Submission from the Commission for Children and Young People to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy

Summary
This submission focuses on literacy learning and teaching in the years prior to formal schooling and the early years of school. It argues that the teaching and assessment of literacy needs to take account of contemporary theories of literacy as social practice and the notion of multiliteracies.

Building strong partnerships between educators, families and children is of paramount importance in supporting children’s early literacy learning. When effective partnerships exist, programs are able to build on children’s family and community experiences with literacy and extend these to new literacy learnings. Respect for children’s diverse experiences with literacy within the contexts of their families and communities is essential in the provision of literacy programs that strengthen children’s expertise and confidence as literacy users.

Play in small groups is also an important vehicle for early literacy learning. Literacy-enriched play with culturally relevant and authentic resources provides children with opportunities to take on roles of literacy users and experiment with print in a secure and supportive environment. The provision of small group experiences encourages the use of language as children exchange ideas and allows for educators to engage with children in one-to-one interactions that provide individualised support and scaffolding.

New conceptions of literacy
The teaching and assessment of literacy needs to take account of new perspectives on literacy. Contemporary theorists view literacy as a social practice that is situated within social and cultural contexts and that includes interactions with texts of everyday life (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996). Literacy is more than the skills of reading and writing and includes processes, concepts, attitudes, values, dispositions and social relationships (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Current perspectives on literacy have broadened from a focus only on reading and writing to be inclusive of speaking and listening, viewing and creating multimodal texts, as well as reading and writing a range of paper and electronic texts (Jones Diaz & Makin, 2002; New London Group, 1996; Zammit & Downes, 2002). New conceptualisations of literacy also include the critique of a range of texts as an essential component of literacy (Luke & Freebody, 1997).

Sociocultural theorists argue that rather than being a unitary set of skills, literacy is multifaceted, reflecting the diversity of cultural and linguistic contexts and the role of multimedia in creating and exchanging meanings (Luke, 1993). The New London Group (1996) as well as Cope and Kalantzis (2000) emphasise the diversity of literacy practices and the impact of globalisation and technology on everyday texts and argue for use of the term multiliteracies to reflect this diversity. In a globalised, technological and fast
capitalist world, visual, electronic and digital texts, texts of popular media culture and environmental print are part of the social worlds of many children (Lankshear, Gee, Knobel, & Searle, 1997; Marsh, 2005). Texts are increasingly digital, interactive and multimodal as they integrate visuals, sound and print (Lankshear et al., 1997; Hill & Broadhurst, 2002). New multimedia and hypermedia technologies enable children to play a more active role than in the past in accessing texts, creating their own multimodal texts and creating new meanings (Buckingham, 2000). Literacy programs should include a range of digital and multimedia texts and texts of everyday life that reflect children’s social worlds.

The fundamental purpose of literacy is to exchange meanings. Effective literacy programs provide many opportunities for children to use print in meaningful contexts that relate to everyday life. A competent literacy user brings many skills and understandings to the task of making meaning from and creating meaning with texts, including oral language competencies, life experiences and knowledge as well as the use of a range of cueing systems and word analysis skills. Effective literacy programs include a balance between the teaching of technical skills such as handwriting, spelling and phonics and a focus on the meaning and purposes of literacy.

New technologies make it difficult to predict what children who are now entering school will need to function effectively as literacy users in the future. Rather than skills what they are likely to need will be the ability to critically analyse and make and create meaning with a range of paper and multimodal texts. Globalisation, consumer culture and the proliferation of technologies make critical literacy essential for all.

The importance of the early years
There is increasing recognition of the importance of the early years in children’s learning. The first years of a child’s life are important in their own right as well as laying the foundation for later learning. Research on early brain development (see for example Shore, 1997) emphasizes the important role of families, communities and governments in children’s lives. It is essential that governments support families in their role as children’s first educators by providing access to family support including affordable, quality children’s services.

Literacy learning begins at birth as children’s understandings of literacy gradually emerge (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Children actively construct their own understandings of literacy as they observe and take part in the literacy practices of their families and communities. To facilitate children’s literacy learning a range of print resources should be integrated into all early childhood programs and all families should be supported to provide a literacy-enriched learning environment at home. It is essential that all children under five have opportunities to experience a range of spoken, visual and written language and to experiment with literacy processes such as reading, viewing, drawing and writing with pencil and paper and with screen technologies.
Children’s experiences with and their emergent understandings of literacy differ according to the social practices of their families and communities (Heath, 1983). As children observe and interact with the adults and children who make up their social world they learn about ways of interacting, talking, being and doing that are relevant for their family and community (Beecher & Arthur, 2001). As children interact with adults and more knowledgeable peers they jointly construct and negotiate culturally relevant meanings and learn the discourse patterns and text structures that are appropriate to their community context. It is essential that educators in prior to school and school settings know about and support children’s family and community experiences with literacy.

**Partnerships between educators, families and children**

A number of studies have found that family involvement and effective communication between educators and families benefits students’ learning (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002; Martin, 2002; Ofsted, 2003). Studies conducted by Ofsted in England (Ofsted, 2000; 2002; 2003a; 2003b) found that effective communication between schools and families had a positive impact on attendance and academic achievement for students.

Effective partnerships where there is regular two-way communication between educators and families enable educators to find out about children’s literacy expertise and extend this in the classroom (Jones Diaz et al, 2001). When educators are aware of children’s literacy experiences within their families and communities they are able to design curriculum that connects family literacies to school literacies. Two-way communication also enables families to be well-informed about the early childhood setting’s or school’s approaches to literacy teaching and their own child’s literacy learning. When educators and families regularly exchange information they are able to support each other in strengthening each child’s literacy learning.

**Respect for diverse literacy experiences**

It is important to acknowledge and value the many pathways to literacy learning that children experience in their families and communities. These include interactions with everyday texts such as catalogues and street signs, multimodal texts and texts of popular media culture (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983). In a multilingual country such as Australia many children’s earliest language and literacy experiences are in a language other than English.

There is a danger that when schools only validate English-language book-based literacies, the diverse literacies that students bring to school can be dismissed or devalued. Socio-cultural theorists such as Luke (1993) argue that when teaching practices do not value children’s diverse home and community literacies those children who are not from mainstream, English-speaking, book-oriented families have few opportunities to display their literacy knowledge and then extend this to developing competencies with school literacies.
Recent Australian studies such as *100 Children Turn 10* (Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland, & Reid, 2002) advocate that schools need to find out about family and community literacies and develop local responses to the differences between the literacy practices of children’s homes and those of school. Hill et al (2002) found that effective teachers in the early years of school were those who were able to build on children’s out of school literacies to extend their literacy repertoires. When teachers are aware of and respect the diversity of family practices and understand the importance of the quality of the relationship between families and children, they are able to move beyond limiting deficit views of diverse literacies to develop positive partnerships with families (Lingard, Martino, Mills, & Bahr, 2002).

**Literacy-enriched play**

Play builds on children’s strengths and interests and therefore offers much learning potential for children of all ages and abilities (Dockett & Lambert, 1996; NSW DET, 1999). Literacy-enriched play environments provide children with many opportunities to explore the functions and features of print and to try out and extend understandings developed in formal sessions in a less formal context (Beecher & Arthur, 2001).

In literacy-enriched play literacy is embedded in the play in the same way as it is integrated in everyday family and community practices. Literacy is thus a means to an end rather than being the end itself, and is viewed as something that is functional and relevant to everyday life (Hall & Robinson, 2001). Literacy-enriched dramatic play, such as a restaurant or shop, reflects real-world literacy events. Play provides a social context for learning where children are able to draw on their family and community experiences as they take on roles as literacy users.

Play environments that are enriched with culturally relevant resources provide opportunities for children to explore literacy processes and concepts, to develop positive dispositions towards literacy and to use literacy for a range of purposes (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2005). Literacy-enriched play environments should provide children with access to a range of literacy resources including writing materials and adult and child-produced reading materials representing a range of texts types. These encourage children to experiment with print and gradually develop their understandings.
Small group experiences
Much learning occurs as children interact with each other in small groups. As Neuman, Copple and Bredekamp (2000) have noted, when children work individually they are silent, but when they work in small groups there is much language use as they express their ideas and respond to the thoughts of others. In addition, when children are learning in small groups the educator is able to interact with individual children, providing demonstrations, scaffolding and feedback as needed. Reid (2002) also notes that there are many benefits of small groups in school classrooms as well as in prior to school settings, as educators are able to provide teaching that is focused on individual strengths and needs.

Research in the United States and in Australia has demonstrated the positive effects of small classes for children’s learning. A pilot study of reduced class sizes in the early years of school in New South Wales found that smaller classes allowed for more individualised instruction, greater support for students needing assistance, more frequent and immediate feedback and increased use of small group work (Meyenn, 2003).

A number of studies have highlighted the role of educators in guiding children’s play with literacy materials and scaffolding literacy learning (see for example Vuckelich 1991; Pickett 1998). Pickett (1998) found that when the educator played in a literacy-enriched block area alongside boys who had a low level of interest in literacy, the boys incorporated literacy in their play. When educators join in children’s play they are able to provide demonstrations of reading, model writing, sound out words, talk about letter-sound relationships and discuss concepts of print in meaningful contexts.

Regular authentic assessment
New basics and productive pedagogies suggest that more important than the acquisition of knowledge and skills are the abilities to solve problems, think critically and use information and ideas in new ways that transform meanings. In order to improve literacy outcomes for at-risk students it is necessary to explore literacy programs that connect to students’ lives and to embrace new ways of assessing literacy learning. Curriculum and assessment with strong links to everyday practices provide opportunities for all students to display their existing expertise and to build on their understandings (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; Marsh, 2003). Assessment of children’s literacy learning in real life and play contexts with authentic materials provides opportunities for children to express their understandings in a familiar and stress-free environment (Beecher & Arthur, 2001). This assessment can then be used to provide literacy programs that provide individualized teaching that builds on identified strengths and caters for individual needs.
Integration of everyday functional uses of literacy across the curriculum

Effective teaching strategies include using literacy throughout the day and across the curriculum in meaningful experiences that reflect the everyday authentic literacy practices of children’s home and communities (Jones Díaz et al. 2001). When early childhood settings and schools integrate texts from daily life, children are able to see the ways in which literacy is part of everyday social practices (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002). Inclusion in the literacy program of familiar texts such as magazines and television programs enables children who do not have traditional book-based literacy experiences to display their existing literacy understandings and extend their repertoire of literacy practices (Alloway et al., 2002; Hill et al., 2002).

Links between students’ social worlds and the world of the classroom can assist in engaging students in traditional and contemporary literacy practices (Beecher & Arthur, 2001; Rowan et al., 2002). This is particularly important for children who are from minority backgrounds and children who do not engage with traditional book-based classroom literacies. Children are more likely to engage with literacy when it links to their interests and experiences outside of school (Alloway et al., 2002; Rowan et al., 2002). When early childhood settings and schools are able to connect school literacy to everyday family and community literacies including multimedia, popular culture, technologies, and everyday texts, there are many opportunities for students to become engaged in literacy learning and to link community literacies to school literacies. Rowan et al. (2002, p.163) warn however that schools need to ensure that they make links to students’ family and community experiences in ways that acknowledge and value diversity and not in ways that are tokenistic.

Inclusion of a wide variety of texts

The literacy experiences of many Australian children include experiences with popular media culture and multimodal texts (Makin et al. 1999; Arthur 2005) as well as what Reid (1998, p. 239) terms the “functional, social and economic interactions of buying and consuming”. Many children develop literacy understandings as they interact with computer games, negotiate their way around internet sites, listen to and watch DVDs, read catalogues and take part in family shopping experiences (Beecher & Arthur, 2001).

A number of researchers, including Makin et al (1999) and Martino (2001) in Australia and Millard (2003) in England, have argued that there is often a lack of congruence between the multimodal nature of students’ experiences with literacy within the contexts of their families and communities and the types of texts present in classrooms. These findings point to the importance of school literacies connecting to students lived experiences, including texts of popular culture and technology as well as multimodal and multimedia texts.

Early childhood settings and schools need to find ways of creating greater congruence between the everyday literacies of children’s families and communities and school literacies. As Alloway et al (2002, p. 158) asserted, schools’ ability to “interface with and draw productively on” the ways of being and interacting and the literacy experiences and expertise that students bring
from home are important in increasing students’ engagement with school literacies.

The inclusion in classrooms of texts of popular media culture provides opportunities for children to draw on their out of school knowledge and experience (Arthur, 2005; Marsh, 2000). The use of popular media culture provides opportunities for children to display expertise in the classroom in ways that traditional materials generally do not (Alloway et al., 2002). Opportunities to use a range of media such as models, posters and photographs as well as to create multimodal texts reflects children’s experiences with literacy in the worlds of their families and communities.

A number of authors, including Alloway et al. (2002) and Rowan et al. (2002) advocate a transformative curriculum where there is a fusion of students’ interests and school curriculum. Students’ interests and passions can assist educators as they work with students to help them transform what they know into literacies that are powerful in the wider word and to develop the ability to critique a range of texts.

References


