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Published March 2006

In this issue:

- [Preschool hope and reality](#)
- [Australian research resources available from EdNA Online](#)
- [ACER UPDATE](#)

## Preschool hope and reality

Education Minister Julie Bishop is spot on with her call for universal pre-school for four-year-olds writes ACER's Research Few early childhood experts would disagree with the idea that young children require rich, nurturing learning opportunities to optimise social and intellectual development.

Education Minister Julie Bishop is spot on with her call for universal pre-school for four-year-olds. The early years of development are critical to brain development and there is overwhelming agreement that the early years shape later social and academic outcomes.

Just recently, the former head of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's education directorate, Barry McGaw echoed long held concerns about the alarming socio-economically linked learning gaps between children at the commencement of school.

How we go about providing early learning experiences for all children in the years before schooling is a \$64,000 question.

That said, making preschool (or kindergarten as it is called in some states) mandatory or compulsory requires a huge leap in our thinking about the 'educational ladder' and the logistics of provision.

Few areas of education are as complex as early childhood services. Report after report says that early childhood services are regulated, administered and funded by a dogs' breakfast of government and non government bodies.

**Published March 2006**

Preschools and child care centres are operated and owned by a range of community groups, government, small and medium private owner-operators, and large corporations. They operate within a variety of legislative frameworks.

There are several types of early childhood services and the same types are called different names in different states. The confusion is exacerbated by a lack of a nationally common school starting age, although this should be solved by 2010. Few people really understand how all the early childhood bits fit together.

The basic cut is along 'care' versus 'education' lines. 'Child care' is funded federally, largely as a labour force measure. 'Education' in the years before school, that is, preschool or kindergarten, is funded by the states and territories. Regardless of the funding source, parents usually pay substantial fees as well.

A four-year-old child might attend one of several early childhood services, or all of them. Some children attend preschool, child care, occasional care, and Family Day Care all in the one week. In some parts of the country a four year old might already be at school. In some states, preschools are part of the school system. In others, preschool programs are embedded in child care centres. Sometimes there's a mix of both models. In some states children are shunted from child care to preschool and back to child care- all on the one day, just to make sure they get their 'dose' of 'education'.

Parents are often confused about the type of early childhood service their child attends. Is an Early Learning Centre a preschool, a kindergarten or a child care centre? Is a kindy or a preschool really a preschool or is it a child care centre? Could it be both?

Whether a centre provides a 'preschool' education depends very much on the curriculum or the program in the centre and the training of staff- not its name or funding source.

Published March 2006

And here is a problem. Nationally, there is no agreement about what a 'preschool' curriculum should cover, who should decide and how children's learning and development should be monitored and reported. Rarely, do preschools or child care centres provide schools with information about children's early learning and development.

The 'care' – 'education' divide in early childhood services is further exacerbated by staffing within centres. Typically, 'preschools' that provide 'education' programs are staffed by qualified early childhood teachers who have a degree in early childhood education. Staffing in child care centres is much more varied. Only about 10 per cent of child care staff have degrees in early childhood education. Most have vocationally oriented diplomas and certificates. About 30 per cent of staff have no formal qualifications. The *Australian Standard Classification of Occupations* describes early childhood practitioners without degrees as 'intermediate service workers' along with bar workers and casino croupiers.

Typical of the confusion in terminology used to describe early childhood staff is the frequent reference to the late Princess Diana as a 'kindergarten teacher' despite having no formal post-school qualification in early childhood education or anything else. Today, early childhood educators are grappling with the notion of professionalism. There is no registration for early childhood educators, no professional accreditation for early childhood education courses, and no core professional standards.

For the last decade there has been a serious shortage of early childhood educators. Child care centres in particular, struggle to attract qualified staff. Degree qualified early childhood educators are as scarce as hens' teeth.

Around the country universities have fought to maintain strong, specialist early childhood degrees and they struggle to attract students in the face of competition from 'sexier' courses. Young people are spoilt for choice when it comes to careers. The low pay, low status and shift work in early childhood care and education is hardly a draw card.

**Published March 2006**

Nationally, as practically everyone has been saying recently, early childhood care and education is in need of an 'overhaul'. So, before any thoughts about universal or 'mandatory' preschool can progress much further we need to think carefully about the entire early childhood sector.

