

# **Investigating children's early literacy learning in family and community contexts**

## ***Review of the related literature***

***Commissioned for the Learning Together Research Program  
Final Report  
February 2007***



**Government of South Australia**

Department of Education and  
Children's Services

Published by:  
Office of Early Childhood and Statewide Services  
Department of Education and Children's Services  
31 Flinders Street  
Adelaide SA 5000

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Policy and Program Officer, Learning Together  
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Also published on <<http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/>>

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## **Executive summary**

This report provides a comprehensive review of Australian and international research into the relationship between family and community and children's early literacy learning.

The report presents the evidence for intervention in the vital birth-3 years age group. It discusses the differing concepts of 'emergent literacies' and 'early literacy behaviours' and highlights the diversity of literacy behaviours ('multiliteracies') that can be demonstrated by early literacy learners. Findings are presented on the importance of oral language proficiency and the interrelationship of orthographic awareness and phonological awareness as the basis of literacy learning. The authors report on a range of research that examines evidence of the connection between socioeconomic status and children's literacy performance, and of performance in the early years as a predictor of later literacy attainment. They bring attention to a range of early literacy interventions in Australia and other countries and suggest ways of enhancing effectiveness through greater involvement of the family and community.

Finally they remind us of the need to challenge the deficit view of families and ensure they are supported and affirmed in their role as children's first literacy educators and equal partners in supporting children's early literacy learning.

## **Introduction**

National and international research has consistently demonstrated the impact of socio-economic and educational disadvantage on developmental outcomes for children. Furthermore, considerable evidence exists to link such disadvantage with an increased risk of low levels of literacy attainment (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; Freebody & Ludwig, 1997; Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland, & Reid, 1998; Kaplan & Walpole, 2005; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), which in turn have been shown to be associated with later isolation, unemployment, delinquency and low self-esteem (Holden, 1997; International Reading Association (IRA) & National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1998). Multiple interacting factors operate between child and environment that shape trajectories of early literacy and school achievement (McClelland, Kessenich, & Morrison, 2003; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004).

In Australia, children from rural and remote areas, and indigenous children have been shown to be at particular risk of low literacy (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996; Kemp, 1999; Noonan, 2000; Storry, 2006). The extent and severity of the problem is reflected in a recent report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on an inquiry into rural and remote education in Australia, in which the disadvantage experienced by country students is described as amounting to discrimination (Noonan, 2000). It is imperative that efforts be made to intervene during the early years for all students at risk of attaining low literacy levels. Findings that experiences prior to school are critical for successful achievement of literacy at school (Australian Language and Literacy Council (ALLC), 1995; David et al., 2000; Jones Díaz et al., 2001; Mullis, Martin, Gonzales, & Kennedy, 2003), have led to increasing recognition that

**A proactive approach is crucial, ensuring that families are supported in their role as their children's first literacy educators in order to prevent the social and economic problems associated with low literacy levels, particularly in less advantaged population areas.** (Cairney, 1994; Makin & Spedding, 2002a, 2002b; Stanley, 2000)

In the report of findings from the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) it was recommended that support be provided for parents that acknowledges and builds on the language and literacy children learn in their homes and communities.

Recent initiatives introduced at national, state and local level share a recognition of:

- the critical importance of the early years and the potential of early intervention programs for improving the developmental outcomes of children, particularly when targeted to high risk families (Kaplan & Walpole, 2005; Karoly et al., 1998)
- the need to build communities which strengthen families (Scott, 1999, November)
- the need for family focussed strategies have led to a call for creative and innovative programs based on principles of community ownership and participation, partnerships with families, and family empowerment.

## **The crucial early years**

The vital importance of the first three years of life, particularly in establishing social and emotional interconnections that give children resilience and strength to meet later difficulties, has been increasingly recognised in recent years. Advances in brain research have provided new insights into how the brain, the most immature of all organs at birth, continues to grow and develop after birth. Whereas this growth had been thought to be determined primarily by genetics, scientists now believe that it is also highly dependent upon the child's experiences (e.g. McCain & Mustard, 1999; Newberger, 1997; Shore, 1997). Consequently, learning and development cannot be considered apart from the individual's social environment, the ecocultural niche.

Fundamental to ecological and sociocultural theories is the recognition that cognition is situated in the social and physical context. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) formalisation of this approach was of a set of nested, overlapping, but isomorphic systems, involving microsystems (i.e., mother/carer and child interactions) to macrosystems (i.e., cultural group or nation-state). Structured by the environment, everyday activities embed opportunities for children to learn and develop through observation and apprenticeship (Rogoff, 1990). The environment influences what activity settings are likely to be possible, the task demands, the scripts for conduct, the purposes or motives of the participants, and the cultural meaning of the interactions. These activity settings come to shape children's first literacy experiences. It is in these settings that young children will observe and participate in the purposes, styles of interaction, and activities of literacy that are so crucial to their development. What they learn, of course, will vary according to the activity settings, local practices, values and the opportunities they are provided to engage with language and literacy.

**Literacy develops in settings that provide resources and opportunities for children to become involved with its cultural tools. Differences in these settings are likely to contribute to the considerable variations in patterns of early literacy development.**

Children who are well nourished and thriving in safe homes and neighbourhoods, who are nurtured by strong families who receive the services they need from living in caring communities (National Research Council, 1998), are those most likely to

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become competent readers following the introduction of formal instruction on school entry. Learning to read is affected by the foundation skills of phonological processing, print awareness, and oral language (Poe, Burchinal, & Roberts, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Where these components are lacking, children may be unable to access many of the activities in the kindergarten's literacy curriculum, and they are more likely than other children to be poor readers in the long term (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Numerous literacy initiatives in recent years have targeted school age children or children in the year prior to school entry, largely ignoring current brain research which acknowledges the crucial importance of the early years (from birth) and the research evidence which demonstrates that literacy starts well before this. This is not to say that intervening after pre-school or school entry has no merit, since numerous interventions involving pre-school have shown some positive outcomes.

