

## **Refereed Conference Paper**

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### **Title**

Literacy in the preschool: Teachers' beliefs, theories and practices.

### **Author(s)**

Janet Anne Scull, Robert Brown and Jan Deans

### **Abstract**

Changing imperatives around the teaching of literacy in preschools have instigated shifts beyond traditional approaches where the development of emotional and social skills are prioritised, to more interactive pedagogies that aim to respond to children's emerging interest in literacy and target the advancement of knowledge in this domain. To investigate current early childhood literacy teaching practice, this paper examines data collected from eight preschool teachers who participated in the first year of The Young Learners' Project, a longitudinal study (2008-2011) that aims to identify factors that are positively associated with high outcomes in early years literacy. The analysis reveals the dominant pedagogical beliefs of practitioners, teaching practices and literacy concepts prioritised. It affords insights into how preschool teachers attend to children's interests in literacy and in doing so identifies pedagogical issues and challenges and continuities between literacy interpretations and practices.

### **Keywords**

Preschools, emotional and social skills, interactive pedagogies, early childhood literacy practices, The Young learners' Project.

### **Author contact information**

#### **Janet Anne Scull**

The Melbourne Graduate  
School of Education  
The University of Melbourne  
Victoria, 3010  
Email:  
[j.scull@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:j.scull@unimelb.edu.au)

#### **Robert Brown**

The Melbourne Graduate  
School of Education  
The University of Melbourne  
Victoria 3010  
Email:  
[r.brown@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:r.brown@unimelb.edu.au)

#### **Jan Deans**

The Melbourne Graduate  
School of Education  
The University of Melbourne  
Victoria 3010  
Email:  
[j.deans@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:j.deans@unimelb.edu.au)



## **Literacy in the preschool: Teachers' beliefs, theories and practices.**

The significance of the early years, and preschool contexts as sites for learning, where children can develop understandings of the purposes and functions of literacy has been recently reinforced by Australian Government initiatives, both national and state, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; State of Victoria, 2008), to establish common curriculum goals and learning outcomes for children. These documents highlight the importance of children developing effective communication skills with particular emphasis being placed on literacy learning, an area of knowledge and skill often contested, with preschool teachers reported as seeing this as the domain of schooling and of little concern to them (Fleer & Raban, 2006; Ure & Raban, 2001). Whilst literacy is now noted as a key focus in the years prior to school, the role of and responsibilities of early childhood educators in respect to literacy teaching are still unclear. With reference to current practice this paper examines how literacy teaching is conceptualised and enacted in a number of preschools in Victoria. It provides insight into the opportunities for literacy learning provided for children, the literacy concepts teachers prioritise and their underpinning beliefs and educational theories.

The Young Learners' Project is a large scale longitudinal study (2008-2011) that aims to identify factors including, the role of the teacher, home life and child characteristics, that are positively associated with high outcomes in literacy in the first year of schooling. This paper reports on a sub-study within this larger project, involving 30 early childhood teachers, that is investigating how teacher beliefs and theoretical constructs translate into practice and the impact of these beliefs and practices on 4-5 year old children's literacy experiences and outcomes in the year before school.

### **Literacy in the preschool**

It is a widely held view that learning to read and write in the school setting will be easier for children with rich home and preschool literacy experiences that introduce them to the world of print and messages in texts (Clay, 1991; Purcall-Gates, 1996). While this does not imply that preschools necessarily take on the role of formal literacy instruction, it legitimises discussion around the concept of emergent literacy, a term that captures the accumulation of skills, knowledges and attitudes that upon which formal instruction will build (Clay, 1991; Purcall-Gates, 1996; Raban, 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Such views of emergent literacy promote the preschool period as time when young children develop literacy like behaviours through exposure to interactions in the social contexts in which literacy is a component (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Further, distinguishing emergent literacy from pre-reading and reading readiness perspectives, is an understanding that reading, writing and oral language develop concurrently and interdependently (Clay, 2001; Raban, 1999; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), supporting a gradual process of children becoming literate. A recent study of current literacy programs in *The European Union* (Tafa, 2008) found kindergarten literacy acquisition

instruction was generally based on the principles of emergent literacy, with children encouraged to understand the form and functions of written words. Rather than skill and drill activities with a focus on visual and auditory development, associated in the past with concepts of readiness, Tafa (2008) found that “today conditions and situations are created and activities initiated within the classroom that allow children to approach the written word through actions that have meaning for them and a clear purpose and communication” (p.168).

