

Building Bridges Between Preschool and School

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THE STATE OF Victoria has a proud and wonderful history in preschool education. So too has primary education in the state system. However, over the past 20 years, significant changes have occurred in state and federal funding, commitment and organisation that have resulted in, among other things, a significant and profound gap between preschool and primary education.

Victoria has always separated its preschool and primary systems. Preschool, or kindergarten as it is often called, has never sat within the education department. It has always been administered within health or welfare or community or human services.

Most university courses within Victoria also held separate courses for their primary or preschool education. Interestingly however, there was an opportunity many decades ago for primary teachers to specialise in what was then called an infant training certificate that covered the first three years of school. This course focused upon early childhood development, play as a pedagogy and other aspects of early childhood education.

As with many aspects of education and pre-service courses in the past decades, specialisation was replaced with more generalist courses assuming that if you could teach in Grade 6 you could teach in Grade Prep. There has been a growing

trend at some levels to assume that teaching and learning were about a range of strategies rather than strategies based upon sound knowledge of child development and the different ways young children take in, process and make sense of learning opportunities.

The gap between preschool and primary widened considerably and could almost be described as a chasm. For children moving between preschool and school, transition was simply a range of orientation sessions. As for pedagogy, similar teaching and learning, a shared or common curriculum, or sharing of information, none of this whatsoever existed. Children would enter school and face totally different teaching methodologies and very little, in most cases no, communication between the preschool teacher and the primary teacher would have occurred.

There was an assumption that the child who learned through active engagement, hands-on experiences and play at the end of one year would suddenly undergo some magical transformation and be ready to learn in a significantly more formal manner once they reached school.

The reality of course is that the child who leaves preschool at the end of one year and five weeks later commences school is the same child, with the same brain, similar stage of maturity and experience and in the ideal world would simply walk through the school door into a learning environment that complements and provides continuity in curriculum, teaching styles and pedagogy.

While it may have taken 100-plus years to occur, finally some exciting developments are starting to occur right across Victoria, in rural, suburban and inner city schools and preschools.

The early years' conference for example, which has been held for many years, is now getting hundreds of delegates, with preschool and primary teachers eager to listen, share and work together.

Local governments have taken up the initiative and hold symposiums once a term where primary and preschool teachers meet, discuss, share and find out about each other's programs. Some of these initiatives have resulted in exciting programs and achievements. One local government organised for the teachers across both sectors to write and distribute a pamphlet that discussed school readiness and school transition. This enabled a consistent and shared message to be sent to all families in that area.

Other local governments have sponsored professional development sessions on literacy, numeracy, play-based curriculum and other aspects of teaching and learning across the two sectors.

One local government has actually used the VELS curriculum framework to develop an early childhood curriculum framework so that links between child care, preschool and prep can be assured. Some local governments have sponsored the development of portfolios that move across from the preschool to the prep teachers so that information between the two can be shared.

Many schools are now contacting and meeting with their local preschool teachers. Shared information evenings are being sponsored by the schools and preschools working together for parents to attend on a range of topics such as the importance of

play, resilience, literacy in the early years and school readiness.

Much has been debated and discussed in recent years about the importance of community hubs where maternal and child health, child care, dental or health facilities are co-located.

Unfortunately, these discussions often left out the relationship between early childhood and primary education.

Therefore it is extremely pleasing and exciting to witness schools and preschools, principals, preschool directors and some cluster management groups of preschools now recognising how important it is to start to organise local networks, committees, symposiums and meetings. Shared understanding, shared language and shared values about early learning must be integral aspects of curriculum and pedagogy between preschool and the early years of school.

An early childhood curriculum that commences at preschool and links directly with the early years of school curriculum is a long-awaited need within Victoria.

Moving so quickly into the 21st century demands educators, administrators, and those in government to move swiftly away from the traditional divisions that existed between preschool and school in this state.

It is in children's and families' interests that effective and smooth transition occurs because the curriculum and pedagogy is the same.

Currently, the great initiatives of getting teachers across the two sectors to meet have taken place at the local level through some committed teachers, and/or through local government taking up the challenge and recognising that it is in their own communities' interests to have these two sectors working together. Those teachers across the two sectors have regular meetings and share professional development, and the system itself allows and provides for this.

At the current time however, we need not only good will but good management, effective systems and formalised processes that ensure that all preschools and schools are networking, sharing and working together in a similar curriculum framework and pedagogy.

My work with schools and preschools over the past five years in particular has highlighted how similar the values and hopes of teachers across the two sectors actually are. The gaps that exist are not because teachers want different things for children, but simply because traditionally each sector has been left almost completely ignorant of each other's work, approaches to learning and teaching and curriculum.

Organisation, leadership, government structures that ensure preschool sits within education; all of these issues need to continue to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The children and families of this and future generations should not be subject to different and separate curriculum across preschool and school. The early childhood years are internationally recognised as being from birth to age 8. These years need a curriculum that focuses upon sound early childhood pedagogy. Systems and organisations need to be established now to ensure that preschool and school move in closer alignment.

The introduction in many schools of the play-based curriculum is another example

of how schools and preschools are attempting to provide continuity and consistency for children as they move across from preschool. Schools that are now using the play-based curriculum report consistently that children and families are happier, attendance is more consistent, oral language has significantly improved and the overall wellbeing of the children is higher.

However, these initiatives need to be consistent and supported by government so that all teachers and all children have the opportunity to understand and implement sound practices that complement each other.

It seems, luckily, that we have almost moved away from the old and tired argument from some that preschool education would be contaminated or harmed in some way if it sat within the education department. Strong evidence now exists that in fact placing early childhood alongside and within education provides a push-up model for the early years of school and ensures an even stronger commitment for both preschool and the early years of school.

Brain research and many international studies continue to highlight the importance of preschool education. It should not be forgotten that a preschool program and the major elements of its teaching and learning can be continued and extended into the early years of school, ensuring that young children can continue their early learning within a consistent framework.

The challenges for Victoria organisationally are that we must ensure that preschool education sits clearly within and alongside primary education as a state-based, free, accessible program for all children in the year before prep.

At the current time, affordability, access, lack of understanding of the program in relation to primary and the fact that preschool education has been with (until now) a human service department rather than education have all contributed to the decline in accessibility and affordability. In addition, these issues have perpetuated the lack of shared understandings between sectors and therefore resulted inadvertently in a lack of continuity in teaching and learning for young children across their early childhood years.

We are now in exciting times where primary and preschool education have finally placed themselves together on the map as moving in the same direction and needing a greater level of shared understanding. It is now up to the state and federal governments, and not just local government, to ensure that organisationally a system will be put in place to ensure this continues to occur and that curriculum frameworks, pedagogy and links across preschool and school teachers are assured.