## **Current understandings of early literacy behaviours**

Children's first literacy experiences are primarily in the home, the community and early childhood education services. There is now general consensus that literacy begins practically from birth, with much learning taking place in the home, and that it is developmental in nature (Sulzby, 1985, 1994b; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Literacy during this period is as much about relationships as knowledge and understandings. Early literacy interactions combine social interaction and a growth in empathy with development in thinking and learning about the world. The development of literacy competence begins with children and their parents, carers and families talking together, singing, reading, playing, and observing the world around them.

### ***Emergent literacies***

These early literacy behaviours, skills, and concepts of young children that develop into and precede conventional literacy are often referred to as 'emergent literacy' (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1999; Schickedanz, 1990; Sulzby, 1985; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). More recently, it has become common to refer to these early language and literacy behaviours as 'emergent literacies', recognizing that

**literacy includes talking, listening, visual literacies such as viewing and drawing, and critical thinking, not just reading and writing. In addition, the literacies of technology (such as computer, internet, faxes), popular culture (such as movies, theatre, art), functional literacy (such as road maps, timetables), ecological literacy (especially for Indigenous groups) and literacies other than English are relevant to the lives of young children today.**

Children participate in a world in which there are 'multiliteracies' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000); a world in which their families and communities construct particular ways of

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literate thinking and behaving, and value specific types of literacy. Technology is increasingly acknowledged in new approaches and resources, although predominantly designed for the school age child (e.g. De Jong & Bus, 2004; Robinson, 2003; Ryokai, Vaucelle & Cassell, 2003).

Emergent literacy differs from conventional literacy as it examines the range of settings and experiences that support literacy, the role of the child's contribution (i.e. individual construction), and the relation between specific literacy outcomes and the diverse experiences that precede those outcomes. It acknowledges the continuities between early literacy behaviours and conventional reading and writing. As Teale & Sulzby (1986) have pointed out, these early literacy behaviours, skills and attitudes are not 'pre- anything'. 'It is not reasonable to point to a time in a child's life when literacy begins. Rather...we see children becoming literate, as the term emergent indicates' (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, p. xix).

### ***Early literacy behaviours***

It should be noted that, while the construct of emergent literacy has been generally well accepted, many have questioned the accuracy of this term since the literacy behaviours, skills and attitudes exhibited by young children are very diverse, and it is extremely difficult to establish at what point pre-conventional literacy behaviours become conventional (particularly as children exhibit both at the same time). Furthermore, it is extremely difficult (perhaps impossible) to verify that certain behaviours predict others, since they are inextricably connected (Yaden, Rowe & MacGillivray, 1999). For this reason, the term early literacy behaviours may be preferable to emergent literacy. For the purpose of this discussion, the two terms will be used interchangeably, but implicit in their use is recognition of the continuity of the process of literacy acquisition; recognition that literacy includes both linguistic and non-linguistic forms of communication (i.e. is multimodal), involving different semiotic systems.

Much of the early emergent literacy research investigated a broad array of skills representing early reading and writing behaviours, skills and attitudes (a focus still frequently evident today). Generally speaking, this foundation is considered to comprise two distinct but highly interrelated areas of development: written language awareness and phonological awareness (van Kleeck, 1998). These domains refer, respectively, to children's acquisition of knowledge about the orthography and the phonology of language.

### **Written language and phonology awareness**

Written language awareness includes, for instance, understanding the function and form of print and the relationship between oral and written language (Lomax & McGee, 1987; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Phonological awareness, in contrast, refers to sensitivity to the phonological structure underlying oral and written language (e.g. Ball, 1997; Lomax & McGee, 1987; Lonigan, Burgess, Anthony & Barker, 1998; Torgesen & Davis, 1996; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Wise, Ring & Olson, 1999) and has been referred to by Valdivieso (2004) as a possible 'zone of proximal development' for initial reading.

**A strong, reciprocal association exists between young children's oral language proficiency and emergent literacy development** (Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000),

with prediction studies showing that an array of discrete oral language proficiency indices, including measures of vocabulary and grammar, consistently serve as moderate to robust predictors of conventional literacy outcomes (for review, see Scarborough, 1998). This predictive capacity becomes increasingly powerful when several measures of language are combined into a composite index of language proficiency (Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000; Scarborough, 1998). Furthermore, early language ability has been shown to be more predictive of phonological sensitivity and later word reading skills than has cognitive ability (Bowey, 2005).

Knowledge across both domains has been shown to be reciprocal in nature (Raban & Coates, 2004). It is acquired gradually and, for many children, incidentally, during the years preceding formal literacy instruction.

**Particularly important to the process are frequent, informal, and naturalistic interactions with written and oral language contextualized within the home or community environment** (Dodici, Draper & Peterson, 2003; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Poe, Burchinal & Roberts, 2004; Raban & Coates, 2004), **and within the broader context of supportive, mediated opportunities with adult caregivers** (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

## **Understanding literacy development from birth**

While numerous early literacy interventions have demonstrated that provision of appropriate opportunities for 3-5 year olds can enhance early literacy skills (Aram, Most & Mayafit, 2006; Bates, 2005; Justice & Pullen, 2003), understanding how literacy develops from birth and intervening early is crucial if outcomes are to be maximised for young children.

