

EARLY YEARS LEARNING AND CURRICULUM

Reconceptualising Reception: Continuity of learning



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Executive summary

This paper, *Reconceptualising Reception: Continuity of Learning*, was written to provide high quality, current research-based information and perspectives in relation to pedagogy and practices in the first year of school.

The paper provides an analysis of major current theoretical perspectives on:

- the changing face of early childhood education
- views of children, childhood and children's learning
- pedagogy and curriculum in early childhood education
- transition to school.

The paper, based on a wide-ranging review of the relevant literature, examines the tensions between various current expectations of early childhood education reflecting the social, political and economic contexts of particular countries, communities and organisations. Different philosophies, theoretical approaches and current perspectives of children, childhood and children's learning are examined along with contemporary perspectives and debates relating to pedagogy and curriculum in early childhood education. Transition to school is considered in relation to the 'readiness' of children, schools and family and community supports.

Introuduction

The purpose of this review is to examine pedagogy and learning environments in the first years of school, and the nature of transition to school experiences for children and their families. This review was commissioned by the Department of Education and Children's Services Early Learning and Curriculum Continuity for Learning Project.

Background

Children in South Australia are eligible to enter Reception, the first year of school, from the age of 5 years.

- Five-year-old children who attend government schools usually start at the beginning of each of the four terms. Some schools also accept children immediately following their fifth birthday but it is not compulsory for them to start until they are six years old. The school year begins in late January and is divided into four terms of approximately ten weeks. Most children usually attend four terms of preschool and then begin school in Reception when they are five. (Department of Education and Children's Services, 2006)

While focused on the first year of school, this review also encompasses research across the prior-to-school years, particularly noting current research relating to pedagogy and curriculum. The nature of the move from prior-to-school contexts to school, in particular from preschool to Reception, is considered in detail.

Definition of terms

An overview of the wide range of materials relevant to this review highlights a number of terms and definitions used in various ways in a variety of contexts and settings.

Organisation of the first year of school across Australia

Currently, the age at which children start formal schooling varies across Australia, as does the name given to the first year of school. In New South Wales, children start Kindergarten. In Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania, they start Prep and in South Australia, children start school in their Reception year. Other states and territories use different names again, as indicated in Table 1 p.7.

While each state and territory has a requirement that children must start school by the age of six years, there is considerable variation in the ages at which children are eligible to start school and in whether or not the year preceding Year One is compulsory. For example, Queensland has introduced a Prep Year from 2007, and while it is not compulsory, there is an expectation that the vast majority of children will attend Prep before starting Year One. A similar situation applies in Western Australia, where there is a very high take up rate for the

Pre-primary program, although it is not compulsory. This contrasts with the situation in NSW, for example, where Kindergarten (the year preceding Year One) constitutes the first year of compulsory school. In South Australia, children have access to preschool in the year before school, as detailed below.

Preschool

The term preschool is used to refer to services accessed by children and families in the year immediately preceding the first year of compulsory school. In South Australia, the following guidelines apply:

Preschool education is provided by the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) for all children in the year before they start school.

Preschool services may be called preschools, kindergartens, child parent centres, children's services centres or children's centres. Some services offer preschool and child care at the same location.

All children are entitled to attend preschool in the year before they start school. Children aged no less than four years old are entitled, where resources permit, to attend up to four preschool sessions per week, for up to four consecutive terms before entry to the reception class of primary school. Full time preschool means four sessions per week. Sessions last for up to three hours. Arrangements can be flexible depending on need eg in some circumstances two sessions a day may be arranged.

Aboriginal children and children under the Guardianship of the Minister for Education and Children's Services are able to start preschool at three years of age.

(Department of Education and Children's Services, 2006)

Early childhood education

The internationally accepted definition of early childhood is the period of a child's life from birth to age eight years (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2006). The term early childhood is used in this review to encompass this period, including both services and provision for children in the prior-to-school years and the early years of school.

Pedagogy

Throughout this review we adopt the definition of pedagogy used by Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell (2002, p. 28) that:

Pedagogy refers to that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive processes between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and community).

As noted by these authors, this provides a broad definition that encompasses interactions, the learning environment and engagement with family and community.

Table 1. Comparison of first year of school programs in Australia

State/territory	Entry age into program one year before Year 1	Name of program	Weekly attendance pattern	Entry age into Year 1	Compulsory starting age
Western Australia	5 by 30 June	Pre-primary	5 days	6 by 30 June	From the beginning of the year the child turns 6 years and 6 months
New South Wales	5 by 31 July	Kindergarten	5 days	6 by 31 July	6th birthday
Victoria	5 by 30 April	Preparatory (Prep)	5 days	6 by 30 April	6th birthday
Queensland	5 by 30 June (from 2007)	Preparatory (Prep)	5 days	6 by 30 June (from 2008)	6th birthday
South Australia	Entry into Reception class at the beginning of the term after 5th birthday	Reception	5 days	Single entry in January, 2-6 terms in Reception, depending on initial entry	6th birthday
Tasmania	5 by 1 January	Preparatory	5 days	6 by 1 January	6th birthday
ACT	5 by 30 April	Kindergarten	5 days	6 by 30 April	6th birthday
Northern Territory	5 by 30 June Continuous intake after 5th birthday into Transition	Transition	5 days	Continuous entry after minimum of two terms in Transition. The final intake into primary school is week 1, Semester 2. Children progress to Year 1 when the school and parents agree that they are ready	6th birthday

(Adapted from Dockett & Perry, 2006, p. 5)

Curriculum

Throughout this review, we adopt the following definition of curriculum, drawn from the work of Stephen (2006, p. 3):

Curriculum refers to a way of structuring learning experiences, an organised program of activities, opportunities and interactions that is usually derived from some explicit or implicit ideological or theoretical understanding about how children learn.

Clearly, curriculum and pedagogy are closely linked. Stephen (2006) notes that pedagogy will be influenced by the beliefs about learning that underpin curriculum. In turn, curriculum will be influenced by pedagogy.

Transition to school

Transition to school is defined as the time when children change their role in their community to become school students (Dockett & Perry, 2007). When considering the transition to school, this definition focuses on the ways in which children's roles, identities, and expectations change. It is also a time of changes in the expectations of others, the patterns of interaction and the relationships around and including children.

The literature review

Rather than seeking to be exhaustive, this review aims to exemplify current research and perspectives in relation to pedagogy in the first year of school, and transition experiences to support a positive start to school for all children and their families. The literature review encompasses empirical studies reported in books, journals and government reports as well as web-based material as appropriate.

We have adopted the approach of raising questions and seeking information from a broad range of sources to inform a critical appraisal of what constitutes effective pedagogy in the early years of school and ways in which to support positive transitions. References to the SACSA Framework (Department of Education, Training and Employment, South Australia, 2001) are included, but were not necessarily used to drive the review.

After a substantive literature search, members of the research team all undertook a range of reading and responses designed to inform and guide the review. Relevant issues identified at this stage provided the impetus for further research and reading. Materials selected for inclusion in the review were required to meet several criteria. These criteria were informed by the topic of the review as well as criteria adopted in previous reviews of research, notably that undertaken by the members of the British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group (BERA-SIG) (2003) and described by other researchers (Meade, 2000; Slavin, 1986). The criteria were that the research:

- was relevant to the topic

- was conducted in ways that minimised bias
- was considered to have external validity
- clearly identified the researcher's philosophical position
- identified the theoretical positions and analyses used
- appropriately described the sample or group involved in the research
- presented coherent and logical arguments and conclusions
- utilised a range of relevant evidence to support these arguments and conclusions
- had been published.

Organisation of the review

The review is organised around the following sections:

1. The changing face of early childhood education – expectations of preschool and the early years of school
2. Views about children as learners and about learning environments that promote learning
3. Pedagogy and curriculum in early childhood education
4. Transition to school
5. Conclusions

Throughout the review questions that could inform and guide future phases of the Early Learning and Curriculum Continuity Project are identified.

1 The changing face of early childhood education: expectations of preschool and the early years of school

Socio-political perspectives of early childhood education

Worldwide focus on early childhood education has increased significantly in the past decades. For example, a recent Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development report (OECD, 2001) indicated that all member countries had committed to a national focus on early childhood education. The World Bank, UNESCO and other international organisations have also invested heavily in early childhood education around the world (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Penn, 2002). The social, political and economic contexts of particular countries, communities and organisations impact on the nature of early childhood education provided and the nature of experiences regarded as important for young children.

In some contexts, early childhood education is one element of an economic imperative seen to be contributing to the future benefit of society by producing a competitive workforce, and reducing the future burdens of society by intervention and prevention programs that locate and rectify problems early (Heckman & Masterov, 2004). Aligned with this view is the importance of providing child care that enables parents to remain in the workforce. Further, parental employment is regarded as an effective means of alleviating poverty and deprivation within families and communities, so again is a service that promotes the common good of societies (Ball & Vincent, 2005).

Discussions of the role and purpose of early childhood education highlight a number of tensions. Traditionally, at least in Western contexts, early childhood education has been regarded as a context for children to engage with and explore their worlds, without pressure to engage in formal learning or instruction (Cuban, 1992; Seefeldt & Wasik, 2002). Early childhood educators have long resisted the push-down of academic curriculum and the notion that the value of early childhood education is located in its role of preparing children for later stages of education (Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Moss & Petrie, 2002), choosing instead to promote the value of children's learning through play, interaction and developmentally appropriate practice (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997).

In contrast to this view, much of the recent focus on early childhood education relates to economic considerations, with investment in early childhood education and intervention linked to future savings in terms of special education and rehabilitation services (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003; Dickens, Sawhill, & Tebbs, 2006; Ludwig & Sawhill, 2006; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 2005). Epitomising this view,

McCain, Mustard and Shanker (2007, p. 17) indicate that “the roots of economic productivity and health risks in adulthood are found in early childhood”.

With the focus on early childhood education as a means of intervention and prevention of potential educational and social problems, as well as providing a sound grounding in the skills and abilities that will enable individuals to contribute to a well-educated workforce, there are clear implications for the nature and purpose of early childhood education, at both the prior-to-school and early school levels.

At the prior-to-school level these implications can take the form of focus on academic preparation for school – the notion that the sooner formal learning starts, the more can be achieved. This is a particularly potent argument in relation to children and families considered ‘disadvantaged’ and who are described as starting school with learning deficits, compared with their more advantaged peers. For example, the US program, Good Start, Grow Smart (White House, 2002), has the explicit purpose of preparing “children to read and succeed in school”.

A focus on developing young children’s academic preparedness for school impacts on perceptions of appropriate curriculum for prior-to-school services and the first years of school (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). One general outcome can be calls for more focused academic instruction during the years before school and into the first year of school. This is particularly the case for kindergarten (the first year of school) in the US, where there is considerable pressure for teachers to start preparing children for the high-stakes testing they will meet in third grade by focusing on the mastery of academic standards described in the kindergarten (first year of school) standards of many states (Booher-Jennings, 2005).