The ability to integrate print and meaning related skills is largely dependent on children’s oral language mastery. The social and instructional contexts in which children experience and use language can be seen as opportunities to develop a repertoire of language practices which is facilitative of early literacy development (Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant, 2004; Clay, 1991; Raban, 1999, 2000; Snow, 1991). Indeed, Snow, Dickinson and colleagues have identified relationships between children’s use of decontextualised, extended talk and vocabulary knowledge as having an impact on literacy outcomes (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Similarly, children’s phonological awareness, recognised as significant to children’s and literacy development, is best developed through rich and playful oral language use (Bryant & Bradley, 1985; Clancy-Menchetti & Lonigan, 2008; Goswami, 2000; Phillips, Yopp, & Yopp, 2000). Hence, the critical role of oral language as a resource for and beneficiary of literacy learning is acknowledged with an emphasis on building competency and expertise across these domains in a mutually reinforcing manner (Clay, 2001, 2004).

Experiences of print in authentic contexts of use, supports children awareness of the role of print in their daily lives and allows children to build a conceptual framework about the nature and purposes of printed materials (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Ure & Raban, 2001). Ure and Raban further state that literacy is profoundly social and children who have broad knowledge of the functions and uses of literacy understand that print has meaning and it can be used in a variety of social transactions. It follows that children who are supported to use print as an integral and authentic part of their daily lives, participating with adults in joint attentional scenes (Tomasello, 1999), begin to conceptualise print as symbolic and related to communicative purposes (Prucell-Gates, 1996). They are able to draw on these experiences to make sense of the more specific skills and sub-skills particular to the alphabetic code associated with learning to read and write English (Clay, 1991, 2001).

It is apparent from the preceding discussion that multiple layers and levels of language and literacy learning must be woven together in order for children to successfully negotiate the acquisition of literacy (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001). These range from introducing children to broad conceptualisations of literacy as social practice to the particular skills that are necessary for effective participation and communication. Thus the issue is not whether or not to include reading and writing among the activities in the preschool, but how to apply suitable teaching methods for children of this age so as to achieve the best possible results.

Recent moves by the Australian government to develop national guidelines for early childhood service delivery have acknowledged the significance of early literacy development and indicated key literacy outcomes during the early years (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). This policy document begins to clarify the place of literacy in early childhood contexts, though there is little information given regarding the roles of early childhood teachers in relation to facilitating children's early literacy learning.

### **Teacher beliefs and educational theories**

Recent research has identified that the role of the teacher has a significant influence on the appropriateness and effectiveness of the curriculum for specific groups of children (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). In the large scale project, *Preparing for School: Report of the Queensland Preparing for School Trials 2003/4* it is noted that "teacher expectations, goals and beliefs influence choice of curriculum content, pedagogical style and learning outcomes" (Thorpe et al., 2004, p. 98). The findings of this study indicate that teachers need to have clear goals for their practice and the children's progress. International research including *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project* has highlighted the association between the quality of teaching and student (child) achievements that promote shared sustained thinking (Sylva et al., 2003). In this study the significance of the teacher as an enabling other is identified with positive outcomes for children, particularly in extended thinking, which is linked to adult child interactions that involve sustained and shared talking time, including open ended questions, ongoing dialogue and regular, formative feedback. The quality of these interactions was seen to be enhanced when early years professionals had in-depth understanding of child development theory and pedagogical and curriculum knowledge that recognised the connectedness between social and cognitive orientations to learning.

Recent studies have highlighted the value of interactive styles of teaching that engage children as active learners (Green, Peterson, & Lewis, 2006). Fullen, Hill and Crevola (2006) with such research underpinning the call for more 'active' teaching in Australian early childhood settings (Wilks, Nyland, Chancellor & Elliot, 2008). Detail on what is considered active teaching is still under debate though there is an argument that high achievement standards for all children require instructional practice that is based on diagnostic data that frames teaching that is precise yet flexible, personalised and generalised (Fullen, Hill & Crevola, 2006). Despite this identified strong association between teaching practices and child achievement outcomes the Australian Education Review report entitled, *Early Childhood Education Pathway Quality and Equity for all Children* notes that, "to date this knowledge is not at the forefront of Australian thinking about quality issues in early childhood care and education" (Elliot, 2006, p. 30).

