



## Lifting literacy Community Consultation – Have Your Say

### Response from Early Childhood Australia – Tasmania Branch

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) has been a voice for young children since 1938. We are a peak organisation acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the field of early education and care.

ECA advocates to ensure quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years of age.

With branches in every state and territory, our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning.

ECA Tasmania Branch (ECA Tas.) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation to develop a community-wide framework to improve literacy in Tasmania.

ECA Tas. offers the following response to questions and issues affecting young children and literacy.

#### Introduction

There is widespread agreement that the first three-to-five years of a child's life is the period of most rapid brain growth and that experiences in that phase have lasting effects on wellbeing, learning and behaviour (OECD, 2007). The most intensive period for speech and language development is (also) during the first three years of life.

Investment in these early years pays dividends in social and economic outcomes in the long term.

#### Key themes in this response

##### **The significant role of parents has implications for investment in and coordination of programs and services**

As noted in the Panel's paper, parents and other caregivers play a vital role in supporting young children's overall development and setting them on the path to literacy success. As respondents suggest, not all parents have the time, resources, confidence, knowledge or skill to offer this vital support. New forms of family support and greater collaboration between existing agencies and programs would be beneficial.

##### **Focus on the whole child implies joined up support across agencies**

ECA Tas. espouses a holistic view of the young child, noting that a child's health, appropriate development across all spheres and general wellbeing impact on their capacity to engage with, and to succeed in, literacy learning. This raises issues about early assessment, diagnosis, referral and intervention for children experiencing difficulties. The current 'silo'

mode of operation by various child and family support agencies minimises their potential to effectively address early learning and development problems.

### **A rich view of the literacy learner**

ECA Tas. agrees with other respondents that oral language is a particularly vital element in young children's acquisition of literacy skills. 'In fact, in the years before school, the development of oral language is an important indicator for early reading success' (Hill, 2009).

Contemporary research also emphasises that a child's personal skills, self-regulation, confidence and motivation are just as important as specific knowledge and skill sets for literacy success. Educators working with children in the years before school and over the transition to school do not necessarily have currency of knowledge and skill required to take these factors into account when implementing programs for each child's literacy learning.

### **Educator knowledge and skill**

ECA Tas. firmly holds the view, espoused in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (2009), that for young children, a developmentally and culturally appropriate approach to literacy education emphasises adult-child interactions and play-based literacy environments. This highlights the need for early childhood educators to have high level knowledge and skill so that they employ proven pedagogical practices to support each child to succeed in literacy learning.

### **Access and equity issues**

ECA Tas. is very aware that there are significant issues of equity and access to quality early learning environments and services across Tasmania. Effective strategies to support young children in their literacy learning will need to address these issues.

### **Gaps and opportunities**

#### **Access issues**

In Tasmania, there are 23, 850 children currently accessing education and care services – 13,080 in Long Day Care, 3,310 in Family Day Care and 9,030 in Outside School Hours care (before, afterschool and vacation care). This data refers to March 2020 and does not include Home Care or Occasional Care. It is widely recognised that experience in high quality early learning environments greatly enhances children's growth and development and current and future learning. However, the cost of education and care can be prohibitive for vulnerable families. Federal Government policy for the Education and Care Subsidy stipulates that to access funding to reduce the cost of (means tested) education and care, families must meet an activity test. This test determines the number of hours of subsidised care a family can obtain for a child per fortnight. Approved 'activity' by the parents includes paid work, study, training, actively seeking work, volunteering etc.

ECA Tas. believes that all children are entitled to access subsidised early education and care regardless of their family circumstances. The focus should be on the child and increased access to quality care would support the aim of lifting literacy in Tasmania.

### **Issues relating to programs and services designed to support families and young children**

Some existing services could be amended, extended and/or enriched to enhance their capacity to support families in early literacy. For example:

- Child Health and Parenting services could add a 'literacy component' to their interactions with families in the first years of a child's life. Staff knowledge about early literacy could be increased and literacy-focused resources – not just books, but toys, puppets, simple recipes etc., – could be promoted and demonstrated through Child Health centres.
- Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) could add role modelling adult-child literacy interactions to their current diagnosis and referral work.
- Launching into Learning staff could reach out to vulnerable families in homes and community centres by taking literacy resources and activities to those sites.
- Not all communities have a Child and Family Centre. Instead of building more centres, the resources could be used to reach out to families that are hard to engage, particularly in rural and remote locations. Staff employed in such outreach programs and those in existing centres could work more closely in collaboration with education and care services as partners in the family literacy support mission.
- Kindergarten teachers in schools could be released for half a day per week to undertake literacy-focused home visits and to liaise with local agencies working with families.
- Some schools in Tasmania currently operate 'Story Island' programs using volunteer tutors (many are ex-teachers). These programs could receive greater resourcing, volunteer knowledge could be upgraded, and the impact could be audited to inform future initiatives.
- Working Together is a vital program for three-year-olds, but the focus is inevitably on behaviour support. The work could be extended into ongoing assessment and support for the child and family through the transition into school. With additional resourcing, Working Together educators could broaden their focus to encompass other domains of development and learning including early literacy. Many families attending Working Together do not have high levels of literacy so they would need support to enable literacy at home to occur. A program based on Guided Play Group models employed in other states could be developed. The subsequent enhanced parent-child interactions would be likely to mitigate some behavioural problems.