Emergent literacy development appears to be strongly mediated by the frequency with which children are formally and informally exposed to language and literacy in the home, school, and community (Leseman & de Jong, 1998; McCormick & Mason, 1986). For example, reciprocal and snowballing relations have been found between maternal book reading and children's vocabulary and language development (Deckner, Adamson & Bakeman, 2006; Raikes et al., 2006; Theriot et al., 2003). Children who seldom interact with written language (e.g. through exposure to environmental print, or parent-child shared storybook reading experiences) have more difficulty acquiring emergent literacy knowledge compared to peers with more frequent literacy opportunities (e.g. Raz & Bryant, 1990; Wells, 1985). A number of studies have shown that activities such as shared book reading are particularly beneficial to early language and literacy development for children with language and hearing impairment (e.g. Aram, Most & Mayafit, 2006; Boudreau, 2005; Rvachew, 2006; Stadler & McEvoy, 2003; Theriot et al., 2003). However, it is not only book reading that is important:

**a growing body of research points to the importance of developing receptive and expressive language through effective adult-child interaction** (e.g. Deckner, Adamson & Bakeman, 2006; Dodici, Draper & Peterson, 2003; Fewell & Deutscher, 2004; Fidalgo & Pereira, 2005).

## **Socioeconomic status and early literacy**

Limited exposure to oral and written language is a circumstance encountered relatively often by young children reared in low-socioeconomic status (SES) households, and it is a situation that may contribute to the relatively low levels of emergent literacy skill observed in low-SES children (e.g. Feitelson & Goldstein, 1986; McCormick & Mason, 1986; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Indeed, converging evidence has provided considerable documentation that both emergent and conventional literacy skills of children from low-SES households differ in comparison to those of their peers from middle- and upper-SES households (e.g. Bowey, 1995; Chaney, 1994; Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Lonigan, Anthony, Bloomfield, Dyer & Samwell, 1999). Dickinson and Snow (1987) compared the performance of young children from low- and middle-SES households on a series of written language awareness tasks, finding that middle-SES children performed significantly better than low-SES children on measures of print production, book reading concepts, and environmental print decoding. Lonigan et al (1999) reported similar findings when comparing the emergent literacy performance of low-SES children in Head Start to that of children in childcare serving middle-SES families. Children in Head Start demonstrated relatively low levels of skill on measures of alphabet knowledge, letter-sound knowledge, book reading concepts, and environmental print decoding.

Similarly, children's performance on measures of phonological awareness has consistently been shown to be influenced by SES (e.g. Chaney, 1994; Nitttrouer, 1996), with low-SES children performing poorly in comparison to their more advantaged peers. However, while Scarborough (1998) has argued that SES is a more powerful predictor of literacy outcome than measures of emergent literacy skill, oral language proficiency, home literacy experience, or nonverbal intellectual ability, a word of caution is warranted. To use membership of a specific group (such as SES status) as a means of measuring children's preparation for literacy and likely literacy outcomes is overly simplistic (see Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Molfese, Modglin & Molfese, 2003). To begin with, there are substantial differences amongst low-income families, and practices and outcomes will be different even within this group (e.g. Britto, Brooks-Gunn & Griffin, 2006; Raikes et al., 2006).

**Furthermore, the specific pathways by which low SES impacts early learning and social development is not well understood** (Foster, Lambert, Abbott-Shim, McCarty & Franze, 2005).

In a meta-analysis of over 200 studies, White (cited in van Kleeck, 1990) found that it was not SES that contributed most directly to reading achievement, but other family and community characteristics such as:

- academic guidance
- attitudes toward education
- language used and opportunities for interaction
- availability of reading and writing materials
- the presence or absence of literacy activities evidenced by older models
- parents' expectations for their children
- cultural activities

all of which may be less than optimal for children from low SES backgrounds.

The key issue, therefore, is why is SES more predictive and what can be done to ensure more positive outcomes for these families and their children? Access to literacy resources, including an adult to scaffold learning, and quality literacy interactions and experiences are clearly key issues to be addressed if we are to ensure that 'at risk' does not mean the same as destiny.

## **Early years literacy levels as predictors**

The importance of the early years is confirmed also by prediction studies following children from preschool or kindergarten into elementary school, that have consistently shown that performance on an array of emergent literacy tasks reliably

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predicts children's later literacy achievement (Catts, Fey, Zhang & Tomblin, 2001; Leppanen, Niemi, Aunola & Nurmi, 2006; for review, see Scarborough, 1998). Children performing well on emergent literacy tasks generally have superior conventional literacy outcomes relative to children demonstrating lower levels of performance. For those children who appear particularly vulnerable or who experience difficulties in achieving an adequate literacy foundation (for an overview of key risk factors, see Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998), research evidence has consistently demonstrated the relative stability of individual differences in reading achievement during the elementary years (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz & Fletcher, 1996; Frost, Madsbjerg, Niedersoe, Olofsson & Sorensen, 2005; Juel, 1988; Stanovich, 1986). It is clearly imperative therefore that the development of emergent literacy is supported in children at risk in order to facilitate their acquisition of literacy when formal schooling commences.

Interventions for young children at-risk emphasise the need to increase children's exposure to literacy concepts as well as their participation in meaningful literacy events (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Increased exposure and participation in literacy events enhances children's emergent literacy knowledge in an implicit manner, that is, without direct instruction. Increasing children's participation in adult-child storybook reading would be consistent with such an approach, and is viewed by many theorists as a particularly potent means for enhancing early literacy development (e.g. Bus, 2001; Bus, Van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995; Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Whitehurst et al., 1988). A number of interventions that have focused on increasing shared book reading, particularly for families in low income communities (e.g. Needlman & Silverstein, 2004; Weitzman, Roy, Walls & Tomlin, 2004) have reported reading aloud to children to be associated with improved literacy outcomes. Increasing adult-child interactions and children's interactions with print during meaningful activities such as book reading, toy play and dramatic play in a variety of home and community contexts have been shown to enhance language and cognitive development (Tomopoulos et al., 2006).

