

The Western Australian Model of Preschool Education

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AEU Research Report
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July 2001

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THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MODEL OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Summary

Making preschool education a priority

Western Australia has gone through a process of review and reform which has fundamentally transformed preschool education in that state.

Following a change of government in February 1993, a Ministerial Task Force chaired by Hon Barbara Scott MLC was asked to review and report on precompulsory education in Western Australia. The consequent Ministerial Statement endorsed a four day week for the pre-primary program, the establishment of a Director of Early Childhood Education Policy in the Education and Policy Coordination Bureau, and further review of changes to entry age and of sessional hours for kindergarten.

In 1995 the Minister for Education announced the *Good Start* Program. Both pre-primary programs for five year olds and kindergarten programs for four year olds would be transferred into the public education system and all children would be guaranteed access to these services.

All five year olds would have access to pre-primary programs at local schools, to *ensure continuity of education in single settings and ensure that the discrepancy that exists in charges will be removed, with the only charge being the schools' amenities fees.* (EDWA 1994-1995)

In 1997 the Education Department began to take responsibility for programs run for four year olds, and all children were to be guaranteed a place in an Education Department sessional kindergarten program by 1999. Since then, almost all community preschools have moved into schools. About 73% to 75% of schools now have a kindergarten program for four year olds.

All eligible children are guaranteed a place in a kindergarten or pre-primary program at a government school, but not necessarily their local school.

Change of entry age and hours

The WA Government has also increased the preschool and school entry age, to bring it closer to the other states and territories.

This has meant that from 2001, children will have access to kindergarten in that year if they turn four before 30 June, rather than four by the end of the year as was previously the case. From 2002, they will have access to pre-primary if they turn five before 30 June in that year. This will subsequently have flow on affects to the starting age for the compulsory years.

In effect this means that in 2001, only half what would previously have been the cohort will attend kindergarten. This half cohort will move up through pre-primary, primary and secondary levels in subsequent years.

Attendance hours have also been increased. From 2001, children can attend kindergarten for four half days per week, or two full days, depending on individual school programs. And from 2002, children will have access to five full days of pre-primary, rather than the four currently offered.

Facilities

The decision to relocate precompulsory education within the school sector required a substantial resource commitment. It was initially suggested that the provision of upgrading of accommodation and equipment on school sites would cost \$27m.

Some 60-70 transportables and 10 purpose-built facilities have been established in each of the last three years. A further \$10m has been committed for each of the years 2000-01 and 2001-02, to cover the cost of some 150 additional early childhood facilities.

The new purpose-built centres are generally described as 'wonderful'. They are spacious

rooms, clustered around a central activity area, including kitchen and wet areas, toilets, and space for numerous activity areas. The transportable early childhood facilities offer many of the same features but they are not as spacious.

Staffing issues

Substantial numbers of additional teachers and aides have been required as a result of these changes. In 1998 alone, 750 teachers and 750 aides were required to expand kindergarten programs.

The recommended class size for kindergarten is a maximum of 20 and for pre-primary, a maximum of 27 for a purpose built permanent pre-primary classroom and 25 in other rooms.

Full time teachers of kindergarten and/or pre-primary receive DOTT (release for duties other than teaching) of 320 minutes, compared to 180 minutes for primary teachers of years 1-7. This recognizes the particular nonteaching duties of teachers in the precompulsory years, including the need to work very closely with parents.

WA is moving towards the reduction of class sizes in the early primary years to 24 by 2003.

Curriculum and educational issues

The underlying concern of many early childhood educators is anxiety about the possibility of transferring the more formalised curriculum structures and culture of the compulsory years to the precompulsory years. They want to make sure this does not happen.

As one early childhood educator commented, over time the inclusion of precompulsory years will force change on schools that will have wider, positive ramifications for children's educational experiences.

At the schools visited, this change is already in evidence, and far from being forced, it is being approached with eagerness. Teachers demonstrated enormous enthusiasm and commitment to early childhood education and many had developed creative and exciting ways

of maximising the educational opportunities afforded by their environment. A K-3 approach provides new developmental learning opportunities for older children as well as ensuring appropriate learning experiences in the precompulsory years.

