic skills – ought not to be any different.

### **Conclusion**

This paper then has described the policies evident in Tasmanian government schools over the last 25 years. While not limited to literacy policy, some other documents that have been influential in the local contexts have been included. This discussion, however, has focussed on literacy in the contexts of early childhood education.

The main elements of the current Tasmanian literacy policy focus on:

- explicit teaching of literacy skills,
- a whole school approach,
- national benchmarks are utilised with
- reporting, assessment and monitoring of student progress and
- an emphasis on accountability.

The professional development of teachers is currently site and cluster-school based without any systematic, state-wide focus on literacy.

This mapping of literacy forms a part of the work towards understanding the issues involved in the complex literacy climate in Tasmania. The paper has asserted that the issues of teachers developing a sense of professional community through the sharing of literacy knowledge and skills and the need for schools to determine and be supported in their development of whole-school, individualised, school-appropriate literacy programs are part of the challenges facing the teaching community in contemporary Tasmanian government schools.

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