The current scattergun approach to early childhood services is no longer working and more importantly cannot be expected to build a nation of learners. Tens of thousands of children miss out on formal early learning opportunities in the years before school. And with the average participation in early childhood services at around 10 hours per week many more are underserved.

Clearly, finding quality, affordable early childhood care and education is one of the most important issues for working parents as they struggle to balance work and family responsibilities. All families want more than baby sitting. They want strong, active early education programs for their children.

Every child needs the opportunity to participate in rich, nurturing early education, at least in the year before school. And some children need more nurturing and more help to get ready for school than others. Countering widespread differences in early childhood provision, quality, accessibility and cost won't happen by magic. Nationally, we need quality early learning programs for all children. But whatever form they take, and whatever they are called, we already have a network of early childhood services to build on. What's needed is a national agreement from all the relevant Ministers and jurisdictions on the vision, action and logistics to turn goodwill and hope into educational reality for each and every young child.

Dr Alison Elliott is ACER's Research Director, Early Childhood Education.

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Published March 2006

## Australian research resources available from EdNA Online

Educators, researchers and students now have increased access to a wide range of educational and research resources from following the signing of a memorandum of understanding between EdNA Online and ACER in March to link their databases.

The two organisations will collaborate on the delivery of information services, which will enable the sharing of knowledge, research and learning content.

As of 6 March ACER's EdResearch Online, a research repository of online articles from over 130 leading education journals, which contains bibliographical details and links to over 10 000 full text articles published since 2000, is available through EdNA Online's existing suite of information repositories.

EdResearch Online is produced by ACER's [Cunningham Library](#), which holds one of the most comprehensive and up-to-date collections of educational research documents in Australia.

ACER's chief executive Professor Geoff Masters said the education and training community would benefit from the collaboration to bring high-quality research resources together in one place.

Gerry White, CEO of **education.au**, the agency that manages the EdNA Online project, said for the first time educators, researchers and students would have access not only to an array of educational resources but also quality research resources.

"The addition of the ACER EdResearch Online repository presents a value-added service to the education and training community throughout Australia, especially those interested in or conducting research" he said.

EdNA Online is one of the world's largest education and training web services. The website provides access to quality online resources for Australian teachers, academics, administrators, librarians, researchers, trainers, parents and students. EdNA also provides a range of free tools and services, and syndicates educational content with a range of national and international partners.

**Published March 2006**

EdNA's search facility provides access to ten national and international high quality digital repositories. These repositories enable the Australian education and training community to search and locate relevant and quality resources.

EdNA Online is a joint initiative of the state, territory and Australian Governments through their education departments, and is managed by *education.au limited*.

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## ACER UPDATE

### **ACER Brisbane office now open**

ACER's Brisbane office was officially opened on 23 March by chief executive Professor Geoff Masters. The office is headed by Professor Gabrielle Matters, who joined ACER in October 2005 as a Principal Research Fellow. Ms Karen Elvish joins Professor Matters in the Brisbane office as Education Sales Consultant for ACER's Professional Resources Division including Assessment Services programs and ACER Press. Gabrielle and Karen will work to establish a greater presence for ACER in Queensland. The office is located at unit 9, 541 Boundary Road, Spring Hill. Phone (07) 3831 2769 Fax (07) 3831 9900.

### **ACER Board member awarded Australian College of Educators medal**

Member of ACER's board of directors, Mr Tony Mackay, was recently named 2006 College Medallist by the Australian College of Educators (ACE) for his outstanding contribution to education in Australia. The ACE citation recognised Mr Mackay "for his remarkable impact on educators in Australia, the UK, and internationally, through his work in professional development, strategic thinking and facilitation for government bodies, education agencies, think tanks, school boards, leadership teams and the profession." ACER congratulates Mr Mackay on this achievement.

Published March 2006

## Professional Evaluation and Reflection on Learning (PEARL)

ACER will design and deliver the Professional Evaluation and Reflection on Learning (PEARL) program for the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria. The key focus of PEARL is to answer the question: How do you know if the school-designed AGQTP is making a difference?

The program will comprise a series of workshop meetings delivered by ACER staff from the Assessment and Reporting research program, and offer some possible ongoing consultation. The meetings will be delivered to learning teams from AISV schools receiving funding for the 2006–9 round of the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program. Participating schools will be assisted in developing ways to evaluate their AGQTP-funded programs. On-going consultation will be offered in response to specific requests from participating schools or clusters.

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