High-Quality Literacy Programs in Early Childhood Classrooms
An Australian Case Study

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A recent study of literacy practices in Australian early childhood classrooms (Makin et al., 1999; Raban & Ure, 2000) suggests that current definitions of literacy in early childhood education tend to reflect narrow and traditional views. The multiple literacy practices of homes, communities, and early childhood settings—for example, the literacies of technology and popular culture, everyday functional uses of print, and languages other than standard Australian English—often are undervalued. This limited approach to early literacy can be a disadvantage to children from sociocultural minority groups, including children who speak languages other than English at home (Makin, Campbell, & Jones Diaz, 1995), indigenous children (Malin, 1990), and children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Freebody & Ludwig, 1995).

Connections between low literacy and social disadvantage have been identified within the last 20 years (see, for example, Connell, 1994; Kalantzis, Cope, Noble, & Poynting, 1990). Low literacy can be associated with a range of social problems, including unemployment and delinquency (Holden, 1997). Children from sociocultural minority groups make up the bulk of children less likely to experience literacy success in mainstream or school-based contexts (Gutierrez, 1994; Heath, 1982).

Many pathways lead to literacy learning. Recent conceptualizations of early literacy emphasize literacy as social practice. This embodies a view of literacy as a social construction highly important to Western, print-saturated societies. Families, communities, and cultural groups teach children what can be said, to whom and how, and under what conditions (Makin et al., 1999). Social constructionists argue that language and literacy learning is embedded in social practices in culturally specific sites, rather than in universal stages of child development and growth (Makin et al., 1999).

Sociocultural perspectives of literacy learning incorporate emergent literacy, social constructivism, and critical theory. Emergent literacy emphasizes children’s capabilities in literacy learning through active, child-initiated experiences in which functionality, meaning, and communication with print and text are important (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Social constructivism draws on the social interactionist theories of Vygotsky
(1978) and Bruner (1983). Vygotsky believed that children's capabilities with language are directly related to the collaborative and interactive nature of human communication. Bruner situated the significance of culture in language development.

Critical theory proponents, on the other hand, are more concerned with the powerful social interactivity of texts. In such an approach, children and adults critically examine the meanings represented in texts, rather than taking them for granted. Children have opportunities to consider how meanings about the world are represented and constituted in languages and literacies. Multiple literacies—such as those featured in computer games, advertising, and other media texts—are considered an appropriate starting point from which to think critically about how these texts give meanings to children's lives. As critical literacy has a social justice focus, teachers committed to this approach have “a wider agenda for social change and are concerned about social disadvantage and how this disadvantage is often sustained in pedagogy, policy and curriculum” (Makin et al., 1999, p. 37).

The Project
From September 1998 through February 1999, the authors pursued a project to map existing literacy practices in early childhood classrooms and explore the understandings and perceptions of staff and families. The project was funded by two Australian government departments: the New South Wales Department of Community Services (DoCS) and the New South Wales Department of Education & Training (DET). These departments are responsible for supporting and monitoring children's development within early childhood settings. DoCS licenses a wide range of early childhood services, including day care centers. DET manages preschools that are attached to public schools. All centers must follow state regulations that set minimum standards for such areas as staff qualifications and staff-child ratios. Supporting children's language and literacy development is a crucial aspect of both departments’ responsibilities.

The research team included specialists in early childhood education at four Project Centers established at university sites in New South Wales, Australia. Seventy-nine early childhood classrooms (24 DET, 55 DoCS) participated. All of the classrooms were in areas designated by the funding bodies as containing a significant population of economically and educationally disadvantaged students. Participation was open to all classrooms within the designated areas if a majority of their children were set to begin formal school in the following year (generally when children are 5 years old). Participation was voluntary and staff could decide to leave the project at any time. One center left the project shortly after its commencement because of other commitments.

Interviews were conducted with two staff members in each of the 79 classrooms. The 158 staff members possessed a range of qualifications (degree, diploma, untrained). The most common pattern was a trained teacher assisted by an aide with other or no qualifications.

Nine parent focus groups were conducted. The main purpose of the focus groups was to hear from a range of family members who reflected the diversity of the classrooms. Aboriginal family members constituted one focus group, led by an Aboriginal facilitator. A focus group for parents from Arabic-speaking backgrounds was also held. A third group contained representatives from a number of different cultural groups and was conducted in English. The other focus groups were primarily Anglo-Australian.