**However, the literacy experiences of children in home and community contexts prior to pre-school or school entry are varied and complex (Cairney, Lowe & Sproats, 1995), and any attempt to support the development of early literacy skills must be cognisant of this.**

## **Literacy as social practice**

Current definitions of literacy acknowledge that literacy is not simply a cognitive skill, it is a social practice manifested in many different ways (Cairney, 1995; Luke, 1993; Matthews & Cobb, 2005). Literacy is, in essence, 'a set of cultural practices situated in sociocultural contexts defined by members of a group through their actions with,

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through and about language' (Cairney, 2002). Literacy is connected to historical, social, economic and political circumstances and is influenced by factors such as age, race, class, occupation, and gender: literacy is not the same for everyone. Literacy outcomes are associated with environmental influences and cannot be explained by genetic or biological influences alone (Byrne et al., 2006; Petrill, Deater-Deckard, Schatschneider & Davis, 2005; Samuelsson et al., 2005). Literacy can only be understood by understanding what it means to be literate to the groups (families and communities) and institutions in which it occurs. Parents and other carers of young children have situated expertise, which is often overlooked, particularly when parents live in disadvantaged circumstances (Makin et al., 1999; Makin & Spedding, 2001, 2002a, 2002c, 2003).

### ***Seven principles of literacy development***

Geekie, Cambourne & Campbell (1999) describe learning, including learning to be literate, as social, collaborative and cultural. In order to understand literacy development, they refer to seven principles:

- Learning is often a mutual accomplishment.
- Children learn through guided participation.
- Children profit from the support of more competent people.
- Effective instruction is contingent instruction.
- It is not interaction itself but the quality of the interaction that contributes to better learning.
- Language is the means through which self-regulation of learning behaviour develops.
- Learning depends upon the negotiation of meaning.

In other words, we are moving from an adult-directed model of instruction in which experts (adults) transmit knowledge to learners, to a 'community of learners' model. Holistic learning experiences which are based on expert and novice jointly constructing meaning are central to this approach.

### ***Social contexts***

In a cross-cultural analysis, Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry & Goncu (1993) found that although there were similarities in the processes of guiding children's participation across cultures, different settings (or contexts) facilitated different communicative functions and different interactions. For example, an investigation of home literacy environment and phonological awareness revealed direct and indirect relationships between some aspects of the home environment and phonological awareness (Foy & Mann, 2003). Furthermore, the types of books parents read to their children affects the ways in which they read to their children (Duke, 2003; Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Stadler & McEvoy, 2003) and the extent to which they support the development of specific skills such as phonological awareness (Stadler & McEvoy, 2003). Specific

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aspects of low income family environments, such as parenting stress levels, have been found to be associated with the level of frequency of activities such as reading aloud to infants (Karrass, VanDeventer & Braungart-Rieker, 2003) and with preschoolers' receptive vocabulary and social functioning (Farver, Xu, Eppe & Lonigan, 2006). Aspects of the home environment may impact on literacy activities in differing ways. For example, mother's educational level, family size, home writing and parental assessment of their children's skills have been shown to be predictive of writing competence in 4 to 7 year olds (Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004). In a longitudinal analysis of children's home literacy experiences and specific reading skills in Kindergarten, Year 1 and Year 4, Senechal (2006) found that specific home literacy experiences such as frequency of storybook reading were predictive of specific reading competencies even for Year 4 children. The impact of such variables, however, also varies according to factors such as child characteristics, (Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004), inattentive behaviour (Dally, 2006; Doctoroff, Greer & Arnold, 2006) and parent discipline practices (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich & Welsh, 2004).

Similarly, studies of developmentally appropriate practice and classroom interactions (Neuman, 1997; Neuman & Roskos, 1997; S. B. Neuman & Roskos, 2005) on children's purposes for literacy and uses of metacognitive strategies, confirm the complex relationship between context and cognition, or learning.

**If learning is influenced by the social situation, by familiarity of the task materials and by the cognitive operations associated with them, the need to ensure all children have access to a literacy rich environment and opportunities to engage in meaningful and enjoyable experiences on a regular basis is apparent.**

## **Defining a literacy rich environment**

What counts as a literacy rich environment requires careful consideration. Any attempt to define or measure the quality of a specific context must look beyond quantitative measures, recognizing that the interaction between variables in any context is complex. Literacy practices are defined as 'cultural ways of utilizing literacy' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, in Volk & de Acosta, 2003, p.11) and include the behaviours of those involved as well as the ways in which they understand and value literacy (Volk & de Acosta, 2003). Three related aspects of the home environment frequently employed to provide a measure of home environment and literacy practices are:

- shared reading experiences between parents and children
- parental beliefs about literacy
- the parents' own literacy practices (Foy & Mann, 2003).

