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The early years of schooling

An initiative of the Director General's Classroom First Strategy



Department of Education

From the Director General

To achieve our Classroom First objectives we need to pay particular attention to the early years of schooling from Kindergarten to Year 2. These years are the platform from which every child can become a successful student.

In 2010, a review of educational practice in Kindergarten, Pre-primary and Year 1 provision in Western Australia was undertaken by Professor Collette Tayler from The University of Melbourne. It found a lack of clarity among early childhood educators and school leaders about what constitutes high quality early childhood curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. It also found that practice in the early years is inconsistent across schools, with no clear guiding vision and expectations.

We also know that our national test results in literacy and numeracy indicate that, by Year 3, our students are not doing as well as students in several other states. There are signs of improvement in recent years but we need to re-examine our approach in the early years of school if we are to equal or exceed the best in Australia.

The practice of teachers in these years must be based on the best available evidence of what will maximise the development and learning outcomes of young children. This includes taking account of children's varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds; and building on their existing knowledge, skills and enthusiasm for learning.

This statement is intended to help school leaders and early childhood teachers by providing them with clear expectations along with guidance about curriculum, pedagogies and assessment appropriate to the early years.

I trust it will make a contribution to the delivery of high quality educational opportunities to children in the critical first years of school.



Sharyn O'Neill
Director General

September 2011

Our expectations of students in the early years

It is more than a decade since the school starting age for children in Western Australia was increased.

Since then, the system's expectations of children beginning school have remained the same even though the children are on average six months older. This is likely to be a contributing factor to Western Australia's Year 3 NAPLAN results being below the national average.

With the advent of the national Early Years Learning Framework, development of the Australian Curriculum and increased hours for learning in Kindergarten, it is timely to raise our expectations of what students can achieve in their first years at school.

While an across-curriculum approach characterises teaching in the early years, it does not mean that programs are content free. On the contrary, from the beginning of Kindergarten, teachers are expected to plan engaging, challenging and supportive learning programs that give children every opportunity to learn by building on children's existing knowledge, skills and interests.

The Early Years Learning Framework and Australian Curriculum clarify what we expect students to achieve in the early years. When finalised, the Australian Curriculum will set the curriculum content and achievement standards for Pre-primary, Year 1 and Year 2.

For Kindergarten, content will be based on the general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum, focusing on personal and social competence, and preparatory literacy and numeracy capabilities (see page 6).

It is important that schools continue to plan for program cohesion and continuity across the early years of schooling. Kindergarten teachers need to know about and lay the groundwork for the Australian Curriculum, while Pre-primary, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers need to draw on the Early Years Learning Framework and accompanying educators' guide for early childhood pedagogical advice.

Guidance about pedagogies

For many years, early childhood educators have debated how formalised the learning program should be for our youngest students.

Those advocating a play-based learning program are often cast as adversaries of those who believe young children need explicit teaching to prepare them for literacy and numeracy success in later years of school.

It is unhelpful to construe these as opposed positions. Play-based learning is not 'just play'. When implemented with care, planning and deliberate learning goals in mind, it is an effective vehicle for achieving expected outcomes for children in the early years.

We expect teachers to use a range of pedagogies, and the Director General's Statement on Effective Teaching applies equally to the early years as it does to all other years of schooling.

The Early Years Learning Framework, Curriculum Framework and findings of Professor Tayler's review point to the need for intentional teaching which requires early childhood educators to:

- be vigilant in their assessment of children's capacities and needs; and to systematically record, analyse and use these assessments to inform their planning
- be purposeful in the selection of strategies and resources in pursuit of clear learning goals for each child
- ensure children have every opportunity to learn through engaging activities, hands-on experiences and in environments where they are required to make decisions and stretch the boundaries of their learning
- routinely engage children in the kind of conversations that will extend their thinking
- focus as much on the process of children's learning (the thinking dispositions we want them to develop) as on the content of lessons and activities
- use a range of group and individual activities.

On-entry assessment of literacy and numeracy

One important input to assessing each student's progress is the on-entry assessment of literacy and numeracy at the start of Pre-primary.

The on-entry test items focus on skills and understandings that are known to predict future literacy and numeracy success. Teachers are able to draw on individual results and other assessment information to extend children who perform well and support those who need more time.

Some children who do not perform well in the on-entry assessment are perfectly capable and will quickly progress when provided with a well designed learning program. Others will require more support, focusing on areas of need identified through the on-entry assessment.

Each child's prospects of success hinge on learning programs that are tailored to their point-in-time capacities and interests. Clearly these change, so ongoing formative assessments across the breadth of the curriculum are required to continually inform program planning and delivery.

Resources to support formative assessment of literacy and numeracy across the early years of schooling include the First Steps developmental continua; Literacy Net and Numeracy Net to pin-point areas of need for children who are struggling; and the ESL/ESD Progress Map to monitor progress among children who are learning English as an additional language or dialect.



Educational leadership of the early years

The early years of schooling from Kindergarten to Year 2 are half the span of primary school so principals have a critical role to play in leading early childhood programs within their schools.

While early years' teachers may have specific expertise in early childhood development and learning, it is the responsibility of each principal to ensure there is continuity in the learning program across Kindergarten, Pre-primary, Year 1 and Year 2, and that the school operates with one cohesive whole-school plan.

In some schools, Kindergarten and Pre-primary teachers in particular operate in isolation from the rest of the school, often with a quite different educational philosophy and practice. This can result in a disconnection between teaching programs in those years and subsequent years.

All teachers share responsibility for the performance of all students in the school, and school leaders are responsible for making sure all staff operate as a team. This means, for example, that all early years' teachers need to be familiar with Year 3 literacy and numeracy requirements and understand their role in preparing students for the demands of future years.

Conversely, failure to integrate early years' perspectives into whole-school planning robs the rest of the school of the essential input from teachers who are providing the critical building blocks for student success in the later years.

Practical support for teachers in the early years

Early years teachers have support to improve their practice from a range of sources.

With the new model for school support, resources previously placed outside schools are increasingly being allocated to schools. This means staff within schools can decide how best to use those resources to get the help they need. This is consistent with the overall direction of empowering school staff with greater decision making authority than previously.

The new School Networks are another source of support for teachers. Within each network, principals are able to identify the early childhood expertise that could be used to benefit other schools in the network. Teachers repeatedly tell us that getting practical assistance and ideas from highly expert teaching colleagues is the best form of support – and School Networks are facilitating this.

A suite of early childhood professional learning opportunities is offered for school leaders and early childhood teachers through the Institute for Professional Learning. This is supplemented by approximately 16 Teacher Development Schools supporting teachers and developing online resources (video vignettes, practice anecdotes and discussion forums) that showcase the practices of innovative and highly skilled teachers across the early years of schooling.



Critical role of support staff in the early years

Given the high proportion of support staff in the early years, developing the expertise of early childhood education assistants and Aboriginal and Islander education officers returns a strong dividend to schools.

A pilot program in 2010 revealed that, in many schools, support staff are an untapped resource and greater attention should be given to their training and development.

Schools may also wish to re-think the roles of key support staff, especially in relation to models of extended service schools. Support staff in many schools have long-term connections within their communities and are well placed to facilitate collaborative partnerships with local agencies, groups and individuals.

Parents as partners

Teachers in the early years are vital in establishing positive and collaborative relationships with families.

When parents are connected, informed and supportive of their children's learning, children's engagement with school and learning is better.

It is also important that parents share information about their children with the school – when things are going well and when there are problems – so teachers can respond to each child appropriately. This is more likely to happen when teachers have built respectful, trusting and friendly relationships with families of children in their classes.

Providing extended services

Many schools currently provide services for younger children who are not yet eligible to enrol in school.

Many of these initiatives have been developed in collaboration with other government and non-government agencies in the immediate community. Principals have had legitimate concerns that policies or legislation have been barriers to establishing valuable local initiatives that would benefit young children and their families.

We are working to change policies and legislation that are getting in the way of these good things happening in school communities for the benefit of very young children who will soon become students in our schools.



Curriculum expectations for Kindergarten

For Kindergarten, the holistic general capabilities in the Australian Curriculum provide a bridge between outcomes in the Early Years Learning Framework and learning area content descriptors in the Australian Curriculum that apply from Pre-primary.

Birth	1	2	3	4 Kindergarten	Pre-primary	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 and beyond
Early Years Learning Framework (2009) early childhood pedagogy and five broad outcomes					Australian Curriculum (in draft form) general capabilities, cross-curriculum priorities, learning area content and standards			
				Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten to Year 12 Education in Western Australia (1998)				

Of the seven general capabilities, the focus in Kindergarten is on **personal and social competence and preparatory numeracy and literacy capabilities**.

The following expectations for Kindergarten draw on findings from landmark research including the *National inquiry into the teaching of literacy* (Rowe, 2005), *Teaching for growth: Effective teaching of literacy and numeracy* (Louden, Rohl and Hopkins, 2008) and First Steps in Mathematics research.

Personal and social competence

Personal and social competencies are prominent in the outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework and have a big impact on a child's ability to succeed in the school setting.

On entry to Kindergarten, children bring a range of prior experiences of interacting with other children and adults outside their families. Some are confident and socially adept while others may have formed behaviour patterns that distance them from other children and learning opportunities. All children need support to learn alternative ways to respond to the large range of new social and cultural situations they encounter for the first time at school.

Teachers and education assistants in Kindergarten are responsive to the range of prior-to-school perspectives and behaviours that children bring and, as required, explicitly teach new ways of approaching new situations.

To succeed at school, children need to acquire new skills to enable them to contribute within the classroom environment and school structures. These include how to join and participate in groups; work by themselves; 'read' and respect the feelings of others; stand up for themselves; deal with frustration and conflicts; express their needs and preferences in ways that are acceptable within the group; offer assistance; ask for and accept help; ask questions and listen to answers; start and end conversations; persevere; and express opinions and needs in ways that maintain class harmony.

Children require varying amounts of time; planned opportunities to practice new skills; modelling; redirection; and feedback to develop a productive range of personal and social competencies.

Preparatory numeracy capabilities

Learning programs provide opportunities for children to explore and enjoy learning mathematical ideas on their own and with others. Activities enable children to solve problems which are meaningful for them. Teachers encourage persistence, curiosity and a willingness to try out new ideas; they engage children in conversations to extend their thinking.

The emergent and subsequent phases of the First Steps in Mathematics diagnostic maps and K-7 Numeracy Net provide a useful focus for planning.

Quantifying small collections

Most children enter Kindergarten able to recognise 'one', 'two' or 'three' objects simply by their appearance. This skill is essential for understanding that numbers are used to quantify (that is, to say 'how many' in a collection). It is the basis of early partitioning. Playing card games such as 'snap' help children understand that the same collection can be arranged differently without changing its size. Children should also talk about whether changes they make to a collection make it bigger, smaller or the same. This is the foundation of addition and subtraction.

Early counting

In Kindergarten, children copy counting behaviours and try to match one number name to each object as they count to at least four. Learning programs capitalise on stories, songs and chants that include counting (for example, Do we have enough bowls for the three bears?). Teachers' conversations with children should help them understand that the 'one', 'two' or 'three' which children recognise 'just by looking' is the same quantity as the 'one', 'two' or 'three' which they find by counting.

Regularity

Regularity underpins many mathematical ideas. Children should have frequent opportunities to make, copy and describe patterns in drawings, music making, songs and when moving to music (for example, clap, stamp, clap, stamp...; my wavy line goes up, down, up...). Drawing children's attention to the regularity of specific routines may help them notice the repeated occurrence of these events.

Preparatory numeracy capabilities (continued)

Sorting and classifying

Kindergarten children need many opportunities to sort and classify collections of objects based on similarity and difference, and to talk about the reasons for their groupings. Activities could include selecting a matching shape from a collection or grouping objects based on their suitability for an intended purpose (for example, groups circular objects together and says 'these are all for wheels').

Shape and position

Learning activities that support the development of children's understanding of shape and position provide opportunities for children to describe and represent key features of shapes found in pictures and objects using everyday language (for example, the pointy one, the wavy side, the sharp corners). Activities include games which require children to respond to and use positional language (for example, under, on top of, behind, near, next to).

Measurement attributes

Most Kindergarten children compare the size of objects by looking at their overall appearance. Planned, play-based activities should challenge children to distinguish between different forms of general bigness. This could include selecting appropriately matched sized containers to hold food for a teddy bears' picnic or deciding whether a piece of material is big enough to be used as a blanket in the doll's pram. Conversations with children include responding to and using the language of the attributes (for example, thin-fat, heavy-light, tall-short).

Preparatory literacy capabilities

Learning programs provide rich opportunities for children to expand their English language skills, knowledge and understandings, building a platform for future literacy learning. It is important for this learning to occur in an environment that engages children with a wealth of literature and enjoyable language and literacy experiences.

Research shows strong links between children's oral language, phonological awareness, vocabulary and print awareness and their success in learning to read and write. It also shows learning programs are most effective when they are tailored to children's pre-existing capacities – stretching those who are ready for greater challenges and supporting those who need more time.

Oral language

Literacy grows from a solid oral language base. Children entering Kindergarten have a wide range of oral language skills and varied experiences of English language and literacy. Teachers build on these language resources as they engage children in meaningful experiences that extend their learning of, about and through English language.

For children whose home language or dialect is not Standard Australian English, starting Kindergarten may be the first time they are immersed in an English speaking environment. Many such children go through a 'silent period' while they begin to acquire English language skills. These children need English teaching programs that specifically address their second language acquisition needs, including explicit teaching of key English language features, vocabulary and usage. Without explicit teaching, the effective acquisition of English may be delayed.

Phonological awareness

Before children can learn to read and write independently they must develop the capacity to distinguish individual sounds within words. This includes the capacity to identify rhyme, syllables, first, last and middle sounds; and identify 'same' and 'different' sounds.

Not all children develop these skills before the end of Kindergarten but learning programs are planned to provide children with every opportunity to do so, and each child's progress is systematically monitored. For advice about developing phonological awareness go to the online resource *Words, sounds and letters: Kindergarten* (det.wa.edu.au/k12resources).

In any Kindergarten group, there is a range of pre-existing phonological awareness. Children with limited experience of word-and-sound play may require more time to develop these important skills and understandings. Delayed progress may also arise from impaired hearing. Daily 'breathe, blow, cough' routines help to clear blocked ears. It is important that teachers are alert to children who cannot distinguish sounds and arrange for hearing test referrals. This ensures that cases of conductive hearing loss are identified early and appropriate program adjustments can be made.

Vocabulary

As a broad and varied vocabulary is a strong predictor of future literacy development, programs must provide rich and varied experiences that give rise to a wide range of words and ideas. Experiences and activities should capture the interest and imagination of children – taking the lead from things individual children are already interested in, or literature or events – and provide a stimulus for children's reasoning and concept development through extended conversations with educators and each other.

An important aspect of vocabulary development is learning the words that are used to talk about language – 'metalinguage'. There needs to be a lot of talk about talk in the classroom, where language itself is discussed as an object of fascination. In culturally diverse classes, this includes discussing different words and phrases used to mean the same thing in different languages and in non-standard varieties of English.

Families of children who speak a language other than English or a non-standard variety of English need to be assured that their children are learning English at school, but that their continued use of their first language/dialect at home is important. This is because children are still learning their first language/dialect so its continued use at home contributes to their overall concept development, sense of belonging and cultural identity.

Concepts of print

In parallel with phonological awareness and vocabulary, learning programs need to develop children's concepts of print. This includes the knowledge that printed words remain constant; written English goes from left to right, top to bottom; words are separated by spaces; individual letters have a name and a common associated sound, have upper and lower case forms, and can look different across various fonts; and (later) that individual letters and groups of letters can represent several sounds depending on which letters are with them. Extensive advice about developing children's concepts of print is in the First Steps in Literacy resources.



W: det.wa.edu.au