Another perspective relevant to this topic and noted by several authors (Crawford, 1995; Kantor, 1992; Raban et al., 2007) focuses on practitioner beliefs and values and teaching practice styles. Green (2005) has reported that early childhood teachers' awareness of

dominant educational theories is a factor that influences understandings of literacy and how these translate into practice and McLachlan, Carvalho, de Lautour and Kumar (2006) have identified that entrenched belief systems and conceptualisations that are resistant to change inhibit the ability and preparedness of teachers to reframe their practice in light of changing views on effective literacy practices. It is of interest to note that Ure and Raban (2001) have reported that preschool teachers have limited expectations for young children's literacy development and lack an awareness of research concerning literacy and young children. In most instances the teachers in this particular study revealed expectations for the development of reading and writing that went no further than requiring children to recognise and write their name. There was a commonly held belief that the place for formal literacy teaching was in the school, not in the preschool. The possible reason for this position may be that teachers are unclear as to how to interpret literacy and how to translate contemporary knowledge and teaching strategies into practice (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001). Flear and Raban (2006) note that teachers identify broadly based literacy concepts, with many admitting that they did not actively stimulate the support of literacy teaching through mediation, but adopted a Piagetian/Developmental perspectives that assumed that resources would stimulate learning. Their research points to the significance of the teacher's alignment to particular theoretical perspectives and how these ultimately determine what is taught and how it is taught.

It is of significant interest to note that many preschool teachers do not view literacy as a central concern of the preschool curriculum (Flear & Raban, 2006; Hannon & James, 1990; Lynch, 2009; Ure & Raban, 2001) and the challenge is now for these teachers to respond enthusiastically to changing imperatives around the teaching of literacy. What may be required is a shift beyond traditional approaches to teaching and learning where the development of emotional and social skills is prioritised, to more interactive pedagogies that aim to extend children's thinking and promote, in particular, understandings of language and literacy (Tafa, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

## **Research methods**

In response to issues raised regarding the significance of children's preschool experience in fostering emergent literacy processes and preschool reform initiatives the Young Learners' Project teacher research aims to map the pedagogical beliefs of preschool teachers and to closely examine their distinct literacy strategies and the learning experiences they provide for children. In essence this sub-study aims to examine what is currently taught and the teacher beliefs and educational theories that underpin this work.

This study has adopted methods referred to as collective or multiple case sampling (Burns, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995), with each case considered instrumental to providing detailed descriptions that enable complex, multidimensional and contextual interpretations (Yin, 2003). The multiple cross-case studies in this study provide for an investigation of similarities and differences (Baxter & Jack, 2008) and core meanings

(Bowden, 1994) that are arguably generalisable and transferable. The argument for this approach is largely situated in the credibility of multiple data sources (Yin, 2003) and the reliability (Bassey, 1981) of patterns found in the strategies of teachers participating in this study and approaches to literacy more broadly in early childhood environments in Australia.

For the purposes of this study, triangulation is not only present in the sources of data (survey, self-assessment and observation), but also in distinct methodological approaches to the analysis of single datasets. The analysis involved a search for meaningful patterns in the data involved a process of revision and rearrangement and a preparedness by the researchers to adjust the categories of description in light of further case study analysis (Hawke, 1993), with the aim being to eventually stabilise pools of meanings (Bowden, 1994). The first phase of this research has involved eight participants and has given emphasis to defining terms, identifying and mapping dominant teacher concepts, theories and behaviours, sought connections and disconnections between these and also identified emergent themes evident across participants. Emphasis has been placed on cyclic processes centred on theory-making and theory-testing (Corcoran, Walker & Wals, 2004); a process that will continue to be revised in light of further planned case studies.

## **Participants**

This paper reports data from the first 8 teachers from metropolitan Melbourne who participated in the study in 2008. Survey information indicated all teachers had tertiary qualifications, two with a Diploma, three with a Bachelor degree and three who undertaken additional study to obtain post-graduate qualifications. Their years of teaching experience ranged from 8 to 41 years, with five of the eight teachers indicating they had taught in primary schools, either in Australia and/or the United Kingdom. The small number of participants in this first intake limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the research with further intakes of teachers necessary to provide a larger representative sample.

## **Data collection and analysis**

To discover the dominant beliefs and practices of teachers, the following data sets were considered.

### **Practitioner survey**

An open-ended survey was designed to gather participant background information and elicit open value statements that point to significant teacher knowledge and beliefs (adapted from the Early Literacy Project (Ure & Raban, 2001), and the Frameworks for Teaching: the National Literacy Project (Stannard, 1997). As part of the survey the participants completed open-ended statements that prompted them to consider their beliefs, roles and practices. A content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of the teachers written survey responses searched for key terms used by teacher to describe their beliefs and roles, both broadly and more specifically in relation to literacy. Numeric counts of the teachers' use of key terms are

reported in findings. For example, in response to the question, how do you believe children learn? the most prevalent responses were through play (n=5) and active, hands-on life experiences (n=5).