Frequency of shared storybook reading has often been used as a means of quantifying the home literacy environment, with differences in the frequency of book reading for middle and lower income children well documented (e.g. Kuo, Franke, Regalado & Halfon, 2004; Pellegrini, Galda, Jones & Perlmutter, 1995; Sonnenschein, Brody & Munsterman, 1996). However, it would be simplistic to assume that the frequency of storybook reading is solely related to parental values or beliefs. For example, levels of storybook reading may be in part due to differences in availability of books. Limited resources can and do serve as powerful constraints on activity (Cooter, 2006; Wilson, 1987). Material resources, an important part of an ecological setting, have been under-examined as a potential factor for explaining differences in type and quality of everyday experiences. It would also be simplistic to assume that frequency of storybook reading or of other specific literacy-related practices in isolation are reliable predictors of later literacy outcomes. For example, Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal (2005) found that a global measure of overall responsiveness and support of the home environment was a stronger predictor of children's early language and literacy skills than were specific literacy practices such as shared book reading. Activities such as storytelling have potential to influence children's interest in reading and development of early literacy skills (Britto, Brooks-Gunn & Griffin, 2006; Cline & Necochea, 2003; Fiorentino & Howe, 2004) yet the focus has been predominantly on story book reading.

## **Understanding the home and community setting**

Clearly, the ecocultural structure of a community is more than a matter of material resources or specific practices; it is the social construction of families and the impact of daily experiences on children's lives. People's actions, goals, and circumstances within activity settings are profoundly interconnected, and children bring to preschool or school their own experiences of literacy and the social practices in which these have developed. For many children, these do not match the social practices of the school setting (e.g. Marsh, 2003) and they are faced with the dilemma of either changing their values and practices to accommodate the school setting, or if unwilling or unable to do so, they face the possibility of poor literacy and school outcomes.

**The extent to which educational settings acknowledge and respond to the complex literacy experiences of their students will have a profound impact on children's school success. It is therefore essential that educators attempt to understand the literacy practices of home and community as the basis for informed curriculum practices, rather than insist on an approach in which parents and families are exhorted to assist the preschool or school in its task and school literacy practices are forced into the home** (Marsh, 2003).

Teachers and students can appropriate knowledge and practices from other contexts into school learning to create new practices that disrupt established power relationships and create possibilities for learning by providing opportunities for teachers to value and build on what children know and for children to help shape learning (Volk & de Acosta, 2003).

### ***Australian experience***

It would seem that Australia has quite some way to go in this area, as evidenced by the findings of several recent Australian studies which indicate that, while there are numerous differences between the language and literacy practices of school and community, there is little difference in literacy practices within and between schools (Breen et al., 1994; Cairney, 2000; Cairney, Ruge, Buchanan, Lowe & Munsie, 1995; Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995).

**If the diversity of the literacy practices between specific families and communities is acknowledged, and the discrepancy between family and community and school practices is acknowledged, a 'one size fits all' approach is clearly not appropriate.**

Perhaps the most compelling example of this mismatch in the Australian context may be seen in educational provisions for Indigenous children. Findings of the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey for Year 3 indicated that less than 20% in the Indigenous sample met the reading standard and less than 30% met the writing standard (Kemp, 1999). Similar results were obtained for Year 5, suggesting that Indigenous students make little or no progress over the two years. Literacy and numeracy levels of many Indigenous students were 3 to 4 year levels below other students. Some students were leaving school with the English literacy skills of 6 year olds, without functional levels of literacy and numeracy, with little chance of finding employment, and likely to become dependent on others for many significant aspects of their lives (Kemp, 1999).

In a study of the educational achievement of students from urban, rural and remote schools in Western Australia, Breen et al. (1994) found that the most significant factors affecting students' school success were whether the student was from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, and the socioeconomic status of the school. Observation of the literacy experiences of the families led Breen et al. to argue that schools should recognise and build on the multiliteracies the children bring to school. While there have been numerous attempts to better cater for students from Indigenous backgrounds, the tendency has been firstly to assume that all Indigenous students have similar early literacy experiences, and secondly to initiate home-school literacy programs. Such approaches ignore the diversity within Indigenous cultures and seek family conformity to a literacy agenda that reflects that of the dominant culture (Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Hanlen, 2002).

Clearly there is undue emphasis placed on picture books, traditional forms of print literacy, individualized writing practices and literacy-related play activities that are based on middle-class norms (Marsh, 2003). The closer the 'fit' between home and community literacy practices and school literacy practices, the more likely it is that literacy learning will be unproblematic (Cairney, 1994; Heath, 1983; Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland & Reid, 1998; Makin & Jones Diaz, 2002a) when children commence formal schooling. The issue of 'fit' is a complex one, especially when one works with families from a wide range of backgrounds.

## **Family literacy programs**

A substantial research literature is available that confirms the effectiveness of parent involvement in children's reading acquisition (see Darling & Westberg, 2004, for a meta analysis of the effect of parent involvement on the reading acquisition of children from kindergarten to year 3) and has resulted in a plethora of programs designed to provide parents of school age children with specific skills and knowledge that will enable them to instruct their child in ways valued by schools (Bates, 2005; Darling, 2005; Waldbart, Meyers & Meyers, 2006), and designed to prepare the parent and/or child for entry to formal schooling (e.g. Rhodes, Enz & LaCount, 2006). Although the crucial importance of the literacy knowledge and experience that children bring to school is now acknowledged, such experiences are often not recognised in practice (Makin et al., 1999) and little has been done in Australia to foster optimum, prior to school literacy experiences for children prior to pre-school or school entry. A review of Australian early literacy intervention programs (Cairney, Ruge, Buchanan, Lowe & Munsie, 1995) stated that no program began at birth and that programs were generally one-way, not collaborative, in nature. Although such a program has been available since 1998 (see Makin & Spedding, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; , 2003, for a description of the Support at Home for Early Language and Literacies Program, SHELLS), it has not been disseminated widely.