Benefits

Discussions with early childhood education practitioners emphasised strong support for guaranteed universal access, for provision of qualified teachers and assistants and for quality control eg in relation to equipment. Pay parity for early childhood educators was also seen as a strength of the system.

For teachers, the move to one site provides positive opportunities for team work, mutual support and stability. A number of teachers in schools visited commented on how much they enjoyed being part of the school and being able to work together, to share ideas and problems.

There is also a view that the integration on one site strengthens the links to local communities: parents get involved early on with their children's education and with the school, get to know the staff and the environment and come to understand and support a K-3 philosophy.

For children, there is also seen to be a positive affect from the continuity and stability of staffing throughout the early years. They get to know teachers in the early childhood centre, whether or not they are working with them directly; they feel confident in the environment; and in many cases they learn to work across groups that are part of their immediate context.

Principals have an important role to play in ensuring the successful development of early childhood education.

Conclusion

The Western Australian model of preschool education shows that substantial, positive reform is possible with commitment, planning and appropriate resources.

THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MODEL OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

History

In 1992, optional and sessional pre-primary of 11 hours per week was available to all children in the year they turned five, through pre-primary centres attached to 480 government primary and 53 district high schools, the Distance Education Centre and 116 community pre-school centres. The last were separate institutions, formerly known as pre-schools or kindergartens, administered by community committees with teachers provided by the Ministry.¹

In 1993, 222 government schools began the phased introduction of an optional full time pre-primary program for five year olds, designed to supplement the part time provision.² This was a full five day program, resulting from the 1992 *Social Advantage* policy, which aimed to make this option available to all children by 1995. In the first year of full time pre-primary, about one third of the cohort –7000 children – participated full time, and about 15,000 continued to participate on a sessional basis in a pre-primary centre or community preschool.³

Kindergarten services at that time were provided by both the Education Department and the Department for Community Development (DCD). The Education Ministry provided about 8900 places through community kindergartens (preschools) and pre-primaries and DCD provided about 8700 places. There were no places for the remainder of the cohort, about 4000 children.⁴ The introduction of the full pre-primary program saw a significant number of four year olds displaced from schools and accommodated in DCD services.⁵

Following a change of government in February 1993, a Ministerial Task Force chaired by Hon. Barbara Scott MLC was asked to review and report on pre-compulsory education in WA. The Scott taskforce reported in November 1993 and proposed a number of recommendations. They suggested that the minimum age for children entering pre-primary be raised by one month per year, beginning in 1995, until it reached 5 years old by 30 April or an age common to the states and territories. By 2002, all children should be given the option of 10 hours per week of kindergarten in the year before full time pre-primary, under the supervision of trained early childhood teachers. They proposed an Office of Early Childhood be established to coordinate government policy and to set standards for non-compulsory services. The report also suggested further study into K-2 multi-aged groupings based on vertical integration.

In addition, the decision to provide every child with the right to access both pre-primary education and kindergarten included a recognition of special needs. The 1993 Ministerial Task Force report recommended the development of a comprehensive state strategy which would identify gaps in the provision and the resources required to fill them. This included screening programs, a coordinated approach to early intervention, family support programs, parent-child programs and extension of the services of the Ethnic Child Care Resource Unit. There are also particular program elements targeted at meeting the needs of rural children, including mixed age groupings. There are early intervention programs for kindergartens, and the 1993 report included a recognition of the need to review forms of fee relief available.⁶

¹ Ministry of Education Western Australia annual report 1992-1993, p. 38

² EDWA *annual report 1993-1994*, p. 44

³ Ministerial Task Force on Full-time Pre-primary Education and Related Matters, 1993, *Voluntary Pre-primary Education in Western Australia, A Report prepared for Hon. Norman Moore MLC, Minister for Education*, p. 1

⁴ Ministerial Task Force on Full-time Pre-primary Education and Related Matters, 1993 p. xxii

⁵ *ibid* p. 46

⁶ *ibid* p. 46

The then Minister for Education, Norman Moore, responded to the Scott Report in a Ministerial Statement in June 1994. The statement endorsed a four day per week pre-primary program, the establishment of a Director of Early Childhood Education Policy in the Education Policy and Co-ordination Bureau and further review of change to the entry age. The two session per week kindergarten program was to be retained and reviewed once the pre-primary changes had been implemented and the entry age issue determined.⁷

The Western Australian model of preschool education has been fundamentally transformed as a result of that review process and subsequent policies.