Accompanying this are often increased expectations that families will prepare children for school. Where families are unable to support such preparation, deficit arguments may be invoked (Arzubiaga, Ceja, & Artiles, 2000; Delpit, 1995). A number of early childhood educators and organisations seek to resist these trends, calling instead for high quality programs for all children that reflect age-appropriate and research-based evidence of effective programs (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2000; Neuman & Roskos, 2005).

Where early childhood education programs assume a strongly academic emphasis, children’s progress tends to be assessed regularly through a series of standardised and non-standardised tests, which also meet increased accountability requirements (Meisels, 1999; Wien, 2004). In some instances, this is regarded as a means of aligning standards across prior-to-school and school programs (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005). Other researchers regard this process as detrimental to child-centred, play-based early childhood curricula, with the outcome of even further pushing down of academic curriculum (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003).

There is no doubt that the introduction of state-based standards for children entering school and in the early years of school in many US states has increased both the number of formal assessments undertaken by young children and the accountability regimes under which early childhood teachers operate: “the new demand to focus increased effort on the development of young children’s academic skills has changed the goals and expectations of early childhood education” (Goldstein, 2007, p. 380). In addition to the push-down of academic curriculum into the early childhood years, Hatch (2002a) describes this increased focus on accountability as “accountability shovedown” (p. 457).

Using standardised assessment with young children requires caution, especially when some major decisions can be made on the basis of such assessment (for example, progression, retention, early intervention). It is important to heed the warning of Bowman, Donovan and Burns (2001) that young children’s abilities are emerging, rather than fixed and that assessment at any one point may present a distorted view of capabilities. Many standardised assessments do not recognise that young children can demonstrate skills and abilities in many different ways, and are not particularly sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity (Bowman, et al., 2001).

While it is important to note that many of the changing contexts listed above are US specific, historically many of the educational trends from North America find their way into Australian educational thinking and policy. The increased focus on preschool provision is one such example.

The idea that prior-to-school services, particularly preschool, serve the purpose of preparing children for school is not new. However, a renewed focus on the importance of preschool education leading into school has been evident in some recent Australian reports and policy documents, such as the National Goals for Schooling (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 1999), the National Agenda for Early Childhood Draft Framework (Commonwealth Task Force on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing, 2004) and the National Preschool Education Inquiry Report (Walker, 2004). None of these papers advocates a focus only on academic preparation for school, and none regard preschool as essential preparation for school. However, these papers do reflect the strong belief that preschool education helps children in make a positive start to school and that more adequate provision of preschool education and greater access to preschool would be beneficial to young children.

The nature of preschool provision (whether it be full-time or part-time), how it differs from other early childhood education provision (such as child care), and appropriate curriculum and pedagogy in preschool remain contentious issues. These issues give rise to the following questions about early learning and curriculum continuity.

Questions for the Early Years Learning and Curriculum Continuity Project

- What contextual factors impact on early childhood education in South Australia?
 - National factors?
 - State factors?
 - Community factors?
- What is the role and purpose of preschool education for children, families, communities?
- What are the expectations of the first year of school?
- What strategies can be used to achieve a balance between the needs of early intervention and prevention, preparing children for the future as well as focusing on children's rights to high quality education that supports and nurtures them in the present?

2 Views of children, childhood and children's learning

Stephen (2006) notes that “the kinds of educational experiences offered to children reflect the expectations held by society in general and practitioners and policy makers in particular about appropriate outcomes and goals” (p. 5). The expected outcomes are, in turn, derived from:

- ideas about children, childhood and learning
- socio-political perspectives on the purpose and outcomes of educational provision in the early years (Stephen, 2006, p. 5).

Different philosophies and approaches to children, childhood and learning are reflected in the many different forms of early childhood services and programs available for children and families. In Australia, as in other Western countries, we find tensions between different views of children, ranging from children as ‘innocent’ and in need of protection to images of children as competent people actively making sense of their world (Cannella, 1997; James & Prout, 1997; Lansdown, 2005; Tolfree & Woodhead, 1999).

Views of children have themselves changed over time, according to different cultural constructions of the role and place of children within particular communities and societies (Cannella, 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Community discourses about children and childhood influence pedagogical theory and practice. At times, competing discourses exist, for example in arguments that early childhood education should be characterised by both a distinct pedagogy and practice and clear connections with more formal education in schools (see for example, Aubrey, 2002). Different constructions of children, childhood and the role of early childhood education also impact on constructions of those who work with children in different settings (Moss, 1999). The most obvious example of this is the notion that educators in child care and preschool settings fulfil the role of ‘childminder’, while educators in schools are considered to be ‘teachers’.

Many perspectives exist of learning and knowledge and how these connect with education. Current perspectives, labelled behaviourist, cognitivist and situative/socio-cultural views, each bring their own expectations of what is important in learning and knowing, how this can be accessed through teaching and how learning can best be assessed (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1996).

Behaviourist views emphasise learning as a process of forming associations between stimuli and responses. The strengthening or weakening of connections occurs through various forms of reinforcement (McInerney & McInerney, 2006). Early childhood educators rely on behaviourist approaches in some of their everyday

interactions. These include offering some form of reinforcement, or positive response, for behaviour considered desirable, such as stickers, stamps or praise and positive attention. Taking away some of the desirable elements of the environment, such as using time-out strategies, or removing the toy children were fighting over, also relates to behaviourist principles (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2008).

Cognitivist perspectives of learning describe the changes that occur through learning as changes in an individual's ability to respond to, or understand, a particular situation (Woolfolk, 1993). These perspectives assume that people actively try to make sense of the world and that they do not just react unconsciously to the environment. According to cognitivist perspectives, people try to make sense of the environment, by attaching meaning to people, places and events. The result is that they engage in processes of decision making and problem solving. With growth and experience, children are described as developing more complex mental structures that enable them to process information and to extract meaning. This function develops over time and through experience, with children able to extract deeper and more complex meanings and understandings as they grow older and as their experiences broaden (McInerney & McInerney, 2006).

Ideas about children's learning have been strongly influenced by the work of Piaget and his colleagues (for example, Piaget, 1962; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). The influence of Piaget and his work remains strong in the early childhood field, largely epitomised by concepts of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This is despite some challenges by researchers working after Piaget (for example, Donaldson, 1978; Dunn, 1988). Stephen (2006) describes Piaget's work as leaving a legacy of "linear, progressive, construction of development through distinct stages" that "remains in the ways in which children are grouped, the emphasis on children engaging in active exploration, and the importance attached to the environment and resources as stimulation for learning" (p. 6).

Situative views of learning regard knowledge as "distributed among people and their environment, including objects, artefacts, tools, books and the communities of which they are a part" (BERA-SIG, 2003, p. 7). Rather than regarding learning as a process of internalising knowledge, Lave and Wenger (1991) situate learning as a social process of becoming a member of a sustained community of practice, such that an individual develops their identity as a member of a particular community. The contexts in which people are located are important, as these are the sites for expression of cultural practices and social interactions. Participating in communities is regarded as an important means of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 1998). Collaboration among peers, or peers and more experienced others, and working to a common purpose characterise models of situated learning.

The contexts in which children are located and learning have been the focus of approaches to learning drawing from socio-cultural theory, such as that of Vygotsky (1978) and Rogoff (2003). While the role of the adult was also important in Piagetian perspectives of children's learning, the importance of the adult is increased significantly in programs reflecting socio-cultural programs, where practices such as attaining intersubjectivity and scaffolding are regarded as critical to effective learning (Berk, 2001; Rogoff, 2003). The recent Effective Provision of Preschool Experiences (EPPE) (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004), and the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) reports particularly highlight the importance of adult interactions to promote learning.

A further theoretical perspective impacting on early childhood education comes from the field of neuroscience. The impact of early experiences is important for future neurological development: "the child's experiences in the early years of life are pivotal for how the genes that govern various aspects of neurobiological development are expressed" and "the child's capacity to learn when she enters school is strongly influenced by the neural wiring that takes place in the early years" (Shanker, 2007, p. 13).

With the greater prominence of research about the brain, there have been many questions about what early childhood educators can do to provide the 'right' sort of experiences to support and enhance development. Blakemore and Frith (2005) as well as Bowman et al. (2001) emphasise that it is not possible to draw simple connections between brain development and particular types of educational environments. MacNaughton (2004) adds the further caution that matching brain development to educational environment also assumes a simplistic and direct connection between what happens in an early childhood context and later life experiences, urging early childhood educators and researchers to be "wary of theories that offer simple roadmaps to certain destinations and ignore the complex, the unpredictable and the unknowable" (p. 100).

While it is possible, and indeed important, to conclude that "enriched, stimulating, early childhood environments" have a positive impact on children's learning, it is also important to note that "there is no biological necessity to rush and put the start of teaching earlier and earlier" (Blakemore & Frith, 2000, p. 2).

As with most explanations of complex phenomena, there is not a simple, best way of understanding learning, and no simple connection among learning, teaching and knowing. Contemporary perspectives of children's learning recognise the contributions of both behaviourist and cognitivist approaches to our understanding of how young children learn and how we can support and facilitate this learning. However, they are not limited to these perspectives. Contemporary perspectives reflect recognition that the social and cultural contexts of children, families and

communities contribute significantly to children's learning (Berk, 2001; Rogoff, 2003) and a greater appreciation of the variability of individual development and learning. There are efforts to understand early childhood settings and schools as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and to consider children in context, rather than as individuals existing in isolation (Rogoff, 2003). There is also recognition of the significance of children's neurological development and awareness that the nature of early childhood environments impacts on both what is learned and how it is learned.

Overall, there is awareness that approaches to learning and teaching are embedded within specific contexts. Effective pedagogy and appropriate curriculum also exist within these contexts.

Questions for the Early Years Learning and Curriculum Continuity Project

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How are children viewed in South Australia?• What are the prevailing views of young children?• How are these views reflected in policies and practices?• What do people believe about how children learn and how they can best support this?• What theoretical perspectives underpin these beliefs? |
|---|

3 Pedagogy and curriculum in early childhood education

Pedagogy is a contested term. Pedagogy as both a concept and practice has been located with the context of education in Europe for a considerable time. However, outside Europe, the notions of pedagogy and the pedagogue are less well known. It is only relatively recently that notions of pedagogy, the pedagogue and effective pedagogy have entered the Australian early childhood education lexicon.

Watkins and Mortimore (1999) note that an increased focus on pedagogy (at whatever level of education) reveals both the complexity of the concept and the importance of context. These researchers emphasise a model of pedagogy that incorporates elements of the teacher; classroom or other context; content, the view of learning and learning about learning, with the aim of drawing attention to “the creation of learning communities in which knowledge is actively co-constructed, and in which the focus of learning is sometimes learning itself” (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999, p. 8).

Throughout this review we adopt the definition of pedagogy used by Siraj-Blatchford, et al., (2002, p. 28) that:

Pedagogy refers to that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive processes between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and community).

