

Chapter 4

Early Childhood, Pre-School and Primary School Education

INTRODUCTION

Employers are concerned about pre-school and primary school education because it is where foundational skills are acquired and where connections to lifelong learning are made. Quality outcomes for pre-school and primary school education, especially in the areas of language, literacy and numeracy, are essential in building the framework through which other skills can be acquired and social disadvantage mitigated.

The early years of a child's learning makes a significant difference to the way they develop and go on to learn throughout their lives. Getting it right at this vital stage of a child's development will build the lifelong foundations of success, not only for our children, but also for Australia.

In this chapter we look at the issues with respect to preschool and primary school education.

EARLY CHILDHOOD AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Background

From a national perspective, early childhood education is characterised by fragmentation, varying degrees of quality and no equitable access. Early childhood education is also without a national vision, commitment or consistent approach. The number of different approaches, funding formulae, terminology, child ratios, curriculum, costs, delivery hours and models promote inequity across Australia for young children and their parents.

Consideration of Issues

Early childhood education and care have been discussed and debated for decades in Australia. In recent years it has undergone significant changes that reflect wider social and political trends and which many believe are shifting the focus of early childhood services away from the needs of children and families. Some forms of services, like long day care, are seeing new interest groups like shareholders entering the picture, with relatively untested outcomes for children.

In recent years a number of reports have highlighted the

importance of the early childhood years. In February 2006, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) published a ten point plan that brought together Australian and International research on early childhood education and care and related policy perspectives.¹

It agreed on the need for a nationally coordinated, planned approach to an integrated system of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Discussion supported an ECEC system that gives priority to the needs of children and their well-being, places the issue of high quality care and education more centrally on the policy agenda, and recognises the pressing need for increased public funding to ensure universal access to early childhood education and care services for all children from birth to school entry.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) also met to consider a National Reform Agenda covering, amongst other areas, Human Capital. The official communiqué of the 10 February 2006 COAG meeting “*noted the importance of all children having a good start to life*” and affirmed the commitment of Australian Governments to ensure that all children were equally provided with opportunities to enhance their life chances. The communiqué acknowledged the critical importance of developing “*high quality and integrated early childhood education and care services*” to equip children with the “*basic skills for life and learning*”. The resulting communiqué includes Human Capital reforms in four priority areas including:

Early childhood – with the aim of supporting families in improving childhood development outcomes in the first five years of child's life, up to and including school entry.

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) supported the COAG commitment in saying that:

The exciting thing about the COAG commitment is that it is going to take a united and concerted effort from all levels of Government, working across a range of portfolio areas, to make a real impact on the wellbeing of children and their families.

It's not just about health, education and community development – it's also about infrastructure such as transport, housing and the environment.

As well as the commitment to early childhood development, the COAG communiqué includes commitments to improving standards of literacy and numeracy through the educational system, and to improving the processes by which young people transition from school to work.

Empirical and anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that children who have not had the opportunity to attend an early childhood education program may be disadvantaged when they begin school. Children without an early childhood experience have greater levels of difficulty in making the transition to the first year of school, take longer to settle into the routines of a classroom and find it harder to respond appropriately to tasks and expectations.

Since August 2003 the development of a framework for a National Agenda for Early Childhood has identified a vision for Australia as a place where young children are valued and have equal opportunities to be all they can be, now and into the future. The framework set out an ambitious aim, a series of goals, and principles for taking the National Agenda forward, and key action areas as a basis for developing policy and programs for children 0-5 years. It also provided an overarching structure for linking together and expanding the work that governments, service providers, non-government organisations, academics, communities and families are already doing to improve the lives of children.

The Australian government has noted the importance of all children having a good start to life. Opportunities to improve children's life chances, especially for children born into disadvantaged families, exist well before children begin school, and even before birth. High quality and integrated early childhood education and care services, encompassing the period from prenatal up to and including the transition to the first years of school, are critical to increasing the proportion of children entering school with the basic skills for life and learning. COAG will give priority to improving early childhood development outcomes, as a part of a collaborative national approach. The decision of the COAG to adopt a national, collaborative approach towards improving outcomes for young Australians has been a positive step forward.

The greatest barrier to access to high quality early childhood education is the lack of a national vision and commitment. Other barriers include:

- geographic location impacts upon children's access to early childhood education. There are significant differences in access to quality and number of early

childhood education programs in rural and remote areas of Australia;

- inadequate transport in some metropolitan, rural and remote areas stops children from accessing early childhood education. Bus programs that transport children to early childhood education are for many families the only means by which their child can access an early childhood education program;
- the provision of good quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is expensive;
- the very rapid and unplanned expansion of childcare services in the last decade, has put enormous pressure on the system to deliver places while guaranteeing good quality care;
- different government departments being responsible for childcare, pre-school and schools is a challenge, particularly in New South Wales and Victoria;
- there are huge gaps in curriculum continuity for children in pre-school and the transition from early childhood education to school can be more challenging than it need be;
- there are also accessibility problems for specific population groups and in particular for Indigenous children and children with disabilities;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain significantly under represented in all forms of Commonwealth funded child care;
- lack of links between services adds complexity and difficulty for families and children in understanding what to access and how to access appropriate services and programs;
- differences in terminology for early childhood education and the first year of school reflect a fragmentation of early childhood education programs across Australia and are particularly problematic for families who move between states;
- differences in age of entry to early childhood education and the first year of school create further confusion for families and inequity for children across Australia;
- significant differences in content and organisation of curriculum for pre-school across Australia promote

inconsistency. This also inhibits development of a national perspective about learning and expected outcomes for children in early childhood education; and

- significant differences in government funding levels and models contribute to unequal access to early childhood education across Australia.

