



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN TASMANIA

New and closer links between early childhood education and care services are being developed in Tasmania.

Introduction

Preschool education, called kindergarten in Tasmania, is an integral part of the public primary school and is located within or attached to the school.

In 1998, regulatory responsibility for Child Care services moved to the Department of Education. This brought some aspects of provision for children younger than four years under the jurisdiction of the Education Department for the first time.

These structures have provided the opportunity to explore the development of new and closer links between early childhood education and car. services.

Early childhood review

An early childhood review was conducted in 1998, to address both curriculum and structural issues in proposing future directions for early childhood education.

The 1999 final report, prepared by Dr Glenda McNaughton, included recommendations for 'strengthened coordination and professional collaboration between early childhood practitioners in schools and children's services, forging stronger links with families in support of younger children's well being and learning and revitalising professional learning across the early childhood sector'.

A set of principles to guide curriculum development was strongly supported.

The report recommended a curriculum consultation to develop a birth to 8 years Curriculum Framework and supported

strategies such as local partnership groups and cluster-based action research.

The report recommended that a uniform school entry age be adopted, preferably with kindergarten entrance at four years old.

The review also recommended the capping of kindergarten and prep classes at 20 children and years 1 and 2 classes at 25 children.

Outcomes of the Review

In response to the Review, the Government has determined that the already existing entry age of four at 1 January which applied to government schools will now apply to all schools, both government and non-government, from 2002. The only exceptions are on the grounds of giftedness or prior school experience.

At the instigation of the AEU Tasmanian Branch, a Ministerial working party was set up to examine the research on early childhood class sizes and the benefits of smaller classes. It was determined that prep and year 1 classes would be capped at 25 beginning from 2003. Kindergarten classes are already capped at 23 when a teacher has one group and 25 when a teacher has two groups.

Arising out of the Review process, a number of strategies have been developed in order to foster cross-sector – childcare and kindergarten/school – collaboration and coordination.

Early Years Clusters have been developed and began operation in 2001. A lot of the coordination between childcare and preschool has been based on goodwill and clusters need resources to work.

Other system initiatives

The Department recognises that a more intensive approach is required to issues of cross-sector collaboration. A plan of action for the Early Years is being developed around three priority areas:

- Community Capacity Building;
- Revitalising professional learning;
- Leadership and Coordination.

There is an inter-agency working party with the Department of Health and Human Services, aimed at supporting parents in a more coordinated way. There is also an Education Department project on enhancing parent participation.

Curriculum consultation

The proposal to develop a curriculum framework arose from the Review, although the Review envisaged a new curriculum framework for the early years ie 0-8. A new framework has been developed.

Essential learnings is framed on personal, social, communicating, thinking and investigating the world. The aim is to be reporting within this framework by 2005.

Action research is needed from early childhood practitioners, who need to be supported by and work with university academics who are versed in early childhood education in order to develop a body of well designed, credible research which links theory and practice.

The framework of 0-16 for *Essential learnings* mainstreams early childhood education. The process has brought preschool and childcare practitioners together, to discuss curriculum, inclusion etc.

Essential Learnings is seen as providing exciting potential and it focuses on 0 –16 and on deeper issues such as thinking, communicating and understanding, personal and global futures and social responsibility.

There is said to be some cynicism and resentment about the outcomes of the Early

Childhood review. People gave a lot of time, attended meetings and so on, but the professional learning re ‘professional artistry’ as proposed did not happen. Only a few research projects are happening.

Class sizes are not the only issue to be addressed; the infrastructure issues involved can be greater than the staffing issues. There is also a need to provide support for early childhood teachers, professional development and support for networks.

Childcare co-location

The co-location of childcare centres into schools has grown out of adhoc arrangements between childcare and schools. The reality of change got ahead of Departmental policies. Childcare centres in Tasmania are community based, not for profit centres.

Departmental resources may be provided to bring the parties together. A critical issue in determining proposals is the existing local service provision.

The process of co-location has provided new opportunities for the development of closer relationships between early childhood education and care services. Case studies demonstrate the emergence of new understandings and relationships within school environments that are attempting to foster these opportunities.

Interviews and discussions were conducted with Departmental Officers, early childhood educators, principals, and the AEU Tasmanian Branch in March 2002.

See Kronemann 2002, Early Childhood Education Developments in Tasmania at www.aeufederal.org.au

Key References:

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