Within early childhood education, curriculum emerges as another contested term. Many early childhood educators shy away from notions of curriculum as a specific content area (such as mathematics or science) and use the very broad notion that curriculum is all that happens across a day within an early childhood context (Arthur et al., 2008). Neither of these extremes encapsulates the importance of creating a planned learning environment that is responsive to the individuals within it.

Throughout this review, we adopt the following definition of curriculum, drawn from the work of Stephen (2006, p. 3):

Curriculum refers to a way of structuring learning experiences, an organised program of activities, opportunities and interactions that is usually derived from some explicit or implicit ideological or theoretical understanding about how children learn.

Clearly, curriculum and pedagogy are closely linked. Stephen (2006) notes that pedagogy will be influenced by the beliefs about learning that underpin curriculum. In turn, curriculum will be influenced by pedagogy.

Questions for the Early Years Learning and Curriculum Continuity Project

- How do early childhood educators define pedagogy?
- What are considered essential elements of early childhood pedagogy?
- What accountability requirements impact on early childhood pedagogy?

What is effective pedagogy?

Early childhood, defined as the period from birth to age eight, is a time of rapid and extensive change in all areas of development and learning. Hence, it is not surprising that there is no one best or most effective pedagogy that covers this entire period. Within early childhood, there is often reference to 'under threes', 'preschoolers' and 'children in the early years of school'. Effective pedagogy tends to refer to each of these groups. Yet again, however, there is no consistent agreement that one particular pedagogy is the most appropriate for all children in all contexts. Despite this, some general recommendations have been made, in reference to children of different ages. For example, in 1999, the UK Department for Education and Employment recommended that the first five years of life should be considered a time when education and care were indistinguishable and when the involvement of families was critical to effective education. Further, this department stressed the importance of pedagogy based on informal teaching during these years, with a gradual move to more formal educational approaches by the end of the first year at school (BERA-SIG, 2003).

Prior-to-school years

In their review of curriculum guidance offered in 20 countries, Bertram and Pascal (2002) highlighted the general lack of curriculum guidelines for children in the birth to age three grouping. They also noted that, across the countries reviewed, a number of common elements were identified in the curriculum guidelines for children aged three to five years. These included:

- focus on holistic curriculum – where curriculum areas were not specifically identified as framing the curriculum
- consensus that the areas to be covered in early childhood curriculum should include social and emotional, cultural, aesthetic and creative; physical, environmental; language and literacy; and numeracy
- curriculum based on children's active engagement, particularly through play
- focus on guiding and facilitating children's learning, rather than explicit teaching or direction

- emphasis on the importance of working with parents
- awareness that there was often discontinuity between curriculum in the years before school and the first year of school.

These elements are evident to varying extents in a wide range of pedagogical approaches used in prior-to school settings.

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP)

DAP draws heavily on Piagetian theory in its promotion of children's engagement in active, self-initiated activities, supported by responsive adults. Play is regarded as one of the major vehicles for promoting learning. The design of the environment, based on the observed interests, needs and strengths of children, also contributes to children's learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Experiential education

This approach identifies two key dimensions as necessary for high quality early childhood education: emotional wellbeing and involvement (Laevers, 1994; 2000; 2003). Emotional wellbeing is evident when children's physical and emotional needs are met – for example, when children feel a sense of belonging, security and recognition. The dimension of involvement is characterised by sustained concentration, intrinsic motivation and supporting children to work in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

High/Scope curriculum

Originating as a targeted early intervention program for children and families described as disadvantaged, this program also draws heavily on Piagetian theory (Schweinhart et al., 2005). High/Scope programs emphasise pedagogy that enables children to engage with a series of key experiences across the areas of creative representation; language and literacy; initiative and social relations; movement and music; and logical reasoning. Throughout the High/Scope program, children plan their activities, engage in these and then reflect on this engagement. This is referred to as the "plan-do-review" structure. The role of the adult in High/Scope programs encompasses engaging in positive interactions and authentic dialogue with children, promoting children's involvement in planning and reflection.

Reggio Emilia

This approach emphasises the role of children as competent agents in their own learning. Children's active engagement with people and resources is seen as the basis for their development of understandings and relationships which link people, ideas and the environment (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). The pedagogy underpinning the Reggio Emilia approach is characterised by emphasis on multiple forms of expression as a means of seeking and articulating understanding (the many languages of children); adults who guide, listen to and provoke children's

engagement in collaborative experiences; and detailed documentation of children's engagement in experiences (Stephen, 2006).

Te Whāriki

This national early childhood curriculum for New Zealand draws on socio-cultural theory, emphasising the many different social contexts in which children live and the social, interactive nature of learning (Carr & May, 1994; Ministry of Education, 1996). Te Whāriki is based on a view of children as competent learners and communicators. Te Whāriki outlines a holistic curriculum based on the principles of:

- empowerment
- holistic development
- family and community
- relationships.

Essential areas of learning and development encompass the five strands of wellbeing; belonging; contribution; communication and exploration. Goals located within each of these strands emphasise ways in which educators can support children, rather than describing specific curriculum content or skills to be learnt.

What do we know about effective pedagogy in the prior-to-school years?

Despite the wide range of programs in the prior-to-school years, there is little evidence to indicate that one particular approach is more effective than others (Stephen, 2006). Certainly, the reports of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project indicate long-term positive effects for those children involved (Schweinhart, Weikart, & Lerner, 1986; Schweinhart et al., 2005), yet this program was specifically targeted at children living in poverty and described as having a high risk of school failure (Schweinhart et al., 2005). There is also some evidence from New Zealand, through the Competent Children Project (Wylie, 2001), which indicates a continuing effect of quality early childhood education at age 10. Cautious interpretation of these outcomes is based on the limited sample, which was not representative of Maori or Pasifika early childhood services (Anning, Cullen, & Flear, 2004). Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell (2006) note that there have been several studies investigating the effects of direct instruction in the prior to-school years. Such studies do report short-term gains for children immersed in this pedagogy, but these gains tend to be short-lived and may well be associated with greater emotional difficulties for children later in life (Schweinhart et al., 1986; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). The evidence that does exist about the effect of early childhood education in the prior-to-school years indicates that the impact of such provision is largely determined by the quality of educational provision and the learning opportunities available for children (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 2002, 2005).

Three major studies of pedagogy in the early years have recently been completed in the UK. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al.,

2004) and the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), have investigated the attainment and development of 3000 children aged three to seven years as they progressed through preschool services and into the early years of school. The Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) (Moyle, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002) investigated the beliefs and practices of effective teachers. Results from these studies shed light on effective pedagogy across the early years.

The EPPE and REPEY projects led to the conclusions that the most effective prior-to-school settings and early school years settings (in terms of intellectual, social and dispositional outcomes) promoted a balance of teacher-initiated group work with freely chosen, yet potentially instructive play activities; promoted sustained shared thinking; and adopted social and behaviour policies that involved staff supporting children in rationalising and talking through conflicts (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). The same studies indicated that there was a significant relationship between higher quality early childhood services and intellectual and social outcomes. In particular, quality outcomes were influenced by:

- the nature of staff interactions with children – warm and responsive interactions resulted in better outcomes
- staff qualifications – with higher qualified staff linked to greater quality of service provision
- the nature of experiences offered in the program – with provision for numeracy, literacy and science experiences, alongside catering for diversity, linked to higher quality outcomes (Sylva et al., 2004).

Several characteristics of effective pedagogy were identified across both projects. Importantly, no one effective pedagogy was identified. Rather, it was concluded that:

the effective pedagogue orchestrates learning by making interventions (scaffolding, discussing, monitoring, allocating tasks) which are sensitive to the curriculum concept or skill being 'taught', taking into account the child's 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978), or at least that assumed in the particular social grouping. (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, p. 720).

The early childhood settings described as effective reflected the following features:

- a balance of child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities;
- regard for play as a potentially instructive activity
- complementary focus on social and cognitive outcomes
- educators with a good understanding of curriculum areas and content
- a strong focus on educators planning and initiating group work
- educators providing feedback to learners

- educators drawing on a repertoire of pedagogical practices as appropriate
 - social and behaviour policies focused on conflict resolution.
- (Sylva et al., 2004).

One of the most striking findings from these projects relates to the importance of sustained shared thinking. This is a process whereby educators and children are mutually involved in cognitive construction as “each party engages with the understanding of the other and learning is achieved through a process of reflexive co-construction” (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, p. 720).

In early childhood settings with quality educational outcomes for children, the EPPE and REPEY projects identified the importance of achieving a balance between *pedagogical interactions* (specific behaviours on the part of adults) and *pedagogical framing* (the behind-the-scenes aspects of pedagogy which include planning, resources, and establishment of routines). Achieving this balance required more than setting up an interesting environment to promote children’s play. Going beyond this to engage children in activities that provided cognitive challenge was essential. This involved identifying “critical moments” where there was potential to “lift the level of thinking” required of children through practitioner use of scaffolding, thematic conversation or instruction (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, p. 723). Despite the importance of this engagement with children, it was reported to occur relatively infrequently, even in excellent services. Recent work in South Australia reflects the importance of achieving a balance between professional interactions and professional framing (Harley, 2007; Harley, Perry, & Dockett, in press; Perry, Dockett, & Harley, 2007).

In summarising the findings of the REPEY project, the researchers note:

We have argued that effective pedagogy in the early years is an essentially ‘instructive’ practice that involves both the kind of interaction traditionally associated with the term teaching, and also includes the provision of instructive learning environments and routines. We argue that where young children have freely chosen to play within an instructive learning environment, adult interventions may be especially effective. However, we have also noted that these interactions rarely occur in practice. We have also argued that any heavy emphasis upon direct teaching and programmed instruction should be avoided in the early years. (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 40).

Results from the SPEEL project (Moyles et al., 2002) indicate that effective pedagogy in the early years is complex and multi-faceted, moving well beyond the application of specific knowledge and skills. Effective pedagogy in the early years is described as:

- practice-based
 - dependent on reflective pedagogical perceptions
 - informed by consciously articulated principles and philosophy.
- (Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove 2006, p. 310)

One of the major outcomes of the SPEEL project was a Framework of Effective Pedagogy which identified 129 key statements under three headings:

- Practice – learning context, interactions and planning
- Professionalism – knowledge, thinking and qualities
- Principles – entitlements, teaching and learning, roles.

Effective practitioners call on a range of pedagogical techniques from across this framework. In relation to practice, this framework emphasises the importance of relationships between adults and children. Positive relationships, based on the skilled interactions of educators, underpin effective pedagogy. To be effective, adult-child interactions need to be sustained and accompanied by feedback (Gipps, McCallum & Hargreaves, 2000), as indicated in the EPPE and REPEY reports. The practice of pedagogy also includes the cycle of planning, evaluation and assessment in appropriate ways.

The professional dimension of effective pedagogy requires educators to engage in informed thinking about their practice and the ability to critically question, deconstruct and reason (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Within this dimension, professional thinking is defined as “the conscious processes of interpretation and reflection and their application to practice” (Moyles et al., 2002, p. 120).