Improving relationships between home and school or improving the literacy skills of adults and/or children have been the approaches most frequently employed by family literacy programs. Family literacy programs such as Headstart, the Family School Partnership Program (PACE), Evenstart, Parents as Teachers (PAT) and Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) are designed to strengthen the relationship between home and school. Two well-known Australian programs designed to improve partnerships between home and school are the Talk to a Literacy Learner Program (TTALL) (Cairney & Munsie, 1992) and the Effective Partners in Secondary Literacy Learning (EPISLL) (Cairney & Munsie, 1993). The former involved parents of children in preschools and primary schools, and the latter involved parents of students of secondary school age. While evaluations indicated positive outcomes for parents and

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children (Cairney & Munsie, 1995), neither program addressed the younger child prior to preschool entry.

Another approach has been that of intergenerational programs, with the aim of bringing about changes in families by strengthening the literacy of adults and children (e.g. Neuman, 1997; Paratore, 2005; Paratore & Brisk, 1995). In this approach, literacy instruction is provided to parents coupled with instruction in how to assist their children with literacy skills, with a view to providing a rich literacy environment for the child from birth.

### ***Outcomes of family literacy programs***

Many of the programs designed to involve parents more fully in their children's early literacy learning such as Head Start, Even Start and the Family School Partnership Program in the US, have been school-centred and have done little to acknowledge the language, literacy and cultural diversity of the communities involved. In many cases, the benefits for children's literacy learning are difficult to confirm and results have frequently been mixed. For example, an evaluation of Even Start found there were no statistically significant or important impacts on families in Even Start when compared to control families on child literacy outcomes, parent literacy outcomes, or parent-child interactions (St Pierre, Ricciuti & Rimdzius, 2005). It was concluded that this was due to a combination of two factors: (a) lack of full participation by families, and (b) ineffective instruction due to curriculum content or instructional approach utilised.

An Australian Federal Government funded review of Family and Community Literacy Initiatives in Australia found that of the 261 programs included in the review, most were school-based; tokenistic, paying little attention to the needs of communities and focusing on school needs instead; and little evaluation of effectiveness had been undertaken (Cairney, Ruge, Buchanan, Lowe & Munsie, 1995). Cairney et al concluded that the programs were generally not well conceptualised, were very limited in scope, and most made no attempt to empower marginalised groups.

While research to date has increased our understanding of the ways in which families and communities construct literacy and the impact of family literacy practices on school success, it has been argued that previous family literacy programs such as those referred to earlier, are not based on sound current research (Auerbach, 1989; Cairney, 1997, 2000; Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Taylor, 1997).

**Common criticisms of many current programs include the tendency for each to make central assumptions about the literacy practices to be privileged and the kinds of strategies that will best promote their development. Many programs do not acknowledge cultural differences and therefore do not meet the needs of participants.**

By not recognizing cultural differences, specific cultural practices are imposed on families, ignoring their potentially rich forms of language, literacy and textual traditions (Cairney, 2002). These programs are based on a deficit hypothesis which assumes that parents lack the essential skills to promote the language and literacy development of their children, or later school success. The competencies of children from bilingual backgrounds, multilingual or dialectal backgrounds, socioeconomically disadvantaged or geographically isolated communities and Indigenous communities are frequently ignored, or the differences regarded as deficits (e.g. Flores, Tomany-Korman & Olson, 2005). As a result, targeted education and intervention programs are frequently advocated for families.

### ***Comparing approaches of 'family literacy' programs***

Most of these 'family literacy' programs are in reality school-based programs which introduce parents to school literacy practices and teach them skills and strategies to support these practices (Cairney, Ruge, Buchanan, Lowe & Munsie, 1995; Darling, 2005). This approach ignores findings of several important areas of research into early child development and early literacy development. Firstly, it ignores research that demonstrates that a formal school-based curriculum is inappropriate for young children. For example, Sonnenschein et al. (1997) found a positive correlation between an approach in which families actively engaged children in enjoyable literacy activities, and scores on measures of early literacy in preschool and kindergarten. More specifically, an entertainment approach (their term) was significantly and positively correlated to children's phonological awareness and concepts of print. A skills approach was either negatively or not at all related.

Second, it ignores research into literacy as social practice (Cairney, 1995; Luke, 1993); and it ignores the social reality of families and their potential strengths. These approaches continue to privilege school literacy, ignoring the richness of family literacy practices and the varied contexts in which these occur. Nor do they acknowledge the early literacy experiences and learning of children that takes place in contexts other than the home, despite research evidence highlighting the impact of such as child-care centres and preschools (Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2005).

Bowes (2000), in a discussion of future research needs in relation to parent support programs, states that, 'An insight into changes in parenting as a result of parenting education and support programs must in the first instance come from parents themselves'(p.36). However, Paratore (1994), in discussion of research into the outcomes of intergenerational literacy programs, states that most outcomes are reported in relation to the academic performance of either the parent or the child, rather than how the project has influenced the adults themselves and their interactions with their children. This is despite substantial evidence showing that

improvement in social-emotional support and enhanced adult-child interactions are key factors in promoting early literacy behaviours (van Tuijl & Leseman, 2004) and may therefore be more important outcomes than measures of academic attainment. In addition, formal measures of academic attainment have limited utility when employed with young children.

**Developing understanding of young children's learning through observation, interaction and reflection during naturalistic play activities has greater potential to recognise and encompass learning complexities and potential in young children** (Broadhead, 2006) **and is more appropriate than assessments designed for school age children** (e.g. Coyne & Harn, 2006; Hintze, Ryan & Stoner, 2003).