Good Start program

By 1995, the vast majority of children (19,720 of the 26,807 attending pre-primary programs) were enrolled at government schools.⁸ This was achieved through the use of a range of purpose built pre-primary centres and transportables, and the modification of existing buildings.⁹ There are also nongovernment schools providing pre-primary programs.

Schools in 1995 were also offering kindergarten programs for four year olds where there were vacancies in pre-primary classes.¹⁰ Other kindergarten programs were at that stage still offered by community preschools staffed with qualified early childhood teachers and aides by the Ministry of Education, where there was spare capacity after catering for pre-primary children. Family Centres, funded by the Department of Community Development, also offered programs, staffed in part by qualified teachers and otherwise by staff with a child care qualification. Fees were set by the local management committee.

In 1995 the Minister for Education announced the Good Start Program. Developed by the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA), it placed *fresh emphasis on the importance of early learning in government schools and aims to guarantee that all children have access to kindergarten and full time pre-primary schooling.*¹¹

WA decided that both pre-primary programs for five year olds and kindergarten programs for four year olds would be transferred into the public education system and that all children would be guaranteed access to these services. Over the period 1997-1999, 9000 kindergarten places would be transferred from the Department of Family and Children's Services. All five year olds would have access to pre-primary programs at local schools, to *ensure continuity of education in single settings and ensure that the discrepancy that exists in charges will be removed, with the only charge being the schools' amenities fees.*¹²

Although described as full time pre-primary, children were able to access pre-primary for four full days or three full days and two half days, as per the 1994 Ministerial Statement. Full time pre-primary classes became available to all five year olds in 1998.

⁷ Hon Norman Moore MLC, Minister for Education 1994, *Ministerial Statement on Voluntary Full-time Pre-primary education in Western Australia and related matters.*

⁸ Moyle H. et al, 1996, *Children's Services in Australia 1996, Services for children under school age*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p.51

⁹ EDWA, *Early Childhood Education, A guide to the Early Childhood Education programs of the Education Department of Western Australia: EDWA memorandum to primary and specialist personnel, 'Primary and Specialist Staffing for 1998'*

¹⁰ Moyle et al 1996, p.17

¹¹ Education department of Western Australia (EDWA), *Good Start, A guide to the early childhood education programs of the Education Department of Western Australia.*

¹² EDWA annual report, 1994-1995, p. 61

Six schools were resourced as focus schools to pilot new educational programs and teacher support materials, and a decision was made to establish an Early Childhood Council comprising educators and community representatives to advise the Minister on early childhood education.

It was estimated that the provision of upgrading of accommodation and equipment on school sites would cost \$27m and that substantial additional numbers of teachers and assistants would be employed. At the same time, it was decided that raising the school entry age would not affect children born before 31 October 1996.¹³

In 1997 the Education Department began to take responsibility for programs run for four year olds, with Family Centres to be the last to transfer. By 1999, all children wishing to attend kindergarten were to be guaranteed a place in an Education Department program offered in a variety of settings. By 1999, 21,000 places were to be made available in programs linked to government schools and made available at over 450 primary schools, district high schools and community kindergartens. Children were able to access kindergarten for two half days or one full day per week. In addition, the Department and local Aboriginal communities agreed to transfer the 26 Aboriginal community-based preschools to government schools over the period 1997-2000.¹⁴ In 1998 alone, these changes required an additional 750 FTE teachers and 750 FTE teacher aides.¹⁵

The guarantee of universal and free access is to the local neighbourhood area, not the local school, since not all schools yet offer a kindergarten year. All eligible children are guaranteed a place in a kindergarten or pre-primary program at a government school, but not necessarily their local school. Selection criteria have been revised to give priority to children seeking a further year in kindergarten or pre-primary, a decision made at school level with parents and teacher; children with siblings at the school; and those who live the shortest distance from the school by road.