Pedagogical knowledge is itself complex, incorporating knowledge of children’s learning, classroom management and organisation, curriculum knowledge and appropriate use of resources, pedagogical content knowledge that informs teaching, specific knowledge about learners, their interests and prior learning, knowledge of educational contexts as well as knowledge of the aims and purposes of education (Shulman, 1999). Effective educators need the time, opportunities and skills to access and reflect upon pedagogical knowledge. Any change in pedagogy will require a great deal of reflection on current practice as well as willingness to explore new ideas and approaches.

The principles underpinning effective pedagogy are linked to the beliefs and expectations of educators: “Effective pedagogy is based on informed knowledge and theories of early childhood development, education and care, including management and organisational factors” (Moyles et al., 2002, p. 119). Further: “the key to effective pedagogy is the ways in which principles are established and the ways that theories of children’s learning and development are applied to practice, informed by values, beliefs and understandings” (Moyles et al., 2002, p. 120).

The SPEEL report (Moyles et al., 2002) highlighted the finding that early childhood educators were much more comfortable describing what they did (their practice) than they were describing what guided their own interactions. This inability to engage in discussion about pedagogy is regarded as a constraint to promoting effective

pedagogy. To engage educators in discussion about their own beliefs and purposes about pedagogy, a great deal of reflective dialogue was required. Reflecting on their pedagogy enabled educators to identify the following:

- Early childhood pedagogy is complex – because of this, measures of ‘effectiveness’ have to focus broadly on pedagogy as a whole, rather than any one particular aspect.
- The complexity of effective pedagogy can be surprising to educators.
- The language of pedagogy and teaching is not clearly used or understood by early childhood educators.
- Effective pedagogical practices depend on a management and organisation ethos that supports reflection and facilitates change.
- Articulation of, and reflection about practice, are important in improving pedagogy and pedagogical skills among educators.

Across all three UK studies, the importance of sustained positive interactions between children and adults has been emphasised. Particular questions have been raised about the role and place of play within effective pedagogy, particularly play in which there is little adult engagement.

Questions for the Early Years Learning and Curriculum Continuity Project

- How is effective pedagogy defined?
- How do educators know if they are effective pedagogues?
- What opportunities and supports do educators have to reflect on pedagogy?
- How do management structures support pedagogical reflection and change?

Effective pedagogy in the first year of school

Both the EPPE and the REPEY studies investigated pedagogical effectiveness for children up to age eight years. Hence, many of the findings reported from these studies have direct application for effective pedagogy in the first year of school. However, the first year of school presents a specific range of contexts and expectations that also set it apart from other early childhood contexts.

The first year of school is an important time of transition for children, families, communities and educators. In many instances, the first year of school is seen to provide a ‘bridge’ connecting children’s learning before school to the more formal learning context in schools. One characteristic of the more formal nature of school is the presence of a mandated curriculum, often with the first year of school considered an integral part.

As children move from prior-to-school settings into the first year of school, there is a trend to more formal curriculum and pedagogy. In the UK, this has been reported by Taylor Nelson Sofres (2002), who reviewed the implementation of the Foundation Stage in Reception classes in schools in England and Wales. In this context, teachers reported starting the first year of school with an integrated approach to curriculum, but by the end of this year had moved to greater curriculum differentiation. In addition, by the end of the year, teachers utilised more whole group instruction than they had at the beginning of the year. By the end of this first year of school, teachers had moved to implementing the requirements of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, including the literacy hour (BERA-SIG, 2003).

One impact of the national curriculum in England and Wales, according to Ball (1999), is a narrowing of curriculum and pedagogy with the purpose of maximising test scores. Similarly, Alexander (1999) has lamented that the national curriculum has resulted in prescriptive pedagogy across “every primary school, classroom, teacher and child” (p. 176). While Australia does not currently have a national curriculum, there is clearly agreement among the states and commonwealth for an approach that is described as working towards national consistency in curriculum. Implications of this approach for the first year of school are, as yet, unclear (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007).

Pedagogy and curriculum in the first year of school

In any given educational context, curriculum tends to be organised in ways that reflect the values of dominant power groups. The codification of knowledge into specific subject areas, with distinct boundaries, reflects this (Young, 1999). As well, assessment and reporting regimes reflect what is deemed to be ‘important’ knowledge in any given context. In Australia, as in many other nations, current curriculum organisation gives precedence to literacy, followed by numeracy and science. Despite overt recognition of the importance of areas such as the arts and physical health and wellbeing, the notional time allocations and reporting frameworks¹ suggested for these curriculum areas indicate their apparent ‘lesser’ value. A recent statement by the Australian Primary Principals Association (2007) reinforces this view.

Across each state and territory, the first year of compulsory school is considered an integral part of the relevant curriculum framework. For example, in the NSW K-10 Curriculum Framework (NSW Board of Studies, 2002), Kindergarten (the first year of school) is equated with Early Stage 1, with learning outcomes reflecting this as a separate phase of schooling. Within the SACSA Framework, the Early Years Band encompasses the phase of learning covered across the years Reception to Year 2

¹ As evident in the Curriculum Framework documents available on relevant websites for each state or territory Department of Education, Curriculum Authority or Board of Studies.

(Department of Education, Training and Employment, South Australia, 2001). Examples from other states and territories are listed in Table 2.

While several of the Curriculum Frameworks across the states and territories recognise the significance of the early childhood years, including the first year of school, all place this year within the contexts of a continuum of learning throughout at least the compulsory school years. Where the first year of school is recognised as significantly different from later years of schooling (such as in NSW where Kindergarten is equated with a separate phase of learning and in Victoria where Level 1 generally equates with the end of the Prep Year), there is both mention of this time as different from other years (for example in noting the importance of play) and a sense of integrating this phase of learning within the broader frame of compulsory education.

A common feature of the curriculum frameworks across the compulsory years of school is the organisation according to curriculum areas. Sometimes called key learning areas, these areas include combinations of the following disciplines:

- English
- Languages
- Mathematics
- Physical Education and Health
- Science
- Studies of Society and Environment
- Technology
- The Arts.

To varying degrees, each of the states and territories is committed to standards-based frameworks, identifying specific learning outcomes for each phase or level of the curriculum. These levels are designed both to map children's current and future learning, so promoting further planning, and as a means of assessing and reporting the progression of children through the various curricula. Children's progression through these levels can form the basis of accountability requirements for teachers and schools, as well as decisions about the effectiveness of pedagogy and curriculum.

The placement of the first year of school within a curriculum framework raises a series of questions. For example:

- Should the first year of school function as a unique learning environment that is different from the primary grades that follow, or is it to be located as the beginning of "a progressing, expanding, non-repeating curriculum of increasing

complexity, depth, and breadth” (Ardovino, Hollingsworth, & Ybarra, 2000, p. 91) as is currently the case in the US?

- What is the major purpose of the first year of school? Is it to support young children’s development across cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual domains? Or is the major purpose to master specific bodies of knowledge and skills that they will need in further educational experiences? Can it be a combination of these? (Goldstein, 2007).

Table 2. The first year of school within curriculum frameworks

State	First year of compulsory school	Curriculum framework	Phase of learning
NSW	Kindergarten	K-10 Curriculum Framework	Early Stage 1 (Kindergarten)
South Australia	Reception	SACSA	Early Years Band (birth to Year 2 comprising 3 phases: Birth-age 3 Age 3-5 Reception-Year 2
Western Australia	Year 1	Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten to Year 12	Early childhood phase – Kindergarten to Year 3
Victoria	Prep	Victorian Essential Learning Standards	First stage of learning: Years Prep to 4. Level 1: end of Prep Year
Tasmania	Prep	Essential Learnings Framework for children aged birth to 16.	Standard 1: to about age 4 Standard 2: about ages 5-7. About the end of Year 2. Each of the standards is divided into 3 levels: lower, middle and upper.
Queensland	Year 1	Years 1-10 Curriculum	Level 1 Level 2 – to the end of Year 3
ACT	Kindergarten	Essential Learning Achievements	Band 1: Early childhood – preschool to Year 2
Northern Territory	Transition	Northern Territory Curriculum Framework Transition to Year 10	Band 1 finishes approximately at the end of Year 2

Children’s progress at school varies considerably. Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar, and Plewis (1988) have reported two factors with major impacts on progress: teacher expectation and the range of learning experiences available for

children. More recent research on student progress during the first year of school (Tymms, Merrell, & Henderson, 2000) has noted that all children learn in the first year of school. Tymms (2002) notes that all children progress at school and that this progress

varies from pupil to pupil and also from school to school. Generally, the progress of one pupil is dominated by who they are and by who the teacher (school) is ... All pupils progress during their first year at school. Most progress rapidly and the teacher (school) is at the heart of this progress. (p. 37)

In other words, and in a replication of the findings of Tizard et al., (1988), how successfully children progress through the various levels and phases of learning is largely related to the individual teacher.

Questions for the Early Years Learning and Curriculum Continuity Project

- Is the first year of school recognised as a specific phase of education?
- How do we identify effective pedagogy in the first year of school?
- What kind of learning is promoted by the pedagogies and curriculum evident within the first year of school?
- How is effective first year of school pedagogy different from, or the same as, effective pedagogy in general?
- How does effective pedagogy in the first year of school build in prior learning and experiences, and link to future learning and experiences?
- What teacher qualities promote children's learning progress in the first year of school?

Some issues in effective early childhood pedagogy

Early childhood pedagogy and learning has long been characterised as different from the learning and pedagogy associated with later life. In particular, the attention to a range of areas of each child's development, a facilitative role for adults, the importance of working with families, an informal approach to assessment and a strong focus on play have all been features of early childhood pedagogy (Arthur et al., 2008; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Brosterman, 1997; Cuban, 1992; Weber, 1984). Several of these characteristics are now the subject of extensive debate.

Areas of development or subject-specific domains of learning?

The move to specific subject areas within the first year of school presents some tensions for early child educators. These revolve around how particular content can best be taught – in an integrated, theme or topic based approach, or using more differentiated curriculum (BERA-SIG, 2003). These two positions represent extreme ends of a continuum, with many points in between. Where there is a focus on teaching academic skills in the first year of school, and reporting these in specific

ways, educators report a number of challenges to their preferred, integrated modes of teaching (Geist & Baum, 2005; Goldstein, 2007). Conversely, where there is a focus only on developmental areas within early childhood pedagogy, there is the risk of providing little cognitive challenge (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004).

The role of play in early childhood pedagogy

The tendency for Reception classes in England and Wales to adopt more formal, 'primary school' pedagogy, rather than pedagogy more usually associated with that in prior-to-school settings (Adams, Alexander, Drummond, & Moyles, 2004), is reportedly due to the pressure felt by educators to elicit specific standards of performance from the children involved (Rogers & Evans, 2007). In such situations, there can be a trend to regard teaching in the areas of literacy and numeracy as more important than making provision for play (Fisher, 2000).

