



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DEVELOPMENTS IN TASMANIA

AEU Research Report

Michaela Kroneman
Federal Research Officer

October 2002

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DEVELOPMENTS IN TASMANIA SUMMARY

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 care 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 nongovernment, 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, and professional development, 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.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DEVELOPMENTS IN TASMANIA

Introduction

Preschool programs are provided for Tasmanian children in the year prior to Preparatory year through the school system. Preschool education, called kindergarten in Tasmania, is an integral part of the public primary school and is located within or attached to the school. Only about 5% of Tasmanian children miss out on a preschool education, although attendance is another issue, especially in Aboriginal communities.

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. The move of the childcare unit into education put renewed focus on standards, the need to meet the regulations on, for example, facilities.

These structures have provided the opportunity to explore the development of new and closer links between early childhood education and care 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 review process involved consultation with staff and parents through a range of forums, as well as a process of written submissions. Over 1200 responses were received. The Department reports that many of the submissions were developed on the basis of cross sector dialogue and discussion between staff working in childcare, kindergarten and the early years of schooling. The process was also described as regenerating professional discussions and debate about what is in the best education and care interests of young children.

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. These recognised the importance of partnerships, saw the need for cross-sector relevance of broad curriculum guidance produced by stakeholders, recognised the need for support for early childhood professionalism and for professional research and study, the need for ongoing professional development and resource support for local initiatives. 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 world wide on early childhood class sizes and the benefits of smaller classes. The committee completed its deliberations in mid 2002 and 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.

In February 2000, the Minister of Education released the draft *Learning Together* report. The planned comprehensive curriculum consultation was seen by the government to be a key means of implementing the early childhood education Review recommendations and following up the findings of the Review.

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.

There are a lot of things happening, but they are perceived to need coordination. An Early Childhood Coordinator position has now been created in each of Tasmania's three regions, although it is unclear how long the contracts for these positions are.

Early Years Clusters have been developed, as recommended by the Review, and began operation in 2001. The clusters are really demanding time wise but Departmental officers say that, while not having enough time, teachers are really keen. Some have been very successful. Sometimes this is because of the enthusiasm and commitment of individuals. Others, such as Glenorchy Inter Agency Network (GAIN) have received some funding from their local Councils. GAIN operated a shopfront last year, to bring children's services together out in the community. It was a successful approach involving a number of different services. Other areas are considering this approach. There are however difficulties. The networks get one day per term, which is insufficient.

There are problems in finding suitable meeting times for Cluster meetings, since childcare staff do not finish work until 6.30pm and kindergarten staff have by then gone home and are sometimes understandably reluctant to leave their family responsibilities and return to work. No provision was made in the budget for time release for teachers and child care workers to meet during work time. If the clusters are to operate successfully and achieve the desired outcomes, then it is preferable that this be acknowledged in the work of the child care and teaching staff.

There is no specific budget for the networks/clusters. Part of the funding allocated for Curriculum Consultation was supposed to go to clusters, but the purpose of this funding is different to the ongoing support for cluster development and operation. A lot of the coordination between childcare and preschool has been based on goodwill. Childcare workers are often based in communities: Glenorchy is proactive, with an overall plan for the community.

Clusters need resources to work. They also need to have a purpose, to provide professional learning, research, changing mind sets. There are issues about the time of day they meet, the coordinators need time off, and clusters need professional development.

The curriculum consultation was seen as very exciting. It was difficult at the school end to understand the from-birth concept. It was a huge issue of professional learning for principals and

teachers and should be part of the professional development strategy for principals and district superintendents.

One said that the clusters last year were wonderful but the longer term future is not so clear because of issues like resources.

Other Departmental /system initiatives

The Department recognises that a more intensive approach is required to issues of cross-sector collaboration and that there is a need for Education to work in cooperation with other agencies serving families. A plan of action for the Early Years is being developed around three priority areas:

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

Projects under consideration include models of Single Point Access Centres through which families can access services, and a Young Parents Support project which aims to pick up children at risk of delays and learning problems and provide support prior to school entry.