### ***Factors for success***

Cassidy et al (2004) report eight factors as being crucial to the success of Literacy Connection, a program designed to improve the literacy skills of low income Latino parents and to better equip them to provide a 'reading role model' for their children. The factors were:

- personalised recruiting
- one-to-one tutoring
- incentives for participation
- flexible scheduling
- provision for childcare
- learner-centred curriculum
- respect for the participants culture
- a University campus location.

Crucial to success was recognition that parents care about the education of their children and by providing access to the skills and knowledge they need in ways that are respectful and culturally relevant, parents can be empowered to help their children.

In a review of 19 studies into the effectiveness of early intervention programs published after 1985, Blok, Fukkink, Gebhardt & Leseman (2005), found that size of effect varied with mode of delivery. Greater effects in the cognitive domain were derived from centre-based interventions or combined centre and home-based interventions than were derived from solely home-based programs. However, this was not true of effects in the socioemotional domain, a finding confirmed by other studies in which home visiting programs were shown to be beneficial in reducing behaviour problems and improving general parenting skills (Fergusson, Grant, Horwood & Ridder, 2005). Including parenting skill coaching was also related to positive outcomes in the cognitive domain. Program characteristics such as age of

onset, program duration and intensity, continuation after kindergarten commencement, or the provision of social or economic support were not uniquely related to outcomes.

Reynolds & Temple (2005) review advances in knowledge about the effectiveness of early childhood programs including (a) increasing evidence for the positive effects of model and large scale programs, (b) the significance of timing and length of participation, (c) the identification of cognitive, family and school-related mechanisms that lead to long term benefits, and (d) evidence of economic benefits resulting from participation in the program.

Despite the research evidence and espousal of practices that empower families, the adoption of a top-down approach to service delivery and to evaluation of programs and services is still common. For example, numerous studies are available which demonstrate that home visiting and mentoring programs have significant benefits for family functioning and there has been a concomitant push to deliver family based programs via home visits at state and national levels (e.g. Department of Family and Community Services, 2000; Federal Parliamentary Labour Party, 2000). However, recent research findings support a combination of home-visiting and centre-based service (e.g. Blok, Fukkink, Gebhardt & Leseman, 2005; Love et al., 2005). A home visiting model (or indeed any other specific approach), may not be appropriate for all families and communities. Nor can the results of overseas programs be extrapolated to the Australian situation (see the Department of Family and Community Services, 2000, for a review of Early Childhood intervention studies).

**Parental, family and community involvement in program development, implementation and evaluation is an important means of ensuring that models of service delivery are sensitive to specific cultural, community and family needs and that practices are empowering for families.**

### ***Including families in evaluation and research***

One approach employed in recent years has been to include parents and families in program evaluation and research related activities. Whereas previously there has been a tendency to see formal assessment as more reliable than parent reporting, there is now increased recognition that parents have an opportunity to observe their child over longer periods of time in broader contexts. Parents who are sensitive observers are especially poised to provide information on children's development in authentic circumstances. Their knowledge may be valuable in a number of ways:

- to save time, particularly for gathering preliminary data
- to identify areas in need of greater assessment/investigation

- to gather background information that helps in identifying areas of need or provide explanation of assessment findings
- to provide information on hard-to-test children that augments or replaces formal assessment
- to add to our understanding of early literacy behaviours by reporting on behaviours that are different to those assessed using formal procedures.

A number of studies have confirmed the value of parent reporting and involvement in program evaluation and research activity. For example, in a study of children's early understanding of visual and orthographic aspects of print and its relationship to reading acquisition, Levy et al (2006) asked parents to complete a Home Experiences Questionnaire that asked parents to specify type and frequencies of home literacy activities. Findings revealed that parents' ratings of the extent of their child's involvement in literacy-related activities most consistently predicted the development of emerging literacy skills. Dickenson and DeTemple (1998), drawing on data from a longitudinal study of literacy development among low-income children, found significant correlations between parental reports of children's emergent literacy at ages 3 and 4 with grade one (ages 6 and 7) teacher reports and assessments.

Those employing parental reporting techniques will, of course, need to consider the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of children. Families may vary in their level of comfort in reporting on their child's development, in their acceptance of formats such as questionnaires, and in the skills and knowledge required. Boudreau (2005) used a parent questionnaire to investigate the relationship of parent report of children's early literacy knowledge and skills with more formal assessment measures. In this study, parents of pre-school children with a language impairment and parents of a typically developing age-matched peer group completed a questionnaire including 31 closed questions using a 5 point Likert scale that addressed phonological awareness, response to print in the environment, alphabet knowledge, interactions around books, writing and orientation to literacy, as well as a number of open-ended questions. Measures of early literacy were administered by an examiner. Findings showed a strong relationship between parent report and formal measures for children with language impairment, but not for typically-developing children. It seems that one explanation for this finding is that the parents of children with language difficulties have more experience reflecting on and discussing their child's abilities and may be more accurate reporters of their child's knowledge and skills. Findings therefore support the use of parent report as a tool in assessment of emergent and early knowledge and skills for children as long as they have been provided the necessary knowledge and skills to do so. Care must also be taken to ensure that certain cultural practices are not privileged and that interpretation of parent responses is in accordance with the cultural framework (Boudreau, 2005).

**Clearly recognising and valuing the literacy practices of families and communities requires more than patronising training programs for parents or top-down approaches to service provision. Those involved need to develop an understanding of how specific families and communities define literacy and how they engage in literacy practice.**

This can only happen if those involved acknowledge varied contexts and the complexity of each, and build effective partnerships with families and communities. A social-contextual approach in which curriculum development is guided by family and community concerns and cultural practices is clearly the way forward.

