

Functional Literacy statement for utas/state govt/ advisory panel

From Early Childhood Educators of Tasmania South (ECET) – Our organisation has been advocating for policies and practices that support children’s healthy development, love of learning and joy in living. We promote a healthy and creative childhood for all children focusing on the importance of evidence informed, play-based learning from 0 to 8 years old. We provide professional learning, resources, advocacy and support for educators and care givers, policymakers and community leaders. We appreciate this opportunity to offer feedback for the paper where it intersects with our expertise, the early years.

Comments on Paper 1.

Pg 10. Early Childhood is designated as 0 – 5 years old, though early childhood is typically defined as **birth to 8**.

Pg 12. The range of activities is too top down and needs expanding to include rich, reciprocal conversations around everyday experiences e.g., dinner as well as exciting special experiences e.g., visiting animal habitats.

Pg 13. “These skills ... must be explicitly taught in a cohesive, integrated and systematic way”. No! The first 2 skills needed to become literate are best taught in an age-appropriate, play and inquiry based environment with guidance from a trained early years educator guided by the Early Years Learning Framework, (Belonging, Being & Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). In play-based settings, teachers intentionally design language and literacy experiences which help prepare children to become fluent, enthusiastic readers. Active, play-based experiences in language-rich environments help children develop their ideas about symbols, oral language and the printed word — all vital components of reading. Early learning programs and curricula that emphasize play as a foundation for learning have demonstrated positive outcomes in multiple domains (Blair and Raver, 2015), including language and literacy development (Stagnitti, Bailey, Stevenson, Reynolds, & Kidd, 2015). Early years programs in which teachers engaged in direct instruction for literacy were compared by Van Oers and Duijkers’ (2013) to classrooms in which teachers relied on setting up play environments for students that contained material that promoted the integration of targeted skills. The findings demonstrated that this continuum of play-based learning resulted in greater acquisition of new words than classrooms with direct instruction. Furthermore, the use of play-based settings has been found to strengthen children’s literacy development by offering the opportunity for children to engage and share knowledge amongst peers (Vukelich, 1993), thus effectively increasing the number of available sources of information for each student within the classroom. Guided play can be an effective strategy for fostering literacy in young children. For example, a study by Han et al. (2010) examining the efficacy of targeted vocabulary instruction found that kindergarten-aged children engaged in cooperative play with an adult demonstrated enhanced vocabulary learning over those who only received direct instruction. Children develop their literacy skills as they construct and interpret MEANINGFUL spoken, drawn & written texts (Mackenzie, 2018). A strong foundation in oral language with lots of meaningful experiences to gain oral language with culturally enriched environments is especially important for young children of EAL backgrounds. This is much more important than “in the early years of schooling, phonics is important for children to become successful readers and writers.” No! (see above). There is no evidence that learning phonics earlier results in more literate kids especially if they have limited oral language.

Pg 14. Again wrong emphasis for the early years: “explicit instruction, learning progressions” and “robust screening tools” are but a small part of early language and literacy acquisition as laid out in the EYLF. “Evidence-based teaching” and learning ... yes! This leaves more time and attention from teachers of children 0 – 8 years old on planning and creating learning environments and exciting, “contextualised” - not just for adults - inquiry programs than being administrators of screening tools etc. Children learn best when they are actively engaged in exciting activities and environments geared to their developmental levels, prior experiences, cultural understandings, current needs and their real world. This means lots of active time outdoors to maximize their learning and to ignite their interests and encourage deep engagement for extended periods of time.
https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_hanscom_the_real_reason_children_fidget_and_what_we_can_do_about_it
Programs that spark investigation, imagination, and problem solving are typically filled with open-ended materials. In play-based Kindergartens and Prep classes, there is individualised intentionality around literacy and language. Teachers will certainly integrate some direct instruction into play but it will not be treated as a scripted literacy block.

Pg 15. On this page it is acknowledged that “early learning is critical”. Yes! Good examples are the CFCs, Bush Kinders, the B4 Early Years Coalition, LiL and those Kindergartens and Preps which have a dedication to play-based pedagogies and environments. DoE’s Refocusing Teaching and Learning professional support for early years teachers was a great start to help teachers with fulfilling the Education Act 2020 requirement of age-appropriate

programs in the early years. However, because of the push down curriculum in primary schools, implementing age-appropriate teaching has not had enough on-going support. Early years teachers are sandwiched between these two demands and are unable to do both. Unfortunately, the NQS has still not been implemented and so regulations supporting age-appropriate programs is not widely implemented. Instead, kindergarten and Prep are being overseen by senior staff who are often untrained in the early years. Implementing the NQS in Tasmania would bring extra training and refocus for senior staff and policy makers.