Conclusion

Whether provided in dedicated pre-schools or in day care centres, a quality pre-school education sets the foundations for cognitive, physical, emotional, social and language development. While preschool education is an important experience in itself, it also provides children with an invaluable foundation for their entry into formal schooling. It is often essential in terms of the detection of impediments to learning, which if not attended to could affect a child's learning potential for the rest of their life. Research has shown that the benefits of a quality preschool education can be long-lasting, through school and into adult life.

ACCI Proposals

ACCI proposes that:

- governments implement policies that avoid fragmentation, inconsistent quality and provide equitable access;
- governments work towards a national vision and quality standards in the areas of funding formulae, terminology, child ratios, curriculum, costs, delivery hours and models; and
- a better flow on between pre-school and primary school curricula so that there is greater alignment between them.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Background

In Australia, primary education is still considered the first 'formal' period of education as part of mandatory school attendance for children. Primary school education is of importance to employers because it is where the foundational skills are formed, most importantly literacy and numeracy and where further connections are made to lifelong learning.

Without solid foundations in skill formation individuals may be disadvantaged in further learning and make costly errors in undertaking basic business tasks.

In addition, the foundations for career development are laid down as part of lifelong learning.

Learning includes a variety of methods to develop students' skills in thinking, communicating, investigating, reflecting and making judgments. Students develop simple investigative and research skills, information technology skills and creative skills through classroom and hands on activities and real life experiences.

Consideration of Issues

Whilst there is a strong primary education sector, there are still opportunities to build on its strengths.

There needs to be a continued focus on achievement in literacy and numeracy, as there are still primary pupils going on to secondary school without capabilities in literacy and numeracy that allow them to optimise their education.

Families need to have access to joined-up services such as childcare and schooling.

Governments should ensure that primary schools work closely with parents/carers of children, seeing them as true partners in the education of their children.

There should be an elimination of the unacceptable variances in performance between schools. There should not be a tension between high standards and a broad and rich curriculum. Every school should excel in developing children's literacy and numeracy skills without narrowing the curriculum.

Indeed, the primary school years provide an opportunity to build strengths in maths and science. This is explored in Chapter 11 – Maths and Science.

There needs to be a continuing and expanded emphasis on the use of information and communication technology to support better teaching.

Business and industry also considers that physical education is a vital part of a child's education and so a curriculum that includes compulsory physical education and school sport each week is important.

Similarly the compulsory learning of a foreign language from 7 years of age or earlier and the opportunity for all students to learn a musical instrument in primary school are also key issues.

There should be a debate about extending the opening hours of school premises so that they remain open between 8.00am and 6.00pm to enable childcare for 48 weeks of the year, to enhance the opportunities for before-school and after-school care, and care during some school holiday periods.

Lastly, governments need to get more serious about the closure of non-performing schools and rapidly turning around weaker schools.

Further, as discussed in chapter 5 with respect to secondary schools, there needs to be significantly enhanced professional development for teachers in schools. Further, there needs to be a concerted push by governments to introduce flexibility and performance pay for primary school teachers and all primary school principals be given the power to hire and fire.

Very importantly, all governments need to ensure that the community is furnished with better data about primary school standards; and it is important for all governments to acknowledge that increasing public confidence in primary school education will come through explicit and defensible standards that guide improvement in students' levels of educational achievement and through which the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of schooling can be measured and evaluated.

Conclusion

Primary education in Australia is at a high standard compared to the rest of the world. Nonetheless there are areas where more can be done to improve quality outcomes.

For example to fully engage in a globalised world it is considered that the compulsory learning of a foreign language is vital.

ACCI Proposals

ACCI proposes that:

- there needs to be significantly enhanced professional development for teachers in schools;
- the need for a flexible industrial relations system

to underpin the principles of performance pay for teachers;

- all primary school principals be given the power to hire and fire;
- all governments need to ensure that the community is furnished with better data about primary school standards;
- the acknowledgement by all governments that increasing public confidence in primary school education will come through explicit and defensible standards that guide improvement in students' levels of educational achievement and through which the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of schooling can be measured and evaluated;
- that there needs to be a concentration on the basics of English, reading, writing and maths for every child in order for them to achieve their optimal progress in their primary years;
- primary school students are provided with accurate and up to date information about career pathways and options and are exposed to a variety of sources of information including talks by employers;
- there needs to be a continuing and enhanced focus on the use of information and communication technology to support better teaching;
- the curriculum should include compulsory physical education and school sport each week;
- to effectively participate in a globalised world there should be the compulsory learning of a foreign language from 7 years of age or earlier;
- there should also be an opportunity for all students to learn a musical instrument in primary school;
- there should be a closer relationship between the school and parents/carers of children;
- there be consideration of school premises remaining open between 8.00am and 6.00pm to enable childcare for 48 weeks of the year to cover before and after school care and some school holiday periods;
- governments get serious about the closure of non-performing schools and rapidly turning around weaker

schools; and

- there needs to be significantly enhanced professional development for teachers in schools.

¹ http://www.acoss.org.au/upload/publications/paper/393_info%20383_child%20care.pdf.