"Play is an almost hallowed concept for teachers of young children" (BERA-SIG, 2003, p. 13). However, recent research results, particularly from the EPPE (Sylva et al., 2004), REPEY (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) and SPEEL (Moyles et al., 2002) projects, have questioned both the quality of the play experiences in which young children engage and the learning outcomes associated with these.

Within the SPEEL project (Moyles et al., 2002), early childhood educators espoused beliefs about the importance of play in children's learning. However, these same educators indicated that children did not experience high levels or consistent cognitive challenge when engaged in free play within their own settings. This reflects reports by other researchers (for example, Bennett & Kell, 1989; Hutt, Tyler, Hutt, & Christopherson, 1989; Meadows & Cashdan, 1988) that play is not always characterised by high quality adult-child interactions or cognitive challenge. Plowman and Stephen (2007) summarise this view in their comment which "challenge[s] the widespread belief that free play is a sufficient condition for learning..." (p. 23).

The potential for play to have an integral part in children's learning has been described by Wood and Attfield (1996):

play acts as an integrating mechanism that enables children to draw on experiences, represent them in different ways, make connections, explore possibilities, and create sense and meaning. It integrates cognitive processes and skills that assist in learning. Some of these develop spontaneously, others have to be learnt consciously in order to make learning more efficient. (p. 153)

For this potential to be realised, Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) argue that educators need to adopt a much more proactive than reactive role. In keeping with socio-cultural and situated approaches to learning, this stance indicates that educators need to provide appropriate scaffolding and support as children are challenged to co-construct new knowledge, skills and understandings.

To support the place of play and learning within early childhood curriculum, educators need to:

- understand the ways in which play progresses and becomes more complex (Kelly-Byrne, 1989; Sutton-Smith, 1997)
- be explicit in their expectations about play and learning (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1997)
- make effective provision for play, including time, space and resources (Dockett & Fler, 1999)
- question their assumptions about children's competence in play contexts, recognising that many children will benefit from guidance and support, rather than a laissez-faire environment (BERA-SIG, 2003).

In their summary on play in the first year of school, the BERA-SIG (2003) note that "research evidence for the efficacy of play is mixed... Whilst play-based learning appears to hold much promise, implementing a play-based pedagogy continues to present numerous challenges to practitioners" (p. 16). Rather than abandoning play within early childhood pedagogy, these researchers call for a new pedagogy of play, characterised by planned and purposeful activity which:

should provide children with challenging and worthwhile activities. In addition to creating the appropriate conditions for learning, practitioners are encouraged to interact with children and provide a richly resourced learning environment. Children should be enabled to plan and develop their own activities, and have sustained periods of time to work in depth. (BERA-SIG, 2003, p. 16).

This revised conception of play links directly to the importance of adults engaging with children in effective early childhood pedagogy.

The role of adults in early childhood pedagogy

One of the major results of the EPPE (Sylva et al., 2004) project related to the importance of children's engagement with adults in sustained shared interactions. Through sustained shared interactions, children and educators engage in a shared process, often with the adult providing scaffolding to enable children to achieve knowledge, understandings or skills that would have been unattainable on their own. Such interactions characterised high quality educational contexts and were instrumental in generating children's learning outcomes.

Adults engaging with children in meaningful, responsive and challenging ways is a critical element of effective early childhood pedagogy. A second critical element relates to adults engaging with other adults in reflexive practice as they articulate, reflect upon, reconsider and reconceptualise their own pedagogical practice. One of the major findings of the SPEEL report (Moyle et al., 2002) was that early childhood educators had difficulty articulating their own pedagogical practice. Over time and as they engaged in reflective dialogue, this difficulty eased. However, this finding does

indicate that effective pedagogues are regularly engaged in reflection and re-evaluation of their own pedagogy.

The importance of reflective dialogue in early childhood pedagogy is reflected in the definition of pedagogy that was generated from the SPEEL report:

...both the behaviour of teaching and being able to talk about and reflect on teaching. Pedagogy encompasses both what practitioners DO and THINK and the principles, theories, perceptions and challenges that inform and shape it. It connects the relatively self-contained act of teaching and being an early years educator, with personal, cultural, and community values (including care), curriculum structures and external influences. Pedagogy in the early years operates from a shared frame of reference (a mutual learning encounter) between the practitioner, the young child and his/her family. (Moyles et al., 2006, p. 308)

Pursuing the theme that many early childhood educators are uncomfortable engaging in reflection, these researchers note that educators need sufficient time and space to engage in reflection, as well as management and organisational support to do so. For example, opportunities are needed to reflect on practitioners' constructs of effective pedagogy (Moyles & Adams, 2001; Neves & Morais, 2001).

Engaging educators in reflective practice can provide a powerful incentive for change. However, Penlington (2007) notes that not all dialogue and reflection among educators promotes the same level of change. Penlington (2007) advocates for dialogue among educators that focuses not only on teaching practice, but also on the reasoning behind different aspects of teaching practice: "the dialogue needs to be structured so that it encourages or even pushes teachers to examine the assumptions upon which their practice is predicated, and the effect of their practices upon students" (p. 12). Within these dialogues, the potential for discomfort and dissonance is acknowledged. Supportive management and organisational structures, as well as supportive colleagues, and a sense of collaboration and trust are critical if this process is to result in change. The importance of a supportive environment characterised by trust and respect cannot be overstated, as educators are emotionally and professionally vulnerable when considering their role and impact as an educator, because "their existing images of the professional self might be challenged, questioned, rethought and reshaped" (Dadds, 1995, p. 288).

Leadership

Leadership in the field of early childhood education remains somewhat ill-defined and contentious. Research has provided only partial clarity to the purpose and nature of leadership with limited direct evidence between linking leadership and improved pedagogical outcomes for children.

Over the past two decades increasing attention has focused on leadership in early childhood education. This has included:

- Jorde Bloom's (1992) exploration of the quality of work life in early childhood settings, indicating the value of training programs in promoting directors' abilities to create change in working environments and teaching staff
- Somers Hill, and Ragland (1995) study of professionals' insights, frustrations and future strategies in terms of leadership in education
- explorations of leadership in terms of advocacy, administration, community, conceptual and career development (Taba, Castle, Vermeer, Hanchett, Flores, & Caufield, 1999).

Australian work (Fraser, 2000) identified various aspects of leadership in early childhood education, noting a focus by practitioners on the practical tasks rather than conceptual or visionary work. Likewise, Waniganayake, Morda, and Kapsalakis (2000) reported a limited relationship between the positional role of director and leadership behaviour. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) focused on the relationship between leadership and the survival of early childhood services, and Rodd (2006), connected the notion of leadership to increasing quality of service provision for young children and families. However, Rodd (2006, p. 4) notes that "the fundamental question of what is meant by 'leadership' in the early childhood profession still has to be answered in a way that is meaningful and credible for practitioners", indicating a lack of clarity around leadership and its purpose within early childhood contexts.

Recently in England, considerable government funding has been provided to implement the early years professional development program – the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership. This program was developed to support head teachers as expectations of their roles changed, particularly in relation to managing more complex, integrated children's services. Evaluative reports indicate positive outcomes for participants, children and families through the participants' own experience of active engagement, experiential learning and knowledge construction which they then model and apply to their own early childhood settings.

In the school context there is greater definition of leadership and its connection to student outcomes. Levin (2006, p. 38) claims there "is wide consensus that opportunities for student learning depend crucially on educational leadership and teacher quality". Penlington and Kington (2007) have reported a case study component of the UK Research into the Impact of School Leadership on Pupil Outcomes project, noting that:

A key theme across all of the case study schools is the pivotal role played by the head teacher in setting and communicating a strategic vision for the school, establishing a school culture in which change and innovation are embraced, and in distributing leadership to other staff so as to build a collective responsibility and accountability for the effectiveness of the school in raising pupil outcomes. (p. 1)

Such links between leadership and educational outcomes are not made apparent to this extent in the prior-to-school field.

Various factors emerge which appear to contribute to the complexity around leadership in early childhood education. Hard (2006) asserts that the entwined nature of management and leadership activity in the prior-to-school field demands attention to managerial practicalities as well as conceptual demands of leadership. While it may not be possible or desirable to separate these two aspects it seems prudent to have an appreciation of what each involves and the value they provide to quality early childhood programs. Hard (2006) reports a small scale research project which explored how leadership is understood and enacted in the early childhood field. Issues from this study related to the isolation of services, limited leadership training, and a dearth of models and mentors – all of which served to constrain leadership enactment. Participants in this study defined leadership as ‘team-based’ but their conceptualisations of this form of leadership reflected limited correlation with what the management literature understands as group or team leadership. According to Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (2001), team leadership involves common and shared goals, and a vision to ensure the group does not “drift from day to day in survival mode” (p. 41). In contrast, early childhood personnel appeared to relate team-based work to non-hierarchical leadership, paying limited attention to the value or role of vision or clearly articulated and shared goals.

Aside from identifying limited vision in early childhood services, Hard (2006) also described a culture in which change and innovation were not embraced, to the extent that individuals who did not comply with the norms of the context were ostracised. Participants provided personal accounts of their own marginalisation as a result of trying different curriculum ideas and approaches. They recounted experiences for themselves and others where exercising leadership alienated them from the ‘team’ and was thus often avoided. This is not inconsistent with leadership literature in the school context.

Efforts to promote leadership and leadership capacity need to be underpinned by early childhood personnel who have, and demonstrate, a robust professional identity (Hard 2006). Without a strong professional identity, balancing the views of others with their own interpretation of self, the individual educator is liable to resort to behaviours such as horizontal violence (bullying) which are both personally and professionally damaging. These outcomes are just as likely to occur in school, as well as prior-to-school settings. It seems unlikely that leadership incorporating both vision and change orientation will occur successfully if such prevailing cultural norms persist in early childhood contexts. Consequently, improving pedagogical practices is less likely to be achieved in a culture with such constraints.

Assessment in early childhood pedagogy

This review has already noted the changing expectations and role of early childhood education. Emphases on the early years as an appropriate time for early intervention and as a time of preparing for the future demands of schooling combined with the development of accountability frameworks, lead to a renewed focus on assessment in early childhood education. In England, this focus is seen in national testing of all seven-year-olds, and in the statutory assessment of children at school entry (BERA-SIG, 2003). In the US, similar national high-stakes testing regimes, usually starting at Grade 3, are also accompanied by assessments of children's readiness for school (Niemeyer & Scott-Little, 2001). Several US states require the use of screening assessments prior to school entry (Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000), and the majority of states administer readiness tests before children start school (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). Children who are deemed 'not ready' often wait another year before starting school (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004).

In a climate of increasing calls for schools to be accountable for educational outcomes, it is not surprising that there is an accompanying focus on assessment. In some instances, this extends to assessment for school entry. However, Dockett and Perry (2007, p. 30) report several issues to consider in relation to the assessment of young children:

- young children's abilities are emerging, not fixed. Assessment at any one point may present a distorted view of capabilities (Bowman, et al., 2001)
- how and where should assessment be undertaken?
- what assessment procedures are to be used?
- what decisions are based on the assessment (e.g. School entry? Progression? Retention? Access to early intervention services? Programs for gifted children?).