## **Future directions**

In more recent times, the need for researchers to define and study literacy in more contextualised frames has been acknowledged. Simple dichotomous comparisons between 'high' and 'low', 'advantaged' or 'disadvantaged', 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' merely serve to distinguish between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', and contribute little if anything, to our understanding of the strengths, factors of resilience and ways in which young children at risk of developing low levels of literacy can be supported to become literate and experience success at school (Yaden, Rowe & MacGillivray, 1999). Assessments and screening tests designed to identify children at risk of experiencing reading difficulties (see Coyne & Harn, 2006; Molfese, Molfese, Modglin, Walker & Neamon, 2004; Phaneuf & Silbergitt, 2003; Puolakanaho, Poikkeus, Ahonen, Tolvanen & Lyytinen, 2003) have limited value if unable to provide insights into how best to support children and families in specific sociocultural contexts. A more contextualised view of literacy is clearly what is needed. However, adopting such an approach means that findings cannot be generalised to all children and families, something which many find difficult to accept.

### ***Emergent literacy intervention***

For children and families considered at risk, a preventive model of emergent literacy intervention is needed to encourage timely attainment of the skills that will serve as the foundation for later literacy achievements (Justice & Pullen, 2003; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

**In order to be effective, interventions must be developed in partnership with those they serve. Each must provide a multipurpose and flexible program with families, concentrating on enhancing the quality of parent-child interactions and the home literacy environment.**

Interventions need to concentrate on: (i) recognizing and utilizing parent strengths (rather than identifying so-called deficits as the basis for intervention); (ii) developing

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desirable values and attitudes toward literacy, and toward education in general; and (iii) developing understanding of and respect for culturally and economically diverse families (Cassidy et al., 2004; Saracho, 2002). This will only occur if we challenge deficit perspectives of families (Volk & de Acosta, 2003) and ensure they are supported and affirmed in their role as their children's first literacy educators, and are perceived as equal partners in the process.

### ***Research in teaching practice***

Investigation of the views, strategies and practices of early childhood teachers and other childcare professionals in promoting early literacy is warranted. The limited research available suggests that teachers may focus on specific skills and strategies while ignoring others (Hawken, Johnston & McDonnell, 2005). The provision of professional development for early childhood educators has been shown to have a positive impact on the literacy development of young children (Jackson et al., 2006). Findings of the National Enquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) also strongly supported the need for appropriate undergraduate training and ongoing professional development. One caveat is warranted, however: such training for early childhood staff should be cognisant of developmentally appropriate practice, not an extension of programs designed for teachers of older children.

Emergent literacy interventions for young children at risk which are guided by current research in early literacy development and developmentally appropriate practice will emphasise the need to increase children's naturalistic exposure to literacy concepts as well as their participation in meaningful literacy events (Justice & Pullen, 2003). While limited resources can and do serve as powerful constraints on activity (Wilson, 1987), provision of resources (or access to resources) will be insufficient alone, since people's actions, goals, and circumstances within different settings or contexts are profoundly interconnected. A holistic approach to supporting children and families in their community is warranted. Interventions such as this will differ from site to site, and over time, evolving throughout the period of implementation.

**To ensure the effectiveness of this proactive model of prevention, there is a significant need to increase methodological rigor and to systematically evaluate intervention programs to determine the efficacy of the program and to guide program implementation** (Bates, 2005).

Frequently, evaluations designed to benefit and improve programs still fail to involve the key stakeholders.

### ***Systematic, rigorous and collaborative evaluations***

Important implications for future program evaluations include that the process should be systematic, rigorous and collaborative, ensuring the provision of participatory and responsive educational services to support parents in establishing strong literacy foundations in their young children. In line with current research imperatives described previously, qualitative research methods designed to record the diverse voices and experiences of participants in their communities must be employed if valid measures of participant satisfaction and outcomes for families and children are to be obtained.

A program evaluation research model described by Dymond (2001) provides an example of a model designed to overcome the shortcomings in previous research referred to above.

Key elements of this model are:

- inclusion of stakeholders in the evaluation process through a participatory action research approach
- use of multiple methods and measures
- analysis of program processes and outcomes
- ascertaining the perceptions of the diverse stakeholder groups.

The key components of this evaluation model include participatory action research, measurement of program processes and outcomes, multiple methods and multiple measures, and input from diverse stakeholder perspectives, including those of the participants. In participatory action research approaches like this, researchers operate as full collaborators with members of an organization or group (stakeholders) in linking theory and research to acceptable and effective practice (Ho, 2002). Full participation of families and children in all aspects of program design, implementation and evaluation is essential to ensure that the program is responsive to family and community needs, and that it empowers the participants, instilling a sense of ownership and commitment.

It may be timely here to highlight the need for researchers to concede that power differentials naturally occur in early childhood settings and to acknowledge that adults don't always know better, or more about children's cultures than the children (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta & Wintersberger, 1994). Thus, there is a need to collect qualitative data about children, with children. Postmodern reconstructions of childhood have promoted a growing acceptance of the agency of children as co-constructors of their own cultures (Aubrey, David, Godfrey & Thompson, 2000; Corsaro, 1997; Fler & Robbins, 2003; Graue & Walsh, 1998), and hence that children should no longer be relegated to being subjects of research, but rather active participants.

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Finally, those involved must establish what they believe an effective program to be.

**Perhaps the definition of what an effective program is not will provide a useful starting point: '*...we believe that no literacy program is effective if it marginalises some children, if it ignores the home experiences that children bring to early childhood programs, or if it does not include the development of mutually reinforcing bonds with children's families*'. (Makin & Jones Diaz, 2002b)**

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