Since 1997, a large number of community preschools have moved into schools. About 73% to 75% of schools now have a kindergarten program for four year olds. There appears to have been a slight shift in Departmental policies with regard to community preschools. It seems that the few remaining community based preschools (42) will be allowed and even encouraged to remain, although there are concerns about the pressures on Committees of Management of having a one-year based organisation. However these community kindergartens are staffed by and receive operational grants from the Education Department, and are linked to schools. Their teachers are performance managed by the school principal.

Change of entry age

In addition to moving preschool education into schools, the WA Government determined to increase the preschool and school entry age, to bring it closer to the other states and territories. This has meant that from 2001, children will have access to kindergarten in that year if they turn four before 30 June, rather than four by the end of the year as was previously the case. From 2002, they will have access to pre-primary if they turn five before 30 June in that year. This will subsequently have flow on affects to the starting age for the compulsory years. These changes to entry ages for various stages of pre-compulsory education and schooling have been defined in the School Education Act 1999.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ EDWA, *Annual Report 1997-1998*

¹⁵ EDWA, *Annual Report 1998-1999*, p.28

In effect this means that in 2001, only half what would previously have been the cohort will attend kindergarten. This half cohort will move up through pre-primary, primary and secondary levels in subsequent years.

The access time has also been increased. From 2001, children can attend kindergarten for four half days per week, or two full days, depending on individual school programs. And from 2002, children will have access to five full days of pre-primary, rather than the four currently offered.

Current structures

Attendance hours

Pre-primary in 2001 is provided for four full days or equivalent, prior to the move to five full days in 2002. Schools can determine actual arrangements. Pre-primary children are to be provided with no less than 1240 minutes per school week, exclusive of breaks. This will increase to 1550 minutes per week and 290 minutes per day in 2002.

Kindergarten is provided for four half days or two full days, for children who will turn four prior to June 30, 2001. Children in kindergarten are to receive no less than 600 minutes per school week, exclusive of breaks. The enrolments in kindergarten are about half that which would otherwise have been expected, due to the change in entry age requirements.¹

However parents can choose whether or not their children will attend for the full weekly program.²

Some teachers expressed concern about the move to a five day week for pre-primary children, suggesting that the children should be at home with their mothers, and that they got too tired after a full week. While this led some to support the change in entry age, others were uncertain about how much difference that would make to a group of children. It would seem that parents rarely choose to have their children attend for less than the available time.

Financial structures

Kindergartens and pre-primary, whether on-site or off-site in a leased facility, are integrated components of school operations. All policies regarding school finance are applicable to both kindergarten and pre-primary classes. The school grant for 2001 was adjusted to take account of the increased attendance time for kindergarten children.

From the start of 2001, schools can request voluntary contributions from parents of kindergarten through to year 7. An amount of up to \$60 per annum maximum can be requested from the parents of any child in kindergarten through to year 7, with the approval of the school council.³ Schools do not necessarily charge this amount. For example, in one school where the subject was raised during our visit, teachers said that parents were asked to contribute \$10 per term, ie \$40 per year.

Class sizes

EDWA's recommended class sizes are currently:

- C Kindergarten: maximum of 20 students
- C Pre-primary: maximum of 25 in a non-purpose built pre-primary and purpose built transportable, and a maximum of 27 for a purpose built permanent pre-primary classroom.
- C Mixed kindergarten and pre-primary class: maximum of 20 students

¹ EDWA, 2000, *New School Starting Age School Information Pack 2, Life's Launching Pad*.

² *ibid*

³ *Ibid*

- C Mixed pre-primary and Year 1 class: maximum of 25 or 27 students depending on facilities.
- C Kindergarten/pre-primary/year 1 classes: 20 at any one time

WA is moving towards the reduction of class sizes in the early primary years. The 2000 Certified Agreement⁴ provides for a staged reduction so that no year 1 to year 3 classes need have more than 24 students by the year 2003:

- C 2000 - 2002: resourced to require no more than 28 students
- C 2003: resourced to require no more than 24 students.