### **Teacher self-assessment**

To add to the information gathered, teachers were asked to undertake a self-assessment using an instrument designed specifically to encourage reflection on practice in relation to teachers' alignment to prominent educational theories (Raban et al., 2007). This instrument required participants to select from a set of multiple-choice statements that they most identified with, relating to three dimensions namely: environment, pedagogy, and partnerships. This task generated a quantifiable summary of the theoretical orientations of each teacher (see Appendix 1).

### **Observations of practice**

Teachers participated in video recorded observations of three short literacy focused teaching and learning events including book reading, drawing/writing and one other teacher selected event. The prescribed events, book reading and a drawing/writing activity, were intended to allow for specific comparisons across the teachers within common teaching contexts and the third (teacher self-selected) to give further insight into how teachers conceptualise the teaching of literacy in the preschool. A schedule of literacy teaching codes was developed from the observational data informed by previous research on teachers' behaviours (Flynn, 2007; Loudon et al., 2005; Topping & Ferguson, 2005; Wray, Medwell, Fox & Poulson, 2000) and understandings of early literacy classroom teaching practice (Clay, 2001; Dickinson, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Hill, 2006; McGee & Richgels, 2003; Tafa, 2008). The codes directed the categorisation of aspects of literacy texts and specific tasks that each teacher attended to during the sessions observed. Timed coding of each observation provided a quantitative proportional representation of literacy practices evident in percentage weightings for each participant.

### **Program documentation**

As supplementary to the survey and observations, teachers provided program plan documentation, for the period of the observations. In addition, photographs and copies of children's artefacts, related to the activities observed were collected.

### **Results and discussion**

To report and discuss the data, a number of distinct yet interrelated areas will be considered. Firstly, the literacy activities identified by teachers in their survey responses and program plans and the events observed will be outlined. Next the literacy concepts attended to through specific teaching practices will be discussed. Then to investigate the nexus between practice and theory, literacy activities and concepts are referenced to teachers' beliefs and educational theories.

## Literacy activities

Reading to children and providing opportunities for children to see and use print as a means of communication were activities prioritised by this group of teachers. The data indicated that all teachers noted reading to children in their survey responses and teaching programs (n=8). Teachers also commented on the use of a range of different texts to explore topics of interest with the children (n=6). Explicit reading skills to be developed such as recalling events and commenting on stories read, predicting and reflecting were also documented in teaching plans (n=3). Survey responses further elaborated the range of writing activities provided for children. Experiences listed by teachers included – writing for children (n=4), opportunities for children to record experiences (n=4), making books (n=5), writing signs (n=4), writing letters or postcards (n=2) and children writing their names to sign in (n=2), with these activities in addition to the development of fine-motor skills to support children writing development (n=4). Evident also in teachers' programs were interdisciplinary connections and opportunities provided across the curriculum for children to make meaningful, symbolic representations (n=4). For example, a unit on travel included preparing tickets at the travel agency, reading texts to visit new locations and writing postcards home.

With respect to the observations of teaching, the presumption of reading and drawing/writing activities as common to preschool programs was confirmed by an analysis of survey and program data. (See Appendix 2 for a list of all teaching observations.) Further, the self-selected literacy activities indicated teachers' awareness of the relationships between language and literacy. A number of the activities observed had an oral language focus. These included children retelling familiar stories (n=2), singing songs and rhymes (n=2), and using language to describe and/or explain (n=3). It was within these contexts of use that teachers directed children's attention to a range of literacy concepts and developed children's understanding of how print-based texts record and convey meaning.

## Attending to literacy concepts

The teaching observations allowed for a close examination of the literacy skills and understandings embedded in activity that were typical of each teacher's program. The coding system was designed to capture teachers' behaviours that guided the children's attention to particular literacy concepts. Aggregated data from all observations is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Observation analysis - all teachers