The Department has said that it is 'enthusiastic about devising strategies for inter-agency cooperation at grass roots level and at the level of agreed protocols for mutual support'. Funding for the cooperative projects is currently with the Minister.

There is an inter-agency working party with the Department of Health and Human Services, which is looking at areas of agreement and/or common action or projects aimed at supporting parents in a more coordinated way.

There is also an Education Department project on enhancing parent participation. An early childhood resource pack was developed at the request of the AEU Tasmanian Branch and with AEU input, which includes content for both parents and schools.

There are some difficulties in trying to develop programs with Health, which include a high turnover of senior Health staff with whom agreements are negotiated. There is however a recognition that Health has good links throughout the community (eg nurses for mothers, early intervention centres) and there is a need to integrate, to focus on education as well as health. There is also a need to research the long term benefits.

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. There is at this point little research to provide guidance on how this would look for the 0-4 year olds.

Action research is needed from early childhood practitioners. However, early childhood teachers do not have the background in research methodology or the time to conduct and write up the research findings. Practitioners 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. There are some tensions to be resolved, such as how to measure higher

level thinking, vs the current accountability/standardised testing approaches. Although action research was also one of the recommendations arising from the Review process, there was little specific funding for early childhood education. The amount per project which has currently been allocated is said to fall far short of actual needs. Some three projects were organised through the use of Commonwealth literacy and numeracy funds.

The curriculum consultation process was allocated \$12m. for implementation of the whole project. One of the declared priority areas in the consultation was parent partnerships and 40 project groups were established. They had to include goals and involve childcare. In 2003 an additional 60 schools will come into the project making a total of 100 schools.

The framework of 0-16 for *Essential learnings* mainstreams early childhood education. The Department argues that child care educators especially, but also preschool teachers, want inclusion. The process has brought preschool and childcare practitioners together, to discuss curriculum, inclusion etc. It is argued that the framework encourages the recognition that what is appropriate for young children is often also appropriate for older children. It provides a continuum of learning, and structured play based learning is critical. There seem to be different views about this process. Some Departmental Officers argue that early childhood education did not use the previous guidelines while others (and the AEU Branch) argue that many early childhood educators are using them, particularly the earlier draft version which had a practical bent. Part of the problem for the previous guidelines was that they were not supported by professional development.

There is a view amongst some practitioners that *Essential Learnings* has provided a broadening rather than a narrowing as feared. It 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 have been discussions about the assessment involved in *Essential Learnings*, which is quite different from statewide testing, but the types of outcomes are still to be worked out.

There is a need to ensure funding for ongoing professional learning. The \$12m for the curriculum consultation includes teacher relief, professional training and so on. There were three relief days provided per teacher in the 40 schools involved in the project over the six districts. That is still only a small proportion of the schools that are actually heavily involved.

There is said by some to be a lot of 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.

The curriculum consultation has seen the formalisation of cluster groups, with the convenor of each group either an early childhood teacher or a child care professional. They are discussing issues such as transition and a learning provision statement.

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.

Structures

Community Partnerships is a new section within the Department, which includes child care.

The Consultative Group, with about 30 members, is largely curriculum based and provides a direct line of input to the curriculum and learning provision statements. It has been particularly focussed on *Essential Learnings* and the impact on 0-4 year olds' programs.

The Early Childhood Reference Group was set up because of the outcry arising from the loss of the Early Childhood Director's position, the specific early childhood position within the Department. The Early Childhood Reference Group meets with the Deputy Secretary twice a term and provides early childhood input into policy, feedback etc. Each region provides a representative of the Kindergarten Teachers Association and the Tasmanian Early Childhood Staff Association, the professional associations. In addition there are representatives from the Primary Principals, Special Education, the District Support Service, the Flying Start program and the Deputy Secretary as Chair.

Examples of the issues considered by the Early Childhood Reference Group include: school age admission, the *Essential Learnings* framework, literacy (the Flying Start Program) and procedures for early entry for gifted children. Five years on since its inception, it is seen by practitioners as an important way of bringing early childhood perspectives into the Department. There is now no specific early childhood person in the Department to call on for advice or to ensure that principals maintain the regulations/requirements.

The Department is not providing professional development for child care and even early childhood/kindergarten is not getting as much as before.

There is a lack of opportunities for early childhood teachers to do postgraduate work. It has to be done via interstate providers, often by distance education, or by doing a general masters which has no specific early childhood component. The Review looked at the possibility of involving interstate providers, possibly via summer schools.

There is also an issue in terms of upgrading TAFE qualifications to a B.Ed. There is only one option, in Launceston, for undergraduates to specialise in early childhood education. There is no opportunity to do a degree focusing on the pre-kindergarten years, as is the case at the University of Melbourne for example. A postgraduate certificate in numeracy has been developed. It would be interesting to know how many early childhood teachers in Tasmania have done postgraduate studies in early childhood education.

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. Some other providers have complained about the subsidised provision available through co-location.

A lot of good work is being done in low socioeconomic areas. Private providers such as Good Beginnings are involved as well as the Departments of Education and Health. There is a need to

facilitate community capacity building and there is a view within the Department that such perspectives are starting to resonate with policy makers.

One art teacher said that having the child care program at the school has really made a noticeable difference to children's involvement in art when they enter her class.

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

Primary School A is a large school which has had a slight decline in population over the last eight years, from 640 to 570 students.

The fulltime kindergarten teacher said that she had two groups, of 18 and 22 children. There is also a 0.5 kindergarten teacher. Parents are offered a choice of a full day program for two days or a half day program of three morning sessions.

The classes are housed in a purpose built terrapin (demountable) building with spacious rooms and storage/wet areas. As required by regulation, the kindergarten play area is fenced. It is an attractive, landscaped area with paved and grass areas and climbing and other equipment. The paved area is ideal for the riding of tricycles, as a number of children were demonstrating with glee during our visit.

Kindergarten staff have the normal full day of non contact time. In addition to the kindergarten classes, the centre provides two pre-kinder programs for three year olds, who attend for one session per week. These programs are run by the Teacher Assistants and supervised by the teachers. The kindergarten teacher, who is relatively new to the school, was enthusiastic about the school, the kindergarten centre itself, and her classes.

A private, community (not-for-profit) childcare centre is now located in the school grounds. The centre is licensed for 25 children, from 12 months to three years old. It is housed in a refurbished terrapin classroom.

There are some minor problems with the structure of the facilities. For example, the older children would need to walk through the toddlers' area to use the children's toilets. The centre has dealt with this by sharing the staff toilet with the older children, since it is located in the three year olds' area. Likewise, there are some difficulties for the staff working with toddlers since the storage area is at the farther end of the three year olds area, and it is hoped that a doorway can be installed to provide more ready access.

Such minor difficulties are dealt with in a spirit of cooperation, and the childcare centre staff are enthusiastic and excited about their new centre, which was established about 12 months ago.

The school contributed significantly to the refurbishment of the rooms from its school budget to allow the centre to be established and continues to provide support through, for example, providing the cleaning services for the childcare centre.

While this provides some pressure on the school budget, it is seen as very worthwhile given the benefits that are seen to accrue for the whole school community.

The school sees the co-location as a very positive step. A number of the children who attend the kindergarten also attend the childcare centre. Those attending the morning kindergarten sessions are walked across to the childcare centre for the afternoon program. Likewise, three year olds attending the childcare centre are walked across to the kindergarten centre to attend the pre-kinder program. While the normal practice within the pre-kinder program is to have parents attend with their child, the childcare staff have been able to fulfil this role for the children from the centre, for those parents who are working and unable to attend themselves. This has given children access to the program which might otherwise have been unavailable to them.

The centre also provides an After School Hours Care program, which operates from the space for three year olds. Children are thus able to stay within the one site for their various programs and parents have one (familiar) place to go when they pick their children up.

The school plans to create opportunities for the kindergarten and childcare staff to network, perhaps weekly, in order to share information and planning in order to enhance children's total educational experiences.

Primary School B is a smaller school with 230 students. It has a child care facility on the school grounds and has grown from 170 students since the childcare centre was established about seven years ago.

The school currently has 29 kindergarten students and offers two classes for them. One is a kindergarten class and the other is a K-Prep class. The older four year olds were put into the K-Prep class. The kindergarten classes are held in permanent buildings and have the usual spaces for wet areas and storage etc.

At the time of our visit to the kindergarten classroom, the children were actually outside doing PE with the school's specialist PE teacher. They also have access to the specialist music teacher as part of their kindergarten program.

The childcare centre is quite centrally located within the school. It is housed in a classroom that has been modified to provide wet areas and new doors. Gates also had to be provided for the childcare play area. It is unclear whether the resources for these modifications were provided from within the school budget but the school would undoubtedly have made some contribution.

The child care centre is licensed to provide 12-13 places in a pre-kinder program, it runs for three year olds every morning. Children come twice or three times a week and this means that about 40-50 children are able to attend. In the afternoons, the centre caters for the kindergarten children who require care. It is a small and cheerful centre.

The centre also offers before and after school care and holiday care, which are located in a large activity room in the school. In order to enable this to occur, the school has had to program its own activities to ensure that the room is vacated in time to allow it to be set up for the after hours program. This is seen as worthwhile doing.

Efforts are being made to increasingly integrate the childcare centre into the heart of the school community. On the recent sports day, for example, the three year olds in the childcare program were included and a couple of special activities were included for them. The pre-kinder children are

often visited by the kindergarten teacher and thus get to know her, as well as becoming familiar with the school as a whole.

The kindergarten teacher provides information about classroom activities to the childcare professional. The Principal expressed a hope that over time, a more detailed dialogue and sharing in relation to programming and curriculum will be able to occur. Some equipment is shared between the centres. The childcare professionals and kindergarten teachers feel that there has not been enough time so far for this to develop as fully as it could. The different relationships that parents can often have with childcare professionals and teachers – with parents more likely to discuss parenting issues in the childcare centre when they come to pick up their children, has been noted in the school. This perhaps also provides the base for further potential collaboration.

The inclusion of the care programs within the school is seen as positive and beneficial for the school and for the community. The school has become a community centre with which children can become familiar, and integrated into, at an early age. Families have the benefit of having all their children in one place, and knowing that the children can move between programs during the day easily and without requiring parental or other involvement or support. The school has the opportunity to get to know the children before they enter kindergarten, and to have children who feel comfortable in the transitions they make in familiar surroundings with familiar children and adults around them. Enrolments have been growing and are likely to continue doing so for the near future.

This may require some further considerations about spaces available, for example, for specialist areas. However such issues, and the day to day issues involved in establishing new and sometimes unfamiliar relationships (such as who has access to what equipment and spaces) can be worked through when there is commitment and relationships are positive.

Having a Principal with a positive commitment to early childhood education and to the development of a community school focus which incorporates childcare into its daily school life is an important part of the successful implementation of these strategies.

This paper was based on a visit to Tasmania in March 2002. Interviews and discussions were conducted with Departmental Officers, early childhood educators, principals, and the AEU Tasmanian Branch.

Key References:

AEU Tasmanian Branch, 1999, *The Review of Early Childhood Education, A Submission Paper prepared by the Australian Education Union.*

Davis K and MacNaughton G., 1999, *Early Childhood review, Structural issues in early childhood education and care: a research summary*, Department of Education, Tasmania.

Department of Education, 2000, *Learning Together, A vision for education, training and information into the 21st century*, Tasmania.

Department of Education, 2000, *The Tasmanian Early Childhood Review, Towards a Future Vision*, Tasmania.

McNaughton G., 1999, *Early Childhood Review, Curriculum Issues in Research and Action*, department of Education, Tasmania.

www.education.tas.gov.au/ooe/publications/ecereport/, at 27/2/02