The Agreement recognises that schools and students may require variation in relation to class sizes, provided that teachers requested to accept a class size greater than that referred to in the agreement can utilise grievance procedures if they feel aggrieved by any proposed variation ; and implementation is to be within available physical and human resources.

The SSTUWA position in relation to P/1 classes is that they should be reduced in line with the planned years 1-3 class size reductions.

Staffing

Staffing is determined on the basis of weighted enrolments and an applied staffing formula. In 2001, kindergarten children count as 0.6 Full Time Equivalent (FTE), while pre-primary children count as 1.0FTE. In 2002, pre-primary children will count as 1.25 FTE.

The formula allocation is determined on the basis of a base, phased in at 0.05 for the first 20 students; .05 for each student up to 180 and .0397 for each student above 180 students. Staffing allocations are now determined to one decimal point, previously two.

In addition to teachers, education assistants are allocated to various year levels. For 2001, the allocation of education assistants to kindergarten is 0.5 FTE for one group of 20 or fewer children and 0.9 for two groups of 20 children. This has increased from 0.2 for 20 children in the context of the increased kindergarten hours.

From 2001, mixed kindergarten and pre-primary classes will receive an education assistant allocation of 0.5 FTE if kindergarten children are attending for four sessions per week, ie one group; and 0.9 FTE if kindergarten children are attending for eight sessions per week ie two groups. There is no allocation for pre-primary groups of fewer than 14 children.

In 2001, the education assistant allocation for pre-primary classes will be 0.9 for one class of 15 to 25 or 27 children. There is no allocation for 14 pre-primary children or fewer. From 2002, the allocation for pre-primary classes will be 1.1 FTE for one class of 15 to 25 or 27 children.

In 2001, the education assistant allocation for mixed classes of pre-primary and year 1 children will be: 0.2FTE for 2-7 pre-primary children in the class; 0.5 FTE for 8-14 pre-primary children in the class; and 0.9 FTE for 15 or more pre-primary children. In 2002, these allocations will increase to 0.3, 0.6 and 1.1 respectively.

⁴ Government School Teachers' and School Administrators' Certified Agreement 2000 , Minister for Education WA and AEU WA, p.15

For Rural Integrated Program (RIP) classes, the allocation will be 0.9 FTE for a RIP class with children from at least three year levels, increasing to 1.1 FTE in 2002.⁵

The SSTUWA position is for a full time education assistant for any class with any number of pre-primary students.

Years 1 to 3 also have a teacher's aide/assistant allocation. The allocation is made to districts, on the basis of 0.2 for every twenty children in years 1 to 3. The District Office distributes this allocation to schools.

Staffing allocations of 0.4 FTE or above are made centrally by Staffing Branch. If the position is not required for a permanent teacher than principals will be able to recommend a fixed term teacher for the position. In practice temporary teachers who have operated preschool programs that have moved into schools have been likely to be allocated the position on a temporary basis which in normal circumstances will have moved to permanent status at the end of two years.

DOTT Time

Full time teachers of kindergarten and pre-primary receive 0.2 release for duties other than teaching (DOTT time). This is 320 minutes, or effectively one day. Primary teachers receive 180 minutes DOTT time.

Where pre-primary classes are mixed classes with years 1 or above, the school should determine the amount of time that teachers receive, based on the number of pre-primary children in the class.

Departmental documents suggest that where 50% of children in a class of 25 are pre-primary, there is sufficient time in the schools staffing allocation to provide the teacher with 320 minutes DOTT time. Where eight children are pre-primary, this would reduce to 250 minutes, and where 6 are pre-primary, to 230 minutes.⁶

THE SSTUWA policy is that all composite classes including kindergarten or pre-primary students should entitle teachers to a DOTT of 320 minutes.

In 2002, when pre-primary goes to five full days, schools will have flexibility in how they provide this DOTT time for pre-primary teachers; as a full day perhaps through the appointment of a fractional teacher from the total staffing allocation to cover all pre-primary DOTT in the school; two half days; or in shorter blocks of time provided through the use of specialist teacher time. The Department has noted that the *most important consideration when organising DOTT time for early childhood education teachers is to ensure continuity of staffing for kindergarten and primary classes.*⁷

Teachers' DOTT allocations can be used for designing and preparing programs with other teachers and teacher assistants, assessing and recording the progress and development of individual children, working and communicating with parents, liaising with other agencies and attending in-services and network meetings. The need to work closely with parents is a key factor in the level of DOTT required for precompulsory teachers.

⁵ EDWA, 2000, *New School Starting Age School Information Pack 2, Life's Launching Pad.*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

Education assistants are also given half a day for planning and preparation with the teacher. Assistants who have been employed for more than ten years still have a full day allocation for this purpose and any pressure to reduce this will be resisted by both the SSTUWA and the LHMU.

Speaking with pre-primary teachers suggests that there is considerable concern about how they (and education assistants) are to access their DOTT when pre-primary is extended to five days in 2002. Teachers were particularly concerned at the possibility of DOTT being broken up into small blocks of time. A number of teachers are also concerned that they will not have access to their class rooms during DOTT time, which means that they are unable to make room arrangements/prepare materials in that space; other arrangements will need to be negotiated.

Qualifications

EDWA indicates that whenever possible the Department appoints teachers with training in early childhood education to work in kindergarten and pre-primary classes. However in some locations it is not always possible to ensure that teachers in kindergarten and pre-primary classes are trained in early childhood education.

From 2002 other teachers will provide DOTT relief for pre-primary classes, including specialist teachers; while considered preferable that these teachers are trained in early childhood education, it is acknowledged by EDWA that this will not always be possible.⁸

The impact of the half cohort

The increase in entry age for kindergarten in 2001, which will flow through to pre-primary and other year levels in subsequent years, has had the effect of halving the kindergarten enrolment in this year. At the same time, kindergarten sessions have been increased from two half day to four half day session. In 2002, pre-primary enrolments will be halved but children will attend for five days rather than four.

Departmental examples of the impact of these changes on weighted enrolments for 2001-02 and subsequent years suggest a generally limited impact. However EDWA advice to schools for 2001 acknowledged that schools that have traditionally formed only one kindergarten class may need to consider an alternative class structure for this year, such as a K-P class.⁹

The formal advice to schools for 2001 indicated that schools would be staffed according to the formulae without exceptions, and that schools enrolling small numbers of children as a result of the half cohort should consider forming mixed-age groups. The staffing formulae would be adjusted to reflect the increased class contact time for kindergarten and pre-primary groups.

A global estimate suggests that the affect of this half cohort could be in the order of up to 400 FTE teacher positions and informal discussions have suggested that this rough calculation could be in order. However, extrapolation of the EDWA examples of staffing changes suggests an impact of something more like 115-130 FTE positions in 2002. This is however mediated by the increased hours for kindergarten and pre-primary and the impact in subsequent years would be greater. These costs (other than the increased K-P hours) are of course already part of the staffing budget.

⁸ ibid

⁹ ibid

The Scott report had suggested that raising the pre-primary entry age to five years by 30 April, by one month per annum, *would mean a saving to the Government school system of approximately \$300 million over 20 years, assuming the compulsory entry age was altered also.*¹⁰

Anecdotal advice suggests that the difficulties of transferring staff out of country and particularly remote schools for one year and then trying to attract staff back in the following year would in itself be so difficult that there is a view around that the Department would not proceed with such transfers should any be technically warranted.

Minister for Education Alan Carpenter, in addressing the SSTUWA Council meeting on Sunday 10 June, indicated that in his view, teachers should not lose jobs and schools should not be forced to redirect resources into keeping teachers in the face of the half cohort. He indicated that maintaining staffing numbers related to the half cohort would provide schools with opportunities arising from that flexibility in staffing. No formal announcement has as yet been made in relation to this commitment.

Implementation of this position would alleviate a considerable level of concern in primary schools.

Structural issues

Not all schools have as yet developed a kindergarten program. There may therefore be some competition between schools in certain areas to gain access to the building funds that would enable them to establish their program, particularly as schools increasingly recognise that providing access to kindergarten increases the chances of children remaining at that school. There have been comments suggesting that the operational rules of clusters arrangements for access to kindergarten and pre-primary are not necessarily completely clear. Concerns relate, for example, to situations where there are insufficient children to form 'cost effective' groups or alternatively, too many children for the accommodation available.

In a situation where schools may find themselves having to offer mixed age groupings not so much out of educational choice as practical necessity, there is a particular need to provide both teachers and principals with access to professional development that is strongly grounded in the experiences of teachers and schools that have already been operating successfully on those models. In general, teachers at the schools visited were positive about mixed age groupings where they had experienced them. They felt that mixed age groupings can extend children, give them peer models and a wider range of experiences. Those who had single year level experience strongly felt the need for professional development and support if they were to be required to teach a mixed age grouping.

There are also, as discussed above, issues related to resources such as access to teachers' aides/assistants. Teachers are concerned that without a full time assistant in a mixed age grouping, pre-primary children may miss out on outdoor play, and there would be pressure to provide them with experiences designed for year 1 students.

Discussions with early childhood education practitioners, particularly within EDWA, emphasised strong support for guaranteed universal access, for provision of qualified teachers and assistants and for quality control eg in relation to equipment. Pay parity for early childhood educators was also seen as a strength of the system.

¹⁰ Ministerial Task Force on Full-time Pre-primary Education and Related Matters, 1993 p. ix

For teachers, the move to one site provides positive opportunities for team work, mutual support and stability. A number of teachers in schools visited commented on how much they enjoyed being part of the school and being able to work together, to share ideas and problems. Cooperative arrangements, including team teaching and shared planning, were common in the schools visited. Even though there was for some teachers a greater sense of 'being one's own boss' in a stand-alone or off site centre, they also commented on the isolation involved. Despite comments from some teachers about moving to facilities of a lesser standard within the school site, their overall reaction was a positive one.

There is also a view that the integration on one site strengthens the links to local communities: parents get involved early on with their children's education and with the school, get to know the staff and the environment and come to understand and support a K-3 philosophy. In one school, for example, there was a strong emphasis on working closely with parents, many of whom were very young, of making them feel part of the school, and also drawing in the local community.

For children, there is also seen to be a positive affect from the continuity and stability of staffing throughout the early years. They get to know teachers in the early childhood centre, whether or not they are working with them directly; they feel confident in the environment; and in many cases they learn to work across groups that are part of their immediate context.

One important issue for teachers in relation to the success of the early childhood education program is the support of the principal, someone who understands and supports early childhood education, looks after it, sees the children regularly. In all the schools visited, teachers commented that their principal was very supportive of, and often quite engaged with, early childhood education. One principal regularly taught a P-1 class to provide DOTT and enable smaller classes, also taking over a pre-primary class during our visit to give the teacher an opportunity to talk. Another was involved with an extension program for two pre-primary children, and came during our visit to tell their teacher about the children's experiences that morning. Teachers commented that some principals needed to be given inservicing in relation to early childhood education, and should be made accountable for what was happening within their school.

Curriculum and educational issues

The underlying concern of many early childhood educators is anxiety about the possibility of a 'top down' curriculum, which could transfer the more formalised curriculum structures and culture of the compulsory years to the precompulsory years. They want to make sure this does not happen.

There is some debate about issues such as whether children in kindergarten or pre-primary years should attend school assembly, for example, and the nature of appropriate assessment and reporting procedures. Within the schools visited, these issues seem to have been sorted out satisfactorily. In one, for example, teachers reported that pre-primary children attended assembly for some of the time ('and the principal always makes a big point of welcoming them and complimenting them') while kindergarten children did not attend.

At the same time, both teachers and students in some schools showed the children's portfolios with some pride, and a number of teachers commented that they were not so different from the outcomes based reports that they had previously done on individual children.

As one early childhood educator commented, over time the inclusion of precompulsory years will force change on schools that will have wider (and, as she saw it, positive) ramifications for children's educational experiences.

At the schools visited, this change is already in evidence, and far from being forced, it is being approached with eagerness. Teachers demonstrated enormous enthusiasm and commitment to early childhood education and many had developed creative and exciting ways of maximising the educational opportunities afforded by their environment.

In one school, for example, teachers have spent considerable time in developing a K-2 program, which includes an Aboriginal kindergarten class. Children from K-2 work across classes as particular curriculum areas are shared. Teachers are increasingly integrating early childhood education principles across these year levels, and parents of years 1-2 children increasingly understand and support what they are doing. The teachers work together to develop term and weekly plans, using some of their DOTT time for the purpose. Teachers say that they have appreciated the role of the pre-primary teacher, who has early childhood education qualifications, to assist them in developing the principles and philosophies of their programs.

At another school, a pre-primary teacher said that the Curriculum Frameworks had not formalised the program, it has 'freed up' the topics and possibilities in the kind of teaching she offers. Teachers at that school had their separate classes, with only one mixed age grouping of years 1-2. But the activity spaces at the core of the centre are available to all, and teachers talked about the benefits of being able to share ideas and problems with colleagues.

A third school had opened the movable wall between two classes, one a pre-primary and the other a mixed age grouping of years 1-2. Teachers were able to team teach and provide support for each other and were enthusiastic about the benefits of mixed age groupings. They too did not see the precompulsory years being formalised, rather the years 1-2 children having access to activities and equipment which would normally not have been available to them.

At yet another, pre-primary teachers were team teaching across two classrooms. Children knew to go to a particular classroom for particular activities and the school wants a K-3 framework for early childhood education.

At a country school, all the classes are mixed age groupings, and in the new early childhood centre there is a shared activities area. Here too, the principal and teachers were enthusiastic about their early childhood education programs and very child focussed.

When they are in the same location, teachers are able to work cooperatively and to build on each other's work, such as the use of LetterLand in pre-primary and year 1.

Facilities

Capital works programs have been planned for the accommodation of the expanded Early Childhood Education program. Some 60-70 transportables and 10 purpose-built facilities have been established in each of the last three years. A further \$10m has been committed for each of the years 2000-01 and 2001-02, to cover the cost of some 150 additional early childhood education facilities.¹¹

Existing school facilities for early childhood education are of varied types. The new purpose-built centres are generally described as 'wonderful'. They are spacious rooms, clustered around a central activity area, including kitchen and wet areas, toilets, and space for numerous activity areas.

¹¹ EDWA 2000, *Life's Launching Pad*

The transportable early childhood facilities are not seen as favourably. They do contain kitchen or at least wet areas but they are certainly smaller spaces than those in the purpose-built facilities. Although perhaps spacious by primary school classroom standards, the spaces are not seen as adequate for the range of activity areas required, and a number of teachers commented on the difficulties of creating a 'quiet area', or said that they were unable to fit a desk for themselves into the room. The toilets are built within the structure, rather than attached to the outside, and this is seen by teachers as an unfortunate encroachment on space (as well as being too close to the kitchen area). Teachers who had come from offsite centres with quite generous facilities commented on the differences; but at the same time, not one early childhood education teacher suggested that the precompulsory years should be moved back out of school.

For example, one teacher who taught in a room that had been converted, with a kitchen and wet area and toilets, noted that the facilities were not as good as the off site centre at which she had previously been located, but better than a transportable. Moreover, she said that she delighted in being part of the school and had felt isolated offsite.

As suggested earlier, teachers and schools visited are making every effort to maximise the best educational use of their particular environment.

While facilities are extremely important to the quality of the early childhood education that can be offered, it is difficult to avoid noting that the commitment and enthusiasm of early childhood educators, both teachers and assistants, and support from their principals, are the most vital ingredients to successful early childhood education.

Conclusion

Structures and cultures that have developed over time are often seen as barriers to achieving substantial changes. The Western Australian model of preschool education shows that substantial, positive reform is possible with appropriate planning, commitment, perseverance and appropriate resources.

Michaela Kronemann
Federal Research Officer
June 2001

Schools visited

Banksia Park PS
Lathlain PS
Ranford PS
Bakers Hill PS
West Northam PS

Interviews/discussions

Early Childhood Directorate, Education Department of Western Australia
SSTUWA
Early childhood educators

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