Code	Time	% time	Count
	<i>Total lesson time: 272 min 45 sec</i>		

General Classroom Management	29 min - 28 sec	10.8%	100
Teacher observation	12 min - 07 sec	4.4%	74
Other	13 min - 38 sec	5.0%	42
Reading to children	35 min - 01 sec	12.8%	133
Introducing texts to children	06 min - 03 sec	2.2%	23
Inviting children to read with him/her	01 min - 46 sec	0.6%	16
Using oral cloze	01 min - 42 sec	0.6%	39
Providing opportunities for children to read (independently)	00 min - 18 sec	0.1%	2
Discussing the meaning of texts	09 min - 35 sec	3.5%	54
Prompting retelling/recall of text details	02 min - 24 sec	0.9%	13
Prompting children to examine the pictures in texts	03 min - 52 sec	1.4%	14
Predicting/requesting predictions	04 min - 53 sec	1.8%	23
Directing children's attention to print concepts	06 min - 01 sec	2.2%	30
Directing children's attention to the sounds of language/words	00 min - 20 sec	0.1%	4
Assisting children to identifying new or known words	02 min - 11 sec	0.8%	11
Assisting children to identifying new or known letters	14 min - 53 sec	5.5%	16
Responding to children's comments	11 min - 27 sec	4.2%	87
Establishing a purpose for writing tasks	04 min - 21 sec	1.6%	16
Encouraging drawing to extend/elaborate text meaning	13 min - 21 sec	4.9%	52
Invites children to compose a text	10 min - 36 sec	3.9%	62
Composing texts with children	02 min - 53 sec	1.1%	16
Encouraging students to record texts (Assisting children to write their names)	04 min - 38 sec	1.7%	28
Providing models (words)	05 min - 37 sec	2.1%	23
Writing for students	13 min - 19 sec	4.9%	59
Spelling words	01 min - 20 sec	0.5%	8
Sounding words	00 min - 31 sec	0.2%	5
Reading texts produced	03 min - 30 sec	1.3%	20
Providing 'wait time'	00 min - 31 sec	0.2%	2
Asking closed questions	03 min - 55 sec	1.4%	39
Asking open questions	15 min - 13 sec	5.6%	70
Repeating responses	01 min - 48 sec	0.7%	28
Extending/elaborating responses	05 min - 04 sec	1.9%	47
Using/introducing new/advanced vocabulary	03 min - 53 sec	1.4%	18
Exposing children to written text structures – stories, songs, rhymes	10 min - 11 sec	3.7%	33

Encouraging imaginative responses	06 min - 59 sec	2.6%	15
Providing explanations	08 min - 01 sec	2.9%	33

A predictable prominent behaviour evident across the three recorded observations was general classroom management (10.8%) which could be assumed to be necessary for any effective group learning, not just literacy learning. Reading to children (12.8%) and the encouragement of drawing to extend/elaborate text meaning (4.9%) were other expected dominant codes given the nature of the two prescribed literacy focused teaching and learning events. Further research will uncover the significance of these codes in the teacher self-selected literacy experiences. De-emphasising the proportional weighting given to these three codes, (totalling 28.5%) places greater significance to the other 'attending to' behaviours evident in the teacher interactions with children.

Data has indicated that explicit attention to children's understanding of texts was prevalent in the book reading activities. When sharing books with children, teachers ensured that meanings from texts were communicated, demonstrating an awareness of the purpose of reading as understanding and interpreting the author's message. Children were encouraged to predict and anticipate patterns in texts (1.8%), recall text details (0.9%), examine the pictures in texts to elaborate text meanings (1.4%) and discuss text read, as they made inferences to extend their understanding of the text or think beyond the text as they related events to their own lives (3.5%). This built children's knowledge of story and reinforced their expectations of the meaningful nature of reading. Children's understandings of text were further promoted by the teachers' responses to their comments related to the stories read (4.2%) When combined, interactions around the interpretations of meanings of texts totalled 10.4%. The transcript excerpts below illustrate opportunities for children to participate in text reading discussions and demonstrate how teachers supported children to construct meanings from the reading experience.

**Teacher 1 (Cathy): Reading - *Where the Wild Things Are***

1. Teacher reading "Now stop", said Max and the sent wild things to bed without their supper.
2. Child (1) Like he didn't have supper.
3. Teacher Exactly like him wasn't it?
4. Teacher reading And Max the king of all the wild things was lonely and he wanted to be where someone loved him best of all.
5. Teacher Where would that be?
6. Child (2) Home.
7. Teacher It might be.
8. Teacher reading Then all around for, far across the world he smelled good things to

- eat.
9. Teacher Where are they coming from?
  10. Child (1) The kitchen.

**Teacher 3 (Jenny): Reading - *Finding Time***

1. Teacher reading So please stop the time so I can run home and everyone will have some time for me. "Can't do that", said the old man, "no one can stop the time, you know".
2. Child (1) People can stop the time, you can just turn the clock and hold it where it is and then people be able to have time.
3. Teacher Oh maybe we could try that one day, and see what happens, what will happen to the rest of all the other children if we put the clock back?
4. Child (1) It would be too much time//
5. Child (2) And it would be muddled up and we'll have dinner at breakfast time.