Three data collection measures were used:

- Early Childhood Language and Literacy Scale (ECLLS), developed by the research team, based on ECERS-R (1998), an internationally recognized Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, and adapted to focus on literacy. The scale contained 28 items grouped into eight subscales: Space and Furnishings, Personal Care, Language/Reasoning, Activities, Literacy, Interaction, Program Structure, and Provision for Parents.
- Semi-structured interviews with two staff in each participating classroom (total, 158). The questions related to the staff members' understanding of literacy, their views on when and how early literacy develops, their perceptions of their role in this process, and their communication with the children's families regarding early literacy.
- Nine focus group discussions that included both family members and researchers. The focus group discussions

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centered on individual literacy experiences; on the family members’ perceptions of their children’s literacy development at home, in the early childhood classroom, and in the community; and on the roles played in this process by the families and the early childhood staff.

ECLLS data were subjected to spreadsheet analysis. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed, using appropriate software. Information was compared and contrasted, as well as related to demographic details of family and staff backgrounds.

From these data sources, the following findings emerged:

- The 79 classrooms boasted many positive features; most notably, the physical environments (furnishings and room arrangement for play) were inviting and staff-child interactions could be characterized as warm and sympathetic. However, support for early literacy development (for example, literacy links in play and the development of metalinguistic awareness) generally was not strong.

- Families and staff did not have congruent perspectives in the area of early literacy. For example, staff and families often held different perceptions of how children’s early literacy should be supported in the classrooms and in the home. This incongruity was more pronounced when the families and staff did not share language and/or culture. In such cases, staff often made deficit assumptions about children’s and parents’ language and literacy proficiencies. Furthermore, a lack of congruence was evident even when there was a shared language and culture.

- Most participating early childhood staff did not possess sufficient knowledge about the impact of information technology and popular culture on early childhood literacy. On the other hand, families were very aware of the importance of these factors in their children’s emerging literacy.

- Classroom staff did not adequately understand the complex nature of the ecology of early literacy, particularly in relation to the notion of literacy as social practice. Staff tended to hold a traditional, book-based view of literacy, whereas family members held a more inclusive view that encompassed community influences such as television, videos, and computers.

In order to explore factors that might help early childhood staff provide environments that are more supportive of early literacy, features of the five highest ranking classrooms were compared with those of the five lowest ranking classrooms. Information from ECLLS, from staff interviews conducted in these 10 classrooms, and from the only focus group that contained family members from these classrooms was examined.

Classrooms in day care centers and those in preschools attached to schools were both included in the high- and in the low-ranking classrooms. Both groups had similar staff-to-child ratios (one trained teacher and one teaching assistant for approximately 20 children). Many staff characteristics were similar. The following variables did not appear to influence the rating of classrooms on ECLLS: 1) auspice (whether the classroom was a day care center or a preschool), 2) age of teaching staff, 3) number of staff who spoke a language other than English, and 4) staff members’ recent professional development experiences. High-ranking classrooms, however, had staff with more experience as teachers and who had been in their current positions longer than those in low-ranking classrooms.

There was a notable difference in the training level of assistants in the two groups. Higher ranking classrooms had assistants with two to three years of post-secondary training. The assistants in four of the five low-ranking classrooms reported having no post-secondary training.

**Information From ECLLS**

Overall, the mean score out of a possible total of 56 was 35.65; the median score was 36.68. Overall ratings for classrooms at each end of the continuum (rounded to the nearest figure) are set out in Table 1.

Each of the 28 individual items in ECLLS was ranked for each classroom from 0 to 7, with 0 representing “not observed/not applicable,” 1 “inadequate,” 2 “minimal,” and 7 “excellent.” On one item, “Furniture for routine care, play, and learning,” all 10 classrooms

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<tr>
<th>HIGH-RANKING CLASSROOMS</th>
<th>OVERALL SCORE</th>
<th>LOW-RANKING CLASSROOMS</th>
<th>OVERALL SCORE</th>
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<td>C1</td>
<td>53</td>
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<td>C5</td>
<td>45</td>
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**Table 1**
(both high and low) ranked between 5 and 7. On some items—“Dramatic play,” “Use of TV, video, and/or computers;” and “Promoting acceptance of diversity”—there was not a great difference, with both high and low classrooms showing rankings of 5 or less.

The five high-ranking classrooms rated between 6 and 7 on the following items: “Furniture for routine care, play, and learning,” “Furnishings for relaxation and comfort,” “Room arrangement for play,” “Child-related displays,” “Encouraging children to communicate,” “Using language to develop reasoning skills,” “General supervision of children,” “Staff-child interactions,” “Interactions among children,” and “Group time.” This finding indicates a positive general environment and, with specific reference to early literacy, a positive communication environment as well.

The greatest differences between top-ranking and low-ranking classrooms were in “Furnishings for relaxation and comfort,” “Using language to develop reasoning skills,” “Encouraging children to communicate,” “Art,” “Music/movement,” and “General supervision.” Low scores in these areas indicate, with specific reference to early literacy, an atmosphere in which communication is a problem.

Staff interviews revealed that they regarded art and music as important contributors to the development of young children’s communication skills, awareness of transformation, and ability to represent meaning in different forms. These areas ranked higher in the high-ranking classrooms. However, music was rated as excellent in only one of the 5 high-ranking classrooms, and in none of the low-ranking classrooms.

One item related to “Provision for parents.” Provision was deemed inadequate if parents were not given information about the program and were discouraged from observing or being involved in the program. It was deemed excellent if information was shared between staff and families, if parents were involved in program-related decisions and program evaluation, and if parents were referred to other professionals when appropriate. Out of a possible ranking of 7, the high-ranking classrooms scored 4, 2, 6, 7, and 6 on this item, while the low-ranking classrooms scored 2, 2, 1, and 2. Although a clear difference emerged between high- and low-ranking classrooms, it should be noted that even the top classrooms did not rate consistently high on provision for parents.

Five items in ECLLS were developed by researchers, introducing a new subscale, “Literacy.” The 10 classrooms at the ends of the continuum showed clear differences on these items. Rankings on the “Literacy” items are shown in Table 2.

The results from Table 2 suggest that even the high-ranking classrooms have room for improvement. For example, the item “Literacy interactions in dramatic play” scored low in two of the high-ranking classrooms, as well as in all of the low-ranking classrooms.

Staff interview questions explored a number of areas related to the provision of an environment supportive of early literacy development. Responses relating to these areas are as follows:

Knowledge and Understanding of Early Literacy and of Literacy Support Strategies. Answers to questions about where and how literacy develops and other issues exploring the knowledge base of literacy development were found to be similar for staff in both high- and low-ranking classrooms.

While both groups appeared to be informed equally about literacy development, some respondents gave answers that did not appear to match what the authors observed. In the low-ranking classrooms, for example, some staff reported that literacy development incorporated talking, listening, and interacting with texts.

### Literacy Subscale Scores of Low-/High-Ranking Classrooms

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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>HIGH-RANKING CLASSROOMS</th>
<th>LOW-RANKING CLASSROOMS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy interactions in dramatic play</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of literacy interactions</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy play</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of literacy concepts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalinguistic skill development</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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*Table 2*
However, staff were not observed interacting with children or fostering interactions between children around texts during the observation period.

**Why Literacy Is Important.** There was a slight variation in the stated reasons for early literacy development. Staff in high-ranking classrooms gave varied reasons for supporting literacy development in the early years prior to school entry. Generally, they understood its benefits for all aspects of the child's life. Staff from the lower-ranking classrooms were more likely to see literacy development as having importance primarily for school readiness. This likely affected their approaches to teaching literacy.

Staff in high-ranking classrooms were more positive about home language development in languages other than English. In lower-ranking classrooms, 15 percent of staff expressed the notion that home languages other than English did not contribute to literacy development.

**Strategies and Practices.** Some differences were evident in how staff members described their work with children. Staff in highly rated classrooms stated that verbal interactions were important as a literacy strategy twice as often as did staff in the lowest ranking classrooms. More teachers in the high-ranking group mentioned observation and the use of encouragement as key strategies for developing literacy. Ironically, more staff in the low-ranking group stated that they spent one-on-one time with the children, especially with those who were seen as needing help.

The high-ranking classrooms appeared to have a positive, encouraging environment for all children, one in which observation is used commonly to assess individual children's literacy needs. In classrooms where the literacy environment was not rated highly, the focus was more likely to be on individualized instruction for those children seen to be having "problems" (i.e., staff employed a deficit approach for "problems"; children; often, children from sociocultural minority groups were identified as needing remediation). Thus, it appeared that an inclusive ecological approach is valued more highly by staff in high-ranking early childhood classrooms than is a compensatory approach to literacy development.

**Technology, Popular Culture, and Literacy.** In the larger study of the 79 classrooms, a general lack of understanding about the uses of computers and other technologies for developing literacy was prevalent. Staff showed limited awareness of the importance of popular culture for literacy development. In relation to this factor, interview data did not reveal a significant difference between high-ranking staff and low-ranking staff. Although a few teachers in the high group mentioned computers as a tool for language development or mentioned television in a positive way, some staff from that group looked askance at its classroom use.

Staff did not report using technology as a tool for literacy development: "We have a lot of kids who sit in front of computers and TVs and that does not help foster the ability to concentrate or to develop word attack skills or look for meaning in stories" (a teacher in a high-ranking group).

Some staff in low-ranking classrooms were more enthusiastic about computer use and television: "We talk about what they watch on TV. We know that they can pick up vocabulary from television. We try to find out if they are using computers at home."

The extent to which staff appreciated, knew about, and made use of technology for literacy development did not appear to affect the ratings of the literacy environment in either low- or high-ranking classrooms.

**Parent Partnerships.** High-ranking classroom staff acknowledged the important role of parents slightly more than staff in low-ranking classrooms. A number of staff in both groups stated that parent participation was a worthwhile goal and described how they tried, in their approaches to literacy development, to complement home learning.

Of the nine focus groups conducted in the large study, one focus group was composed of family members from one of the low-ranking classrooms and was conducted in the first language of the participants (Arabic), then translated. The issues identified in this focus group related directly to the diversity of languages and cultures represented in the classroom. Essentially, the discourse practices associated with languages other than English were relatively misunderstood. Consequently, staff disregarded the children's bilingual/bicultural experiences, and seemed to view the parents' and children's experiences with literacy outside of the preschool as insignificant and, if anything, problematic. The absence of bilingual staff members from the children's language groups made it very hard for the staff to communicate effectively with the families. Furthermore, staff seemed to have little awareness of parents' perspectives and concerns about their children's bilingual development.

Information from the other focus groups supported the notion of an incongruence between staff and families, although bilingualism and biliteracy were not issues in the other groups. An area that appeared in common for all focus groups was an awareness of the important roles played by information technology and popular culture in children's early literacy development.

**Conclusion**

When ELLs ratings were examined in relation to staff interviews and focus group information, the following variables emerged as differences between staff and their beliefs/practices in high-ranking versus low-ranking classrooms.
• Stated understandings and beliefs related to early literacy development were translated into observed practices in high-ranking classrooms. This was not so for low-ranking classrooms. The corollary to this finding is that low rankings on ECCLS did not seem due to a lack of understanding or knowledge about literacy practices.
• Teachers in high-ranking classrooms were more experienced than those in low-ranking classrooms.
• Assistants in high-ranking classrooms had post-secondary training.
• Staff in high-ranking classrooms reported that early literacy development is important as a discrete life skill. Those in low-ranking classrooms tended to view the value of early literacy development in terms of school readiness goals.
• Staff in high-ranking classrooms were more likely to report on the importance of literacy in the child’s home language. Staff in low-ranking classrooms placed less value on the home language if it was other than English.
• Staff in high-ranking classrooms used general strategies such as observation, interaction, and encouragement to facilitate literacy development. Staff in low-ranking classrooms were more likely to use interaction as a strategy for children with perceived literacy problems.
• Staff in high-ranking classrooms were twice as likely as those in low-ranking classrooms to report on the importance of verbal interactions when discussing literacy strategies in the classroom.

Differences in high versus low rankings were not affected by staff attitudes towards computers and other technologies either inside or outside the classroom, nor by their awareness of popular culture as a tool for literacy development.

Implications

Studies of factors affecting program quality in early childhood programs often point to the importance of teacher qualifications and professional development (see Epstein, 1999). The study reported on in this article supports these findings and identifies specific areas of focus for professional development. Teacher education programs and professional development programs need to: ensure close links between theory and practice, offer assistance in developing a positive approach to diversity, and develop strategies for two-way communication with parents. Staff need knowledge of areas such as bilingual and biliteracy development, and of the role of technology and popular culture in children’s literacy development. Training for assistants (beyond secondary schooling) also may benefit the quality of the classroom literacy environment. High-quality programs have been shown to have clear links with positive outcomes for children (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993). Support for early literacy is a key indicator of high-quality early education.

High-quality early education plays a crucial role in providing daily opportunities to extend young children’s capabilities as emerging literates. Sociocultural, emergent, and critical literacy approaches recognize the significance in planning for children’s active engagement in constructing literacy-based knowledge through everyday practices. Learning environments that cater to children’s diverse experiences with literacy ensure that functional and environmental print is an integral part of the program. Such learning environments extend children’s engagement with a broad range of literacies congruent with their daily lives, and they facilitate children’s emerging capabilities in evaluating and critiquing the meanings represented in texts.

References