In general, reliance on norm-referenced standardised tests is problematic in relation to young children (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2000). Many standardised assessments do not recognise that young children can demonstrate skills and abilities in many different ways, and are not particularly sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity (Bowman, et al., 2001; Meisels, 1999; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Clifford, 2003).

Possible purposes of assessment in the early years are explored by the BERA-SIG (2003), who describe three forms of assessment:

- informal assessments by educators, conducted as part of their professional practice and often not documented. These assessments call on the professional judgement of educators, and sometimes parents. There are rarely efforts to standardise these assessments, or to establish reliability or validity.
- diagnostic assessments conducted by educationalists, psychologists and psychiatrists. These may be conducted for the purposes of research, as part of evaluative practice, to provide specific guidance for teachers or to assist in clinical practice. These assessments are regarded as more objective, reporting

measures of reliability and validity. These assessments are generally constructed to assess some specific aspect of young children's development or learning, rather than a broad overview of the child.

- physical assessments conducted by doctors, paediatricians, health visitors or educators with the aim of identifying and remedying any potential learning difficulties.

These researchers identify a number of important questions around the use of assessment in the early years, including assessment on school entry. These include:

- Does the assessment cause harmful stress to the child and/or the teacher?
- Does assessment focus attention inappropriately on the easily measurable?
- Does assessment help teachers identify important issues?
- Are some children's lives enhanced because early assessment spotted something that was sorted out at a crucial early stage?
- Are some children's lives blighted due to unwarranted labelling? (BERA-SIG, 2003, p. 26).

Many educators utilise formative assessment to great effect in their everyday practice. Within early childhood pedagogies, some innovative forms of documentation, such as Learning Stories (Carr, 2001) and the Reggio Emilia approach (Rinaldi, 2006), have generated renewed interest and vigour in the area of formative assessment. However, accountability frameworks often emphasise summative, rather than formative assessment. Learning outcomes are often presented in terms of what children are expected to achieve or to demonstrate at the end of a particular year, stage, or phase of learning. One of the challenges of this focus is that:

summative assessments emphasise normative judgements and weightings that are usually predetermined by previous policy makers and educationalists. Thomas and Loxley (2001) argue that such assessments do not merely describe but also construct that which they set out to describe. (BERA-SIG, 2003, p. 26)

In other words, the presence of pre-determined learning outcomes sets up an expected 'normal' standard. By definition, children who are assessed as not meeting that standard are then characterised as "below average" and those who exceed these standards are described as "above average". This has particular significance for the placement of children with special education needs.

Effective pedagogy in the early years involves a range of appropriate assessment. Effective educators provide regular and realistic feedback to children, with the aim of providing cognitive challenge and facilitating progression in children's learning and development (Sylva et al., 2004).

Family engagement in early childhood pedagogy

Parent-teacher partnerships are one of the cornerstones of early childhood education (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). Yet, often in early childhood contexts, relationships between educators and families fall well below the requirements of partnerships

(Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; 2000). Despite this, effective pedagogy in the first year of school requires positive, reciprocal, trusting relationships between families and educators.

One of the key factors in children's overall school success has been identified as positive, ongoing family involvement (Epstein, 1996). Henderson and Mapp (2002) summarise their review of studies of family-school connections by noting a:

positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students of all ages. (p. 24)

Positive relationships between families and schools are more likely to develop in some contexts than others, notably where:

- family members have the time and expectation to engage with schools (Griffith & Smith, 2005)
- there are relatively few differences between the cultures of home and school (Laureau, 1987, 2003; Toomey, 1989)
- the environments and expectations of home and school are similar (Baker, Kessler-Sklar, Piotrkowski, & Parker, 1999; Morrison, Griffith & Alberts, 1997).

Dockett and Perry (2007) note that positive relationships are critically important in contexts where these conditions are not met, but may be more difficult to establish and maintain. Overcoming barriers to positive relationships depends greatly on educators recognising that schools can be intimidating and overwhelming places for some family members, and that reluctance to become actively involved in school, or to visit schools often, does not necessarily reflect family indifference.

Many forms of family participation have been identified (Epstein, 1996). Despite this, effective family engagement in schools tends to emphasise how families enact the goals of school. For example, Griffith and Smith (2005) describe the ways in which mothers, particularly middle-class mothers, enact the goals of school within home environments. Other families may well find it difficult to provide the school-like resources (such as books, drawing materials, access to libraries, museums) and expectations of these mothers. These families run the risk of being positioned as uninterested or unable to assist in their children's education. Barton, Drake, Perez, St Louis, and George (2004) describe this as a deficit model that positions parents inappropriately, rather than recognising that parents often draw on a range of resources, experiences and circumstances to position themselves. This model positions parents as 'others' in ways that constrain equitable parent-school relationships (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Lall, Campbell, & Gillborn, 2004).

Questions for the Early Years Learning and Curriculum Continuity Project

- How does pedagogy in the first year of school reflect a balance of focus on developmental areas and high levels of cognitive challenge?
- What is the role and function of play in the pedagogy of the first year of school?
- How can the value of play be retained, while at the same time recognising the need for play to involve sustained shared thinking and cognitive challenge?
- What strategies are used by educators to engage in shared sustained thinking with children?
- How is reflective dialogue among educators encouraged and supported?
- What does effective early childhood leadership look like?
- How can leadership development enhance reflective pedagogy and program quality for children, staff and families?
- What are the roles and purposes of assessment in the first year of school?
- What decisions are made on the basis of summative assessments?
- What innovative approaches to assessment are incorporated into first year of school pedagogies?
- What constitutes effective assessment?
- How are families engaged in first year of school pedagogies?
- What constraints are there to engaging families in pedagogy and how can these be overcome?

4 Transition to school

Defining transition to school

Transition can be conceptualised in many different ways. In some definitions the transition to school is related to time: “transition describes the period of time before, during and after a child’s move into primary school, either from home or from an early childhood program” (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2007, p. 2). In other definitions, transition is described in ecological terms: “an interlocking set of systems comprising home, nursery and school, through which children travel in their early years of education” (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007, p. 1).

Dockett and Perry (2007) draw on these definitions, as well as that of Rogoff, to describe transition as a “time when children change their role in their community’s structure” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 150). When considering the transition to school, this definition focuses on the ways in which children’s roles, identities, and expectations change. It is also a time of changes in the expectations of others, the patterns of interaction and the relationships around and including children. However, the transition to school involves changes for others as well: changes for parents as they become the parents of a school child; changes for educators as they start to build relationships and interactions with children and families; and changes for communities as children, families and schools seek access to resources and support.

Why is a positive transition to school important?

A positive start to school, including initial success across social and academic areas is a key factor in setting up cycles of achievement (Burrell & Bubb, 2000) and promoting children’s positive adjustment to school (Ghaye & Pascal, 1988). A range of research indicates the significance of a positive transition to school. For example:

- A positive start to school is linked to positive school trajectories, in both academic achievement and social competence (Alexander & Entwisle, 1998; Ramey & Campbell, 1991; Tizard et al., 1988).
- Children’s images of themselves as learners are influenced greatly by their school experiences (Hadley, Wilcox, & Rice, 1994). Their experiences of success, or otherwise, have a direct impact on their future success at school and on their own sense of self (Alexander & Entwisle, 1998).
- Children who experience academic and social difficulties in the early school years are likely to continue having problems throughout their school careers, and indeed, throughout their adult life (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1987).

Such difficulties may be evidenced by grade retention, a low self-esteem, disruptive behaviour or an overall attribution of failure.

Readiness

Much current research is directed to elements of children's readiness for school. However, alongside this there is also the recognition that the prime responsibility for preparing children to enter school rests with families and communities, not individual children. For example, a recent US report cited the equation that 'ready families + ready communities + ready services + ready schools = ready children' (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005, pp. 12-13) in their approach to developing a set of measurable indicators of school readiness.

Readiness means different things to different people. Definitions of readiness can be described in terms of age, or stage of development, a demonstrated set of skills, or relationships and interactions. Invariably, such definitions focus on children, despite the identified importance of other factors, such as the relationships involving children, families, schools and communities (National Education Goals Panel, 1998, 2000) and the importance of continuity in both curriculum and context (Sanders et al., 2005).

The working definition of readiness published by US National Education Goals Panel (1997) identified three components of school readiness:

- children's readiness for school (enabling them to participate in classroom and learning experiences)
- schools' readiness for children (schools responding to the children enrolled)
- family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness (promoting family and community environments that support learning).

Children's readiness for school

Five dimensions of children's readiness have been identified (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995):

- Physical wellbeing and motor development
- Social and emotional development
- Approaches to learning
- Language development
- Cognition and general knowledge.

A great deal of research attention has been devoted to investigating these areas (for example, Emig, Moore, & Scarupa, 2001; Halle, Zaff, Calkins, & Margie, 2000), sometimes with the aim of developing a list of desirable or essential skills. Defining the skills that all children require to make a positive start to school remains a challenge, often because different people have different views about what is required

(Dockett & Perry, 2007). Several other issues also confound discussions of children's readiness.

Age and readiness

There is much variation among children starting school. Some of this can be attributed to age. However, with recent moves away from stage theory and maturation theory in early childhood education, there is greater awareness that children's development is influenced by more than their age (Bowman et al., 2001). Accompanying this is the realisation that children's experiences have a major influence on their development, including their perceived readiness for school.

Some parents choose not to send their children to school as soon as they reach the eligible age, preferring to 'hold them out' of school until they are a year older and are perceived to have an educational and social advantage (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). In the US, delayed entry is more common for boys than girls; (Bellissimo, Sacks, & Mergendoller, 1995; Datar, 2006; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Marshall, 2003), and among families of higher, rather than lower, socio-economic backgrounds (Bellissimo et al., 1995). Anecdotal reports of delayed entry to school in Australia also focus on the same groups.

Delaying the entry of some children into the first year of school serves to widen the gap in age in any one class. Some educational implications of this practice include:

- escalation of the first year of school curriculum, as teachers teach to the older and more knowledgeable students: "the older children will tend to set the pace and establish the norms, whereas those who entered when eligible may appear to be behind" (Zill, Loomis, & West, 1997, p. 4)
- on the basis of increasing emphasis on children being deemed 'ready' for school, there are questions as to the role of early childhood services in preparing children for school (Dockett & Perry, 2001b). "The emphasis on school readiness has also led many parents and school administrators to expect that children possess basic academic skills (e.g. identifying sound-letter relationships and shapes) prior to kindergarten entrance" (Stipek, 2002, p. 8).

Assessing readiness

In a climate of increasing calls for schools to be accountable for educational outcomes, it is not surprising that there is an accompanying focus on assessment. In some instances, this extends to assessment for school entry.

Measures of readiness typically assess the skills of individual children (Niemeyer & Scott-Little, 2001). Criticisms of these measures include their assessment of isolated skills, lack of data related to the validity of the tests and the often inappropriate use of tests (Snow, 2006). In their meta-analysis of readiness assessments and their predictive power for school outcomes, La Paro and Pianta (2000) reported that readiness assessments provide limited information about academic and social

success in the first three years of school. Other factors – including what happens at school – account for the majority of variance after two to three years at school.

Social and emotional readiness

There continue to be calls to define and assess readiness in terms other than children's academic skills and abilities. One response has been to focus on social and emotional readiness. Positive social and emotional development are often couched in terms of relationships, with children's ability to engage in positive and supportive interactions underpinned by their ability to regulate their own behaviour and to understand the feelings and views of others (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd, Herald, & Kochel, 2006; Thompson, 2002).

Schools' readiness for children

Some definitions of readiness emphasise the interactive responsibility of the school and the community, so "readiness is considered to include the 'social, political, organisational, educational, and personal resources that support children's success at school entry' (Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000, p. 554). In this definition the focus is not only on the child, but also on what supports are available for the child.

Based on the notion that schools should be ready for children, as much as children are ready for school, the National Education Goals Panel (1997) outlined three sets of characteristics of ready schools (Shore, 1998). These have been summarised by Ackerman and Barnett (2005) as:

- Ready schools provide necessary supports for children. For example, they focus on transition programs, make links between prior-to-school services and schools, and adjust their educational approaches to respond to children. They have professional staff and environments conducive to learning and staff have positive expectations for all children.
- Ready schools have teaching and learning programs that support the professional development of teachers, recognise the importance of adjusting teaching styles to respond to children, and facilitate parent involvement.
- Ready schools are adaptable. They do not aim to have programs where 'one size fits all'. Rather, they adapt to find what works in individual circumstances. Schools take responsibility for each child's success. Schools have strong and articulate leadership and the ability to determine and access appropriate resources. Ready schools also recognise that children can benefit from support outside the school, including access to adequate health care and nutrition, and so promote collaborations among services and partnerships for learning.

Promoting continuity

A central feature of ready schools is a commitment to continuity. There are many ways in which schools can support continuity for children and families in the transition to school. These include promoting interaction and shared understanding among

educators in different settings, developing complementary curriculum and approaches to learning and teaching, as well as promoting respectful communication across prior-to-school and school settings (Bröstrom, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2003; Thomson, valentine, Patulny & Fisher, 2005; Timperley, McNaughton, Howie, & Robinson, 2003). Continuity of relationships and support can also be promoted, ensuring that the supports and resources available to children in prior-to-school settings can be maintained when children start school.

Continuity of curriculum presents a number of challenges when government departments responsible for the regulation of services are different for the prior-to-school and the school sector. Where the same government department has responsibility that crosses the sector, some significant efforts have been made to develop curriculum continuity (see for example, the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework developed by the Department of Education, Training and Employment, South Australia, 2001). Curriculum continuity is also promoted when educators in prior-to school and school settings collaborate.

Different curriculum frameworks across prior-to-school and school settings provide one possible barrier to curriculum continuity (Wood & Bennett, 1999). This is particularly the case when the language of curriculum pits 'child-centred' approaches against 'didactic' approaches and suggests that each approach can be tied to a particular setting (Dockett & Perry, 2004).

Often transition to school highlights discontinuities: physical discontinuities; social discontinuities; and philosophical discontinuities (Fabian, 2002). While it is important to recognise that discontinuity itself is not necessarily negative (indeed, children starting school expect and want school to be different from prior-to-school settings, (Dockett & Perry, 2007)), constant discontinuity may well have a negative impact on the transition to school.

Transition programs

Transition programs are identified as ways that schools can make connections with children, families and communities. What constitutes a transition program varies widely from school to school, state to state and even across countries. Transition programs can serve to connect the contexts in which children live (Dockett & Perry, 2006; 2007).

Family and community supports

The third area identified by the National Education Goals Panel (1997) as contributing to readiness related to family and community supports. These include:

Prior-to-school programs

Focusing on what happens in the prior-to-school years recognises that readiness is not something that suddenly emerges at around the time of starting school – rather it

develops as children participate in a range of different contexts and settings (Snow, 2006). Provision of high quality early childhood programs, that are accessible (culturally as well as geographically) and affordable does much to promote children's competence across academic and social domains (NICHD 2002, 2003; Sylva et al., 2004).

Family supports

Many family factors have been linked to children's readiness for school. These include family socio-economic status, maternal education, care-giving practices, and parenting attitudes (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002). In addition, the presence of family stressors has been negatively linked to children's readiness for school (Zill & West, 2001).

Community supports

Communities can provide a wide range of resources to families. These include the physical resources located within the community, such as schools, child care and health services, as well as a web of rich relationships that both buffer and support families (Fegan & Bowes, 2004; Kirk-Downey & Perry, 2006).

Community measures of readiness

As an alternative to focusing on readiness applied to individuals, Canadian researchers have developed a community measure of readiness. The EDI (Early Development Instrument) (Janus, 2003) is compiled through teacher assessments of children but reported at the community level in terms of how well communities are supporting children as they make the transition to school. An Australian adaptation of the model – the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) – is currently being trialled (Centre for Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2005). The aim is to develop an instrument that will allow communities to monitor what happens and to plan to change local resources, provision or supports to improve children's life chances.

What happens in the transition to school?

Australian states and territories have different approaches regarding the transition to school. Most school systems do not typically use pre-enrolment screening of children to determine school entry. However, many do incorporate assessment of children within that first year of school in a range of ways. Some states use developmental checklists (for example, Tasmania has used the Revised Kindergarten Development Check, (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2003)) and other states use assessment schedules tied to curriculum areas such as the Schedule for Early Numeracy Assessment (SENA) which forms part of the Count Me In Too mathematics program in NSW (Wright, Martland, & Stafford, 2000). Standardised testing is often reserved for children and their families seeking special placement, for example early intervention or specialist school placement, and for children who are

gifted. While the same cautions as noted earlier (Bowman, et al., 2001) apply, such testing can result in children gaining access to specialist support.

There is no common transition to school procedure across Australian states and territories. Essentially, school systems in each state determine priorities, but it is left to individual schools, or sometimes regions to determine the actual form of transition programs implemented. Very often, decisions about the nature of transition programs are based on the availability of resources – human, physical and financial.

Effective transition to school programs

While there is not a national approach to transition in Australia, it is clear that effective transition to school programs have the potential to help children—and their families and communities—feel comfortable, valued and successful in school. Dockett and Perry (2001a; 2001b; 2006; 2007) argue that effective transition to school programs:

- establish positive relationships between the children, parents and educators
- facilitate each child's development as a capable learner
- differentiate between 'orientation to school' and 'transition to school' programs
- draw upon dedicated funding and resources
- involve a range of stakeholders
- are well planned and effectively evaluated
- are flexible and responsive
- are based on mutual trust and respect
- rely on reciprocal communication among participants
- take into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community.

These Guidelines provide a clear link between research, policy and practice. In adopting these Guidelines, organisations commit to a view of transition as a process with multiple participants and multiple perspectives, rather than as a package to be delivered (Dockett & Perry, 2006).

Promoting positive transitions for Aboriginal children and families

There is much evidence of inequity of educational access, participation and outcomes for Aboriginal children in Australian schools (Adams, 1998; Cronin & Diezmann, 2002). Frigo and Adams (2002, p. 1) suggest that many of the issues described by MCEETYA (2001) emerge early in school-home connections and are perpetuated throughout school life:

In the early childhood years (0-8 years), Indigenous students are less likely to participate in preschooling than their non-Indigenous peers, they have higher rates of absenteeism beginning in primary school, and the early indications of their educational achievement, as measured by state-wide English literacy assessments, indicate that, as a group, they perform at a lower level compared to their non-Indigenous peers.

Starting school is an important time when children establish identities of themselves as learners within the context of school (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). This can be particularly important for Aboriginal children. Schools in which Aboriginal children are achieving tend to support Aboriginal culture and actively engage young Aboriginal children in learning. There is often a strong Aboriginal presence at the school – both in terms of students and staff. As well, strong links between the community and the school are evident, and seen as vital in promoting a smooth transition between home and school.

The importance of family involvement within Aboriginal communities in Canada has been recognised in several reports, culminating in the view that:

When valid and effective partnerships between the education community and Aboriginal communities are established, and when these partnerships enable and assist Aboriginal parents to have greater engagement with their children's education and greater involvement in schools, then Aboriginal students will experience improved success in schools. (Malatest, 2002, p. 5)

Canadian research suggests that there are several distinct barriers that impede communication and collaboration between Aboriginal families and schools. Barriers include the following issues.

Negative educational experiences of Aboriginal parents

Many Aboriginal adults have had negative experiences at school, and these experiences influence current perceptions and expectations. Consequences may include Aboriginal families feeling uncomfortable about volunteering to assist in class, or in helping with homework.

Barriers to communication

Miscommunication can result when there are differences in the preferred communication styles of people, when there are language differences and when communication uses jargon.

Lack of understanding by schools

Aboriginal parents reported a lack of understanding or empathy from schools related to the difficulties and challenges that were unique to Aboriginal families.

Cultural awareness

A lack of cultural awareness was linked to varying expectations of family involvement in schools, with Aboriginal families and schools having different views about what constituted successful engagement. There was a noted concern for Aboriginal families discussing their children with people they did not know or trust. Aboriginal families saw schools as having a view of a single Aboriginal culture, failing to

recognise the diversity of Aboriginal culture and experience. In addition, locally relevant resources and curriculum was often missing, or outdated.

Poverty and illness in Aboriginal families

Poverty has an impact on interactions with school when a lack of resources means that accessing transport to get to school is difficult, or when the cost of child care prohibits attendance at school functions. Chronic health problems also limit possible interactions with schools.

Lack of engagement strategies by schools

Aboriginal families report that some efforts to involve them in schools do not seem genuine – for example asking them to attend celebrations of Aboriginal culture when they have not been consulted about the celebrations or had input.

The intimidation factor

Parents can feel intimidated by the school environment and the people within it. Some families report racism in their dealings with school.

Negative nature of parental contact

Often, contact between schools and families related to discussing problems children were experiencing.

'Segregation' of Aboriginal students

A predominance of Aboriginal children in support classes or special programs was often regarded as a form of segregation: "While Aboriginal parents acknowledged that such supports were often necessary, it was also noted that such programs should not become a catch-all for Aboriginal students who may be experiencing difficulties in a traditional classroom setting". (Malatest, 2002, p. 14).

While these factors have been identified in a different cultural and political context, they resonate with issues identified in discussions of parent-school collaboration and communication within Australia. The same report (Malatest, 2002), noted that examples of best-practice strategies in schools to overcome these barriers included:

- engaging parents in the decision-making process – viewing parents as genuine partners in school activities and decision-making, particularly, but not only, in relation to Aboriginal curriculum.
- Communicating – using processes that build trust between schools and parents; multiple channels of communication; and providing opportunities for parents to meet in a social setting.
- thinking outside the [school] box – considering innovative ways of delivering programs and services.
- recognising and addressing barriers.
- recognising Aboriginal role models – having a visible Aboriginal presence in the school, including both school staff and families.