Significant to the efficacy of book reading, with particular reference to vocabulary development, two conditions are reported as enriching students' word knowledge: firstly, the explicit teaching of vocabulary within the context of reading and; secondly, students' active participation in discussions (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Ewers & Brownson, 1999; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Peeno, Wilkinson & Moore, 2002). Similarly, the results of this study point to teachers' understanding of text reading and discussions as appropriate contexts for developing children's vocabulary and knowledge of word meanings. The analysis of interactions revealed a total of 18 occasions (1.4%) when children's attention was explicitly directed to new or unusual vocabulary, most often in text reading. For example, when reading to children, the teachers directed children to explore interpretations of reflection and frustrated. The following excerpt demonstrates the teachers' attention to vocabulary development.

**Teacher 6 (Sophie): Reading - *Brown Bear Brown Bear What Do You See?***

1. Teacher reading I see a green frog, looking at me.
2. Child (1) Staring at me
3. Teacher Staring that's another word for looking, we can say looking at me, staring at me. What's another word?
4. Child (1) Peeking.
5. Teacher Peeking, that's a good one, peeking at me. I see a green frog peeking at me.
6. Teacher reading *Reading continues*
7. Teacher Do you know another word for looking, peeking, looking and staring

- and ...
8. Child (1) Glancing.
  9. Teacher Glancing, what a good word that is.

The relationships between oral language, writing and reading were reinforced throughout the interactions. Children's oral language, as descriptions of their drawings, was the basis for written texts and children were clearly aware of their role as authors of the texts created. From a genre perspective, which highlights the purpose, function and form of writing (Derewianka, 1990; Wing Jan, 2009), children participated in the construction of personal reflections, explanations, recounts and narratives. Across the observations teachers assisted children to compose messages (3.9%) and then recorded children's dictated texts (4.9%) or assisted them to write themselves, either by providing models for the children to copy (2.1%), or by helping them sound (0.2%) or spell the words the children required (0.5%). Writing for children was often slow and deliberate with children encouraged to observe the details of print, as texts were transcribed. Completed texts were read to, or with, the children to reinforce understanding of the printed code as symbolic of spoken language (1.3%). The transcript below typical of the writing interactions observed.

**Teacher 6 (Sophie): Writing/drawing**

1. Teacher So sleeping child, sleeping child, what are the next words?
2. Child What do you see?
3. Teacher What do you see? (*teacher repeats as she writes*)
4. Child I see Annabel's penguin looking at me.
5. Teacher Fantastic, what do you see, and down here (*indicating new line of text*), I for Imogen, see Annabel's penguin looking at me (*teacher repeats as she writes*).  
What's Annabel's penguin doing? Is it looking at you?
6. Child Looking at me.
7. Teacher Looking at me. (*teacher repeats as she writes*)

Consistent with conceptualisations of emergent literacy, the teachers in this study used the texts read to children and those produced for and by children as opportunities to direct children's attention to print conventions (2.2%) and details of the printed word such as word identification (0.8%). More frequent was teachers' attention to letter names (5.5%) however this was most often with reference to children's own names.

Again, it was primarily within the context of texts that teachers focused on the explicit development of phonological awareness. Children's participation in oral cloze or fill ins in book reading, stimulated children to construct rhyming couplets. This is demonstrated in the transcript excerpts that follow.

### **Teacher 7 (Keira): Reading - *Mr McGee and the Blackberry Jam***

1. Teacher reading He put two sugars in his tea, then split the lot and burnt his ...
2. Children Knee.

### **Teacher 2 (Leah): Reading - *Green Eggs and Ham***

1. Teacher reading I do not like them in a house.  
I do not like them with a ...
2. Children Mouse.
3. Teacher reading I do not like them here or there.  
I do not like them ...
4. Children Anywhere

Moreover, detailed in teachers' programs were the songs and rhymes that were to be shared with children and five of the eight teachers noted the teaching of either rhyme and/or phonemic awareness as letter sound knowledge in their survey responses. However teachers' attention to phonemes was rare within the observational data. Directing children's attention to the sounds of language when reading was observed on 4 occasions (0.1%), and teachers sounding words for children when writing on was observed on 5 occasions (0.2%).

A large body of research evidence suggests the importance of phonological awareness for children's later literacy learