



Pathways to literacy



By Dr Alison Elliott

Alison is the Research Director of ACER's Early Childhood Education research program.

Alison Elliott discusses how all children, including the most vulnerable, can be given the best chance to be ready to read.

Most children are well on their way to reading independently by the end of the first year of school. How well children progress depends on their pre-requisite understandings and skills – or ‘readiness’ at school entry. The concept of ‘readiness’, although not currently popular in Australia, is central to reading.

What do we mean by being ‘ready’ to read? In the case of most Australian classrooms, ‘readiness’ – as it applies to literacy, includes the ability to speak English fluently, describe experiences, tell and retell a story, and carry out a sequence of instructions. It also includes enjoying books and ‘reading’, knowing about the structure of books, knowing colours, drawing and describing drawings, recognising and writing a word or two, classifying objects, hearing rhyming words, beginning, and ending sounds in words and differentiating between shapes, letters and words – by appearance only.

Generally, the language, auditory, visual and perceptual skills needed for reading develop in the preschool years, mostly in the home. By the start of school, most children will use increasingly complex sentence structures and vocabulary, be able to participate in conversations, ask questions, follow instructions and tell stories. They can also express spatial and positional concepts such as size, location, quantity, and time.



Many children begin school with poor listening and speaking skills and do not develop these pre-requisite or pre-literacy skills until the first year or two of school. Immature language makes it difficult to develop print knowledge and phonological awareness, which are fundamental to learning to read. The social and cognitive gap (the 'readiness gap') between children at school entry can be immense. Where children have not developed reading readiness in their family environment, the school has to be ready and able to facilitate children to develop their 'readiness' skills in the early years of school.

Language as the basis for reading

The evidence about the link between language and early literacy is clear: Children with language difficulties are at increased risk for a wide range of problems, including poor educational achievement, mental illnesses, early school leaving and a range of behavioural problems. Good language and literacy skills on the other hand lay the foundation for social, academic, personal economic, and community success.

Good language skills develop when children are in environments with rich language, interaction and attention to the world around them and its detail and nuances. Ideally, families provide these rich language environments but when they don't or even if they do and children spend significant parts of their waking hours in child care, we need to intervene.

A recent study of nearly 1000 early childhood educators found that most had noticed a distinct increase in the number of children with 'poor language skills'. Child care practitioners attributed these poor language skills to lack of interaction with parents in the home, too much

television viewing, limited at-home reading, and social isolation. These present challenges for the preschool setting and for the first years of school (Elliott & Slee, 2004; Elliott, 2006).

A disproportionate number of children with poor language skills come from vulnerable, economically disadvantaged families. By age three children from higher socio economic backgrounds have vocabularies of 12 000 words while children from lower socio economic backgrounds have about 4000 words.

Risk factors that affect language development, literacy and later school success are mothers' low educational levels, unemployment, poverty, parent mental illness, substance abuse, and high levels of family conflict. Building mothers' language and parenting skills and boosting mother-child interaction can help to improve child language outcomes above and beyond the effect of family social status.

Fluency in English language is critical. Most of us learn to read in our first or home language, but increasingly many children learn to read in their second or even third language. There is a strong evidence base for teaching reading in children's most fluent language. In reality, with hundreds of 'first' languages used by children in Australia this is not practical. Hence, it is more important than ever to develop English language fluency.

Parents, other family members and the wider community, together with early childhood settings, hold the key to early language development. Building capacity in families enables them to have the confidence and competence to interact more intensively with children. But capacity and expertise in early childhood settings

must also be boosted. For many children, especially the most vulnerable, early childhood programs hold the key to strengthening language and in turn, pre-literacy skills.

Boosting reading readiness in early childhood settings

Early childhood education programs can play a vital role in boosting reading 'readiness.' Most preschool aged children participate in some form of early childhood program, but many miss out, many are under served and many attend programs of dubious quality.

The much welcomed proposals for universal preschool announced recently by the Federal education minister will help address the urgent need for the most disadvantaged children to have a preschool education, but will need careful planning and management if all children are to benefit.

Gearing up for universal preschool requires a target date and a massive investment in resources and early childhood teacher training, a process that will take some years. We need to build capacity in terms of facilities, resources, places and staffing. Ideally, children will have the option of attending preschool for 3-5 days per week, there will be a better integration of care and education, and a shift away from the artificial two-tiered 'care' – 'education' system so entrenched across much of the country.

Ideally, early childhood programs act to complement families' day to day language building activities, but often they need to supplement and enrich language to ensure that the social and language gap so often noted at school entry is narrowed. It is not sufficient to provide all children with the same activities. All children need a carefully planned and focused learning program. But some need much more intensive scaffolding

– language modelling, conversations, question exchanges, and story reading and telling than others.

The importance of competent, qualified staff to promote literacy

Evidence indicates that the quality of the early childhood setting impacts significantly on children's experiences. Better qualified staff, and especially early childhood degree credentialed staff, provide richer, more personalised and better targeted learning environments for children.

Unfortunately, the qualification levels of staff in child care centres do not inspire confidence in their ability to create rich learning environments, let alone strong literacy programs. While evidence on the importance of quality pedagogy and the strong associations between quality environments, pedagogy and child outcomes, and qualified staff are robust, there has been little commitment to ensuring qualified practitioners in our early childhood centres and little, if any, monitoring of VET training delivery in the many hundreds of small private providers that offer these courses. Complicating the picture is the lack of a national agreement on what credentials are appropriate for staff in early childhood centres and what mix of credentials are needed within an early childhood service.

There is a clear need to improve quality and effectiveness in early childhood care and education or we are in danger of further widening the learning gap at school entry. The evidence is clear about what works. There just needs to be greater will, commitment and action. ■

This is an edited version of a paper presented to the DEST Reading Aloud Conference in Melbourne in August.

References and readings

- Bruner, J. (1984). *Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. The hidden agenda.* In B. Rogoff & J. Wertsch (Eds.), *Children's learning in the zone of proximal development* (pp. 93-97). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Elliott, A. (2006). *Early Childhood Education: Pathways to quality and equity for all children.* Australian Education Review 50. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Elliott, A. & Slee, J. (2005). *Educators' perceptions of young children's challenging behaviours.* Paper presented at the Biennial Early Childhood Australia Conference, Brisbane, Sept 28-Oct 1st.
- Freund, L. (1990). *Maternal regulation of children's problem solving behaviour and its impact on children's performance.* *Child Development*, 61, 113-126.
- Hart, B. & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in every day experiences of young American Children*
- Neuman, S. & Roskos, K. (1997). *Literacy knowledge in practice: Contexts of participation for young writers and readers.* *Reading Research Quarterly*, 32, 10-32
- Rowe, K. (2002). *The importance of teacher quality.* Issue Analysis, No. 22, Feb, 2002, Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies www.cis.org.au
- Rowe, K. (2005). *Report of the National Enquiry into the Teaching of Literacy.* Canberra: DEST
- Saluja, G., Early, D.M. & Clifford, R.M. (2002). *Demographic characteristics of early childhood teachers and structural elements of early care and education in the United States.* *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 4(1), 1-19.
- Senechal, M. & LeFevre, J.A. (2002). *Parental involvement in the development of children's reading skill: A five year longitudinal study.* *Child Development*, 73(2), pp. 445-460.