### **Issues relating to educator time, knowledge and skill**

- The early education and care sector (ECEC) has critical workforce shortages and retention issues which make building enduring relationships with, and providing consistent support for, families a challenge. Educators in the sector work long contact hours and non-contact time is barely sufficient for curriculum planning with no time for additional tasks such as family support. Families themselves are time poor, rushing to and from work, leaving little time for in-depth conversation with educators. It might be possible to develop a set of quality-assured concise literacy 'tip sheets' to be shared with families through existing information technology platforms. However, this would come a poor second to face-to-face conversation between educator and family.
- There is concern about the quality of some training at both tertiary and vocational levels not being as rigorous and robust as required for contemporary best practice.

- While ECA Tas. supports the principle of a diverse workforce, it recognises that educators for whom English is a second language require specific professional learning opportunities. Oral language and an understanding about how written English works are prerequisite to providing effective literacy support for young children, so the educator needs this knowledge to act as a role model and mentor.
- Access to affordable quality professional development for the ECEC sector generally is problematic. The Federal Government ceased funding professional development programs some years ago and costly commercial rates are now applied to services seeking to maintain and upgrade educator knowledge and skill. Any current professional development is consumed with mandatory compliance requirements – first aid, child safety, WHS etc.
- A funded professional development program would need to cover relief for educators and ideally be delivered on site in services to provide authentic mentoring and memorable, relevant information.

### **Issues relating to early diagnosis, referral and intervention for young children experiencing difficulties**

- There is currently a serious lack of specialists available to undertake diagnosis in vital areas such as speech, hearing, motor development, psychological difficulties such as ADHD, infant and juvenile stress and behaviour problems. There are long waitlists first for diagnosis, then for referral to the appropriate specialist, and early intervention programs are underfunded. The cost of specialist intervention for a child is beyond the reach of some families, including those most at risk.
- As well, there is a need for ongoing collaboration between educators, the specialist and the family to ensure consistent messaging and support for the child.
- As noted earlier, ECIS (Department of Education) function, which used to include working directly with a child with delays or difficulties, has altered, resulting in less direct intervention and support. Resources should be provided to enable a richer, broader support remit for the service.

### **Conclusion**

In this submission, ECA Tas. has drawn attention to some overarching issues that impact on early literacy and now offers some recommendations.

All children should have access to high quality early education and care irrespective of their family circumstances. Whatever initiatives are proposed to address issues related to child and family support should be inclusive and ‘joined up’. Much greater collaboration between all agencies and services working with young children and their families should be part of any strategy to improve literacy outcomes. Research into effective programs operating in other jurisdictions is probably part of the task of the panel. ECA Tas. notes that the not-for-profit *Raising Literacy Australia*, for example, offers promising strategies for supporting families with literacy.

Another platform for future improvement should be to fund a rigorous research project to map, evaluate and advise on existing programs and services.

### **Specific recommendations**

- Address quality issues in training for early childhood educators, including that provided by RTOs, ensuring that programs have a strong focus on early literacy and the role of the educator and are informed by contemporary research.

- Undertake an honest audit of existing child and family services to determine a) their overall effectiveness; and b) in what ways their work could be more focused on early language and literacy.
- Rigorously evaluate existing high investment programs – e.g., Child and Family Centres, LIL, LIFT, Working Together – to determine what is effective and what could be improved.
- Connect programs and services so that each knows what the other is doing, duplication is minimised, and a shared language and approach to working with young children and families is developed.
- Increase the number of early childhood development specialists and coordinate their work.
- Invest in professional learning for educators and provide additional time for them to interact with, model for and support families.
- Create partnerships between educators in ECEC services and early childhood teachers to provide synchronised outreach programs in support of vulnerable families.

ECA Tas. is available to clarify any matter contained in this response and willing to offer the organisation's expertise in early childhood to contribute to appropriate initiatives aimed at lifting literacy in Tasmania.

Contact: Ros Cornish, ECA Tas. Branch President

#### References

Commonwealth of Australia Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2009). *Belonging, being and becoming: The Early years Learning Framework for Australia*.

Hill, S, (2009) Oral language and beginning reading: Exploring connections and disconnections. *Forum on Public Policy*, 2009 (2).

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2007). *Understanding the brain: The birth of a learning science*.