The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004), indicates that “one of the most effective ways to support Aboriginal children into the formal school setting is through transition programs which prepare children for Kindergarten” (p. 64). The following factors are identified in the report (p. 64) as underpinning successful transition programs:

- involvement of Aboriginal families and key Aboriginal groups in decision-making
- positive relationships and genuine collaboration between families, schools, early childhood services, key community groups and local service providers
- a learning community that promotes the sharing of information, cultural insights and expertise by all parties concerned with children’s transition to school
- a holistic approach to addressing the specific health, development and wellbeing needs of Aboriginal children in the context of strengthening the capacity of families and communities to meet those needs
- a dual focus on providing information and support for parents as well as quality early learning experiences for children.

The review noted the support for transition programs from Aboriginal families and communities, and identified a specific need to “develop strategies to support transition to school for all Aboriginal children, including children attending Aboriginal preschools, DET preschools, other early childhood services and particularly children who do not access any prior-to-school services” (p. 65).

Effective transition to school programs for Aboriginal children, families and communities draw on the Guidelines outlined previously (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Specifically, they have the following characteristics (Perry, Dockett, Simpson, & Mason, 2007, pp. 105-106):

1. High quality programs and experiences that:

- actively involve children and families
- utilise a range of strategies for involving and engaging positively with families and communities
- focus on the development of positive, respectful relationships among all involved
- facilitate the development of children’s skills, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy
- engage children and families in a meaningful, relevant and challenging curriculum, signalling to children and families the importance of high expectations
- are recognised as important to the whole school and involve the whole school
- promote a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school

- promote the general wellbeing of children and families.
2. Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation. Stakeholders include children, families, prior-to-school educators, community members as well as school staff. Involvement of stakeholders promotes transition programs as community based and responsive to the community.
 3. Specific focus on relationship building across and between different stakeholders:
 - families and school;
 - children and school;
 - communities and school;
 - educators in different settings;
 - children;
 - educators and families; and
 - other stakeholders as appropriate.
 4. Recognition of strengths that exist within the community.
 5. Recognition of the complexity of transition and ability to respond in flexible and meaningful ways.

Starting school is an important time in the lives of children. The following factors are significant in contributing to children's positive and successful experience in transition to school.

- Children who successfully adjust to school, who feel connected to school and who have positive relationships with the adults and other children at school, are likely to experience school success.
- Families who feel involved with, supported by and connected with the school are likely to support their children in ways that promote their engagement with school.
- Schools and other community agencies that work together not only support each other, but also support the children and families with whom they work.
- The resources put into making the transition to school a positive one, characterised by strong relationships between all involved, are minimal compared with the resources required to manage problems that emerge later and which may have their roots in ineffective transitions to school.

Questions for the Early Years Learning and Curriculum Continuity Project

- How is readiness for school defined?
- What policies and practices have schools developed to ensure that they are 'ready schools'?
- How are community perceptions of readiness incorporated into transition programs?
- What is the role and purpose of transition programs?
- How are these programs organised and by whom?
- How do transition programs support the development and maintenance of positive relationships between and among children, families, schools and communities?
- How are the Guidelines for Effective Transition to School enacted?
- What strategies are in place to support positive transitions for Aboriginal children, families and communities?
- How are Aboriginal children, families and communities engaged in positive transition and school practices?

5 Conclusions

The changing face of early childhood education: expectations of preschool and the early years of school

At all levels, there are changing expectations of early childhood education. At times, these expectations generate tensions for those developing, implementing and experiencing early childhood educational provision. Current expectations of early childhood education include:

- a context for children to engage with and explore their worlds, without pressure to engage in formal learning or instruction (Cuban, 1992; Seefeldt & Wasik, 2002)
- an economic imperative seen to be contributing to the future benefit of society by producing a competitive workforce (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005)
- an investment linked to future savings in terms of special education and rehabilitation services (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003; Dickens et al., 2006; Ludwig & Sawhill, 2006; Schweinhart et al., 2005)
- a service that enables parents to remain in the workforce, which in turn helps alleviate poverty and deprivation within families (Ball & Vincent, 2005)
- a site for preparing children for later stages of education (Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Moss & Petrie, 2002).

These different expectations reflect the social, political and economic contexts of particular countries, communities and organisations. They also impact on the nature of early childhood education provided and the nature of experiences regarded as important for young children.

Views of children, childhood and children's learning

Different philosophies and approaches to children, childhood and learning are reflected in the many different forms of early childhood services and programs available for children and families. Views of children have themselves changed over time, according to different cultural constructions of the role and place of children within particular communities and societies (Cannella, 1997; James et al., 1998). Community discourses about children and childhood influence pedagogical theory and practice.

Different perspectives of learning carry different expectations of what is important in learning and knowing, how this can be accessed through teaching and how learning

can best be assessed (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1996). Current perspectives of children's learning include:

- behaviourist views, which emphasise learning as a process of forming associations between stimuli and responses
- cognitivist perspectives, which describe changes that occur through learning as changes in an individual's ability to respond to, or understand, a particular situation
- situative/socio-cultural views of learning, which focus on learning as a process of participation
- neurophysiological perspectives, which emphasise the importance of early experiences for later learning.

Contemporary approaches to learning incorporate elements of each of these theoretical approaches. Approaches to learning and teaching are embedded within specific contexts. Effective pedagogy and appropriate curriculum take cognizance of these contexts.

Pedagogy and curriculum in early childhood education

Pedagogy is defined broadly in this review as a concept that encompasses interactions, the learning environment and engagement with family and community. Curriculum is also defined in broad terms, to include both planned and spontaneous interactions that are underpinned by a set of theoretical perspectives.

Despite the wide range of programs in the prior-to-school years, there is little evidence to indicate that one particular approach is more effective than others (Stephen, 2006). In the prior-to-school years, Bertram and Pascal's (2002) review of curriculum for three to five-year-olds across 20 countries identified the following common elements:

- focus on holistic curriculum, where curriculum areas were not specifically identified as framing the curriculum
- consensus that the areas to be covered in early childhood curriculum should include social and emotional, cultural, aesthetic and creative; physical, environmental; language and literacy; and numeracy
- curriculum based on children's active engagement, particularly through play
- focus on guiding and facilitating children's learning, rather than explicit teaching or direction
- emphasis on the importance of working with parents
- awareness that there was often discontinuity between curriculum in the years before school and the first year of school.

Evidence of effective pedagogy in the early years supports the following conclusions.

1. High quality learning outcomes in the early years are influenced by:

- the nature of staff interactions with children – warm and responsive interactions resulted in better outcomes;
- staff qualifications – with higher qualified staff linked to greater quality of service provision
- the nature of experiences offered in the program – with provision for numeracy, literacy and science experiences, alongside catering for diversity, linked to higher quality outcomes (Sylva et al., 2004).

2. Effective early childhood settings were characterised by the pedagogical approaches that:

- provided a balance of child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities
- regarded play as a potentially instructive activity
- demonstrated a complementary focus on social and cognitive outcomes
- required educators to have a good understanding of curriculum areas and content
- had a strong focus on educators planning and initiating group work
- involved educators providing feedback to learners
- expected educators to draw on a repertoire of pedagogical practices as appropriate
- implemented social and behaviour policies focused on conflict resolution.
(Sylva et al., 2004).

3. Effective early years pedagogy is:

- practice-based
- dependent on reflective pedagogical perceptions
- informed by consciously articulated principles and philosophy.
(Moyles et al., 2006)

4. Early childhood educators tended to be more comfortable describing what they do (their practice) than they were describing what guided their own interactions. This inability to engage in discussion about pedagogy is regarded as a constraint to promoting effective pedagogy (Moyles et al., 2002).

5. As children move from prior-to-school settings into the first year of school, there is a trend to more formal curriculum and pedagogy.

6. Across Australia, the first year of compulsory school is considered an integral part of the relevant curriculum framework. While several of the curriculum frameworks recognise the significance of the early childhood years, including the first year of school, all place this year within the contexts of a continuum of learning throughout at least the compulsory school years.

7. Children's progress at school varies considerably. All children learn in the first year of school (Tymms et al., 2000) and much of that learning is attributable to the individual teacher (Tymms, 2002).

The following pedagogical issues are the focus of debate in early childhood education:

- Should early childhood pedagogy focus on areas of development or subject-specific domains of learning, or both?
- What is the role of play in early childhood pedagogy?
- What is the role of adults in early childhood pedagogy?
- What is the role and place of assessment in early childhood pedagogy?
- How does effective early childhood pedagogy promote family engagement?

Transition to school

A positive start to school is a key factor in promoting children's positive adjustment to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

Much current research around transition to school is directed to elements of children's readiness for school. The working definition of readiness published by US National Education Goals Panel (1997) identified three components of school readiness:

- children's readiness for school (enabling them to participate in classroom and learning experiences)
- schools' readiness for children (schools responding to the children enrolled)
- family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness (promoting family and community environments that support learning).

Australian states and territories have different approaches regarding the transition to school. Essentially, school systems in each state determine priorities, but it is left to individual schools, or sometimes regions to determine the actual form of transition programs implemented. Dockett and Perry (2001a; 2001b; 2006; 2007) argue that effective transition to school programs:

- establish positive relationships between the children, parents and educators

- facilitate each child's development as a capable learner
- differentiate between 'orientation to school' and 'transition to school' programs
- draw upon dedicated funding and resources
- involve a range of stakeholders
- are well planned and effectively evaluated
- are flexible and responsive
- are based on mutual trust and respect
- rely on reciprocal communication among participants
- take into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community.

In adopting these Guidelines, organisations commit to a view of transition as a process with multiple participants and multiple perspectives, rather than as a package to be delivered (Dockett & Perry, 2006).

Starting school is an important time when children establish identities of themselves as learners within the context of school (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). This can be particularly important for Aboriginal children.

Effective transition to school programs for Aboriginal children, families and communities draw on the Guidelines outlined previously (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Specifically, they have the following characteristics (Perry et al., 2007, pp. 105-106):

1. High quality programs and experiences that:

- actively involve children and families
- utilise a range of strategies for involving and engaging positively with families and communities
- focus on the development of positive, respectful relationships among all involved
- facilitate the development of children's skills, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy
- engage children and families in a meaningful, relevant and challenging curriculum, signalling to children and families the importance of high expectations
- are recognised as important to the whole school and involve the whole school
- promote a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school
- promote the general wellbeing of children and families.

2. Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation. Stakeholders include children, families,

prior-to-school educators, community members as well as school staff. Involvement of stakeholders promotes transition programs as community based and responsive to the community.

3. Specific focus on relationship building across and between different stakeholders:

- families and school
- children and school
- communities and school
- educators in different settings
- children
- educators and families
- other stakeholders as appropriate.

4. Recognition of strengths that exist within the community.

5. Recognition of the complexity of transition and ability to respond in flexible and meaningful ways.

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