

Productivity Commission Submission

It's excellent that our Australian Government is committing to a high quality early childhood education and care system. The focus of this submission is to discuss the objective **addressing children's learning and development needs, including the transition to schooling** by implementing systems change (birth to 8 years). Literacy skills are important as they underpin a successful society, so this is a focus in the discussion.

Policy priority

It is critical that quality early childhood education is a government priority as early education plays a key role in building the foundation skills children need for later learning (OECD, 2013) and this can result in cost benefits for many years (e.g., Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002). President Obama in his 2013 State of the Union speech said "In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children...studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own. We know this works. So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind" (The White House, 2013).

Problems

- Although there is a vision for Australia to be a world leader in education, our international reading results have declined.
- Literacy skills of children starting kindergarten in NSW (using the 'Best Start' assessment) have not improved. Results have been similar since 2010 (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2013).
- There is a large research-to-practice gap. An Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) report (Meiers, Reid, McKenzie, & Mellor, 2013) on the evidence for the effectiveness of literacy programs used in the first years of our primary schools states: "Based on the criteria used for the review, among the **literacy interventions** reviewed there is no research evidence or very limited evidence available for the efficacy of: *Accelerated Literacy; Best Start; First Steps; Language, Learning and Literacy; Literacy on Track, Literacy Lessons; Focus on Reading, Off to a Good Start: Learning to Read K–2 (OTAGS); Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL); Reading Matters; or Reading to Learn* (p.129) ". "Only in a small number of

cases is there a reasonably strong base of research evidence which assesses the efficacy of literacy interventions; *Reading Recovery*; and *MultiLit*" (p.129). The Australian reported that "the effectiveness of Reading Recovery has been questioned, with the Queensland government dropping it in 2008 and a recent report in New Zealand blaming it for the lack of improvement in reading skills there. The ACER report fails to mention one of the biggest flaws in the Reading Recovery research: reporting only students who successfully complete the program, with those who struggle to make progress withdrawn about 14 weeks in and not included in evaluations" (Ferrari, 2013, para. 13-14).

- Researchers report that children who have difficulty learning to read by the end of Year 1 often continue to be poor readers (see Chard & Kameenui, 2000). There's an inequality if some children start school without adequate language development and key early literacy experiences.
- Some child care workers lack formal qualifications and the qualified educators including those in rural and remote areas, need ongoing professional learning and support. Many teachers and families are not aware of evidence-based practices they could embed into everyday routines.
- It's easier for a system to keep the status quo than to action changes.

The solution

What if we could change the future for our children? High quality early education starting with babies and toddlers is a powerful way to do just that. 'High quality' education includes using evidence-based practices to improve the way we teach our children.

Evidence-based practices are interventions and strategies that have been scientifically demonstrated to work. Such research is usually published in peer reviewed journals, has been scrutinised by researchers and academics, and there are many studies supporting the effectiveness of the practice. I look for experimental studies that have been repeated across investigators, settings and participants and document similar outcomes for similar children. Unlike medicine, evidence-based practices have not been universally embraced in education. In fact, some argue that education remains firmly stuck in the pre-scientific era. It's time for educators to use a scientific approach, particularly when teaching important skills that people need for everyday living (such as reading and communication).

A part of the solution is already available, it's just about the government reaching out to grasp the opportunity. It's a matter of looking at the best available research evidence in the world and using it. We need to intentionally transform the education system so that effective evidence-based practices can be identified, widely adopted, and implemented well in early education (birth to 8 years) now and in years to come. This includes regular measurement of what's working and if our children are learning. In addition, universal screening to identify vulnerable and at risk children early, followed by intervention is ideal.

An international movement to address the research-to-practice gap has started, and Australian education hasn't moved with it. Although this work is relatively new, we now have a clear framework based on a review of the literature (i.e., Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005), about how to move the science into practice to improve outcomes for people, such as young children. This can work across disciplines (e.g., health, welfare), not just education.

A cutting edge way of transforming our education system is to set up a *State Implementation and Research Centre for Evidence-Based Practice in Early Education* to support the implementation of evidence-based practices in long day care centres, preschools and schools. There would be a flow on effect for families. This centre would be different from other centres, for example, the NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation that provides information about evidence. It's not enough just to provide information. Researchers have found that information alone, does not result in moving the evidence into practice to benefit people (see p.20 Fixsen et al., 2005). Key features of the proposed implementation and research centre are that teachers are supported so they can develop competency and child progress is monitored.

The concept is similar to what's happening in other countries. For example, in the United States, there is a state implementation centre based at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Staff are working intensively with seven states to set up frameworks that will help them implement evidence-based practices in primary schools. Independent centres have been established in other countries to address important social issues. For example, in Norway, the government established an independent national implementation and research centre to respond to

problems with youth behaviour (see Ogden, Hagen, Askeland, & Christensen, 2009 for further information).

Our early education implementation and research centre needs to be tailored to meet our Australian needs. The use of technology could help meet the needs of those in rural, regional and remote areas. After examining the work of centres in other countries, it appears that the combination of careful selection of evidence-based practices, implementation, mission-orientated research, and evaluation, in one mission-driven centre to improve outcomes for children, works. Legislators, leaders (e.g., principals, directors), centre staff, researchers and practitioners all have an important role to play. One of the most important characteristics of these centres is that they have clear guidelines on how to work with existing systems and services such as preschools, and remain independent of the organisations that they serve.

Here in Australia, we need an education system that is always improving. It's important to conduct our own research as well as adopt the best evidence from other countries. For example, language interventions have been found to be more effective with children under 3 years, rather than the older 3-5 year old children (Fischel & Landry, 2008).

What is a cost effective way of optimising children's learning and development?

Competent implementation of effective evidence-based practices (0-8 years) is the key. Building an infrastructure so this can happen for many years is a sustainable solution.

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