This analysis is supported by the data on preschool disadvantage. Even though “more Tasmanian children (98.2%) participated in some form of early education in the year before compulsory education than any other state or territory”, we are ranked the most disadvantaged. This can be explained by the fact that in Tasmania, our kindergartens are often too formal due to being part of schools, many of which expect the Kinders and Preps to fit into the timetables and programs of the primary years. Too much “schooling” increases the risk of losing a year or more of establishing the fundamentals of literacy (oral language, vocabulary and phonemic awareness) through engaging, age-appropriate programs. This is particularly relevant for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Literacy acquisition is holistic. Children need to be socially and emotionally ready for “explicit instruction and learning progressions”.

Pg 16. The AEDC shows that 1/5 of Tasmanian Preps are developmentally vulnerable for language, which is a little lower than the Australian average, but even more worrying and in need of attention is that ¼ of Preps are physically, socially and emotionally vulnerable.

Pg 17. There’s a spelling/semantic mistake - children developmentally at risk lack “word” instead of “world” knowledge. Early education can provide children with a wide range of life experiences that enrich their understanding of the world and help them comprehend the content of books.

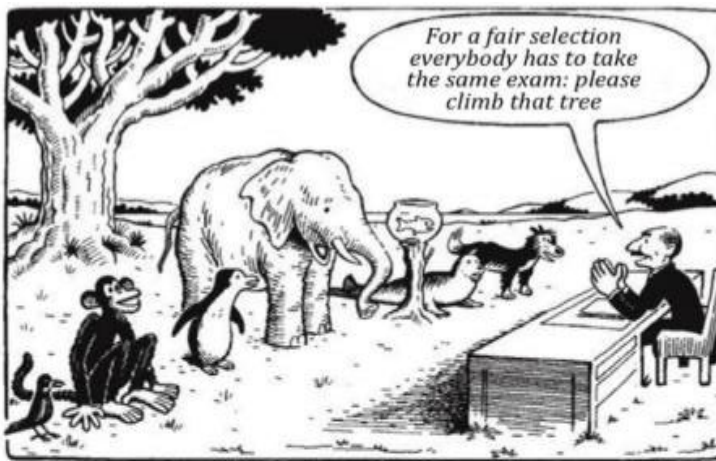
Less academic and more emotional and social stability and more activity and play will prepare children better for more formal literacy lessons in later school years (Angela Hanscom). PISA results show that this works with many of the countries scoring well on literacy, which only introduce formal literacy lessons when children are 7 years old (not 4 years old as in some Tasmanian Kindergartens).

Pg 18. The next data set, NAPLAN, unlike the AEDC, has no data for physical, social and emotional development so we don’t have a comparison for important aspects of the previous data. Comparing averages with the rest of Australia though, we are slightly below the middle range. Students’ progress is “broadly in line with students in schools of similar socio-economic advantage in other states ... The primary factor appears to be socio-educational disadvantage.” Considering that “children who start school behind, often stay behind” (pg 15), it is clear that more support is needed in the early years for families and schools in disadvantaged areas. Achieving greater equity in education is not only a social justice imperative, but also a way to use resources more effectively, increase the supply of skills that fuel economic growth, and promote social cohesion. [p.4] OECD 2019 PISA Results (volume 2): Where All Students Can Succeed

Teachers have reported that NAPLAN distorts teaching practice, relies on drill and worksheets, scripted and dull, direct instruction approach, reduces creativity and the fun of learning, denies students in-depth learning experiences, keeps children inside classrooms instead of out in the wider world and sidelines other key subjects such as science, history, languages and the arts. Teachers feel pressured to “teach to the test. Another concern is that many schools focus on students who are just below the minimum benchmarks at the expense of the very low or very high achieving students. The public publication of results is largely responsible for the hijacking of good teaching practice. Inappropriate, didactic methods combined with excessive formal testing overloads teachers and takes valuable time from teaching and learning.

Pg 20, 21, 22, 23. So many tests! Funding more literacy testing is not the answer! What gets measured is what gets the attention in the timetable. These data sets show that too much is spent on a narrow band of education, to the detriment of the many other important areas of education. Understanding the child rather than understanding the data sets should be the focus of teachers. Our contention is that creativity and the richness of human capacity is the basis and purpose of literacy and we should treat it with the same status, thus fostering the whole child and equity of opportunity for all learners.

Testing, didactic academic teaching and sitting inside at desks privileges one type of learner and makes less “successful” students unwilling to try things they will “get wrong”. overemphasis on literacy makes students with strengths in other areas feel less valued and less smart. Anxious students, creative, innovative students, active students, naturalistic learners, kinaesthetic learners are all disadvantaged. (See Sir K Robinson’s TED talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY>).



Our Education System

"Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

- Albert Einstein

Many of our ECET members report that tests such as PAT are of no value because they are inconsistently administered and are inappropriate for many children. Many students from lower SES schools are unable to even do the technology without adult help. At least the previous PIP test gave teachers the chance to sit one-on-one with students and hear their comments and see their responses. The Kinder Development Check is recognised for giving good information for teachers across all developmental domains in a way that integrates well in an early childhood setting.

There are many teachers reporting burn out from working in the public system. Trying to do the best by their students as described in the EYLF and being required to do didactic planning and scripted lessons required by senior staff with classes that are too large and with minimal support personnel for students with high needs is overwhelming them. The EYLF guides teachers to carefully observe children in activities and play, identifying the concepts and skills each child is working on, asking questions, engaging in discussions and providing follow-up activities to extend learning. Teachers use what they've learned from these observations to facilitate literacy development for each child. Assessment occurs through careful observations of children; their play and social interactions provide authentic and broad-based documentation of student growth and progress. This lies in sharp contrast to computer-based or other standardized assessment tools, which, from the data sets, are not even resulting in improved test results.

ORGANISATIONAL MAPPING

We noticed that there is a huge emphasis on foundational literacy happening indoors in this map. It needs to be expanded to include the wider world of children.

DoE

The Early Years – add in Bush Kinder at the Sustainability Learning Centre

4 + years old – add in enrichment programs for Kindergarten at the Sustainability Learning Centre, Molesworth Environment Centre and the Marine Discovery Centre

Parents, Carers and Guardians – add in Bush Kinder at the Sustainability Learning Centre

Non-Government Education Providers - add in Early Childhood Educators of Tasmania

- add in Tasmanian Nature Play Network

Others – add in Hobart City Council Bush Adventures

- add in Libraries Tas e.g. school holiday fun and regular story time events

Peak Bodies and Groups – add in Early Childhood Educators of Tasmania (ECET)
(educators of children 0 – 8 years old)

What is currently working well to improve literacy? The Early Years Learning Framework is a great guide for teachers of children from 0 – 8 in settings where teachers are well supported. Learning literacy through play and inquiry is successful in the early years. Especially in the development of oral language, vocabulary, comprehension and communication. Outdoor learning programs such as Bush Kinder works for all children but especially provides opportunities for the many children who feel restricted indoors. Enjoyment of learning and the social and emotional wellbeing of children also needs to be taken into consideration when evaluating what is an age-appropriate strategy for teaching literacy in the early years. It would be inappropriate to replace rich and meaningful pedagogies with rote learning which disengages students. Ongoing PL for educators, including teacher assistants, where this happens, is very beneficial but needs extending. Programs and facilities which engage families such as LiL and Child and Family Centres are excellent.

Do you know a program or activity that supports literacy development in Tasmania that is not listed in this document? If so, please provide: add in ECET professional development for early childhood educators in this section.

What do you think the gaps are, considering the organisational map (on page 35)?

School occupational therapists, more speech pathologists and psychologists. Mandatory PL for senior staff and policy makers about the early years if they are not early years trained; specifically training them in the principles, practices and outcomes for the EYLF. Appropriate adult to child ratios and more support for students with extra needs. There is a deficit of experienced teachers working in culturally diverse and low-income communities.

What opportunities are there?

The Panel has the opportunity to provide the state with a comprehensive strategy to support the development of literacy but in doing so it is important not to forget the development of the whole child - the physical, cultural, ecological, social and emotional wellbeing of the child. Children will only learn if they feel safe, well-fed, connected and valued. These are the pre-conditions for being actively engaged in learning, learning which is enjoyable, challenging, relevant and age-appropriate. When literacy is taught in ways that are connected to student's areas of interest and everyday experiences, engagement is more likely to occur, and when engagement in learning activities is strong, learning outcomes are more likely to be achieved (Alexander, 2018). Systemically, the rights of the young child as a learner will be explicitly supported through honouring the EYLF within school's improvement plan to enable gathering evidence to set key performance indicators thereby extending the EYLF principles, practices and outcomes to year 2. This can be achieved by consulting long term with lead early childhood educators experienced in developmentally appropriate, play-based, culturally responsive pedagogy for supporting young children's optimal learning from birth to age 8.

What supports need to be in place? Ensure a high level of professionalism for all early childhood educators. Bring in the NQF with funding for PL and regulation. Expand classrooms to include more learning in the great outdoors, including funded field trips. Reduce the income gap for childcare workers and incentivise experienced teachers to work in culturally diverse and low-income communities. Schools need more support with the numbers of student with additional needs within the classroom as this significantly impacts on teaching and learning. Teachers need more teaching and planning time and less admin work, safer class sizes and more in-class support. Programs for gender and cultural equality to create a level playing field are necessary. Funding for more allied health professionals is needed. Resources are required to support educators to move literacy learning outside traditional boundaries that hinder authentic, real-world learning between schools, communities and environments from occurring, (EYLF)Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world.

Questions:

1. What measures and targets do you think are required for the community-wide framework? The rest of Australia has the National Quality Standards for early years programs but this is yet to be implemented in Tasmania.

2. Do you know of any sources of data, not listed in the organisational map (from page 54), that track literacy rates/development in Tasmania? **Note: Not all data needs to be standardised and centralised e.g., teacher knowledge of students and recording of individual progress. There is also room for including the voice of the children in their assessment.**

3. Are there any additional measures that you believe are required to track the progress of the community-wide framework?

Promote the use of assessments that are based on observations of children's development and learning by their well-trained, experienced teachers on a school-by-school basis.

The rest of Australia has the National Quality Standards for early years programs but is yet to be implemented in Tasmania.

Ongoing study of Tasmanian learners akin to the English 7 years project where learners are revisited every 7 years.

Learners' own self-reflection of themselves as learners.

Happiness measure - aka Bhutan.

Adaptive Kindergarten Development Check – Bush Kinder Check.

Consultation with learners and parents/carers where targets and outcomes are set and revisited.

References:

Alexander, P. A. (2018). Engagement and literacy: reading between the lines. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 41(4), pp. 732-739.

Brown, Stuart. (2010). *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. New York, NY: Penguin Group

Blair, C and Raver, CC. (2015). School readiness and self-regulation: A developmental psychobiological approach. *Annual Review of Psychology* 66(1): pp. 711–731.

Carlsson-Paige, Nancy. (2008). *Taking Back Childhood: A Proven Roadmap for Raising Confident, Creative, Compassionate Kids*. New York, NY: Plume.

Department for Education (2021). *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage. (EYLF)* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>

Falk, Beverly. (2012). *Defending Childhood: Keeping the Promise of Early Education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Han, M, Moore, N, Vukelich, C and Buell, M (2010). Does play make a difference? How play intervention affects the vocabulary learning of at-risk preschoolers. *American Journal of Play* 3(1): pp. 82–105.

Mackenzie, N.M.& Scull, J (Ed) (2018). *Understanding and supporting young writers from Birth to 8*
Stagnitti, K, Bailey, A, Stevenson, EH, Reynolds, E and Kidd, E (2015) An investigation into the effect of play-based instruction on the development of play skills and oral language: A 6-month longitudinal study. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 5: pp. 1–18.

Suggate, Sebastian, P. (2012). "Watering the garden before the rainstorm: The case of early reading." Edited by Sebastian Suggate and Elaine Reese. *Contemporary debates in child development and education*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis. pp. 181-190.

Van Oers, B and Duijkers, D (2013). Teaching in a play-based curriculum: Theory, practice and evidence of developmental education for young children. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 45(4): pp. 511–534.

Vukelich, Carol, (1993). Effects of play interventions on young children's reading of environmental print. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, Volume 9, (2): pp. 153-170

https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2018-results-volume-ii_b5fd1b8f-en#page6

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY>

https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_hanscom_the_real_reason_children_fidget_and_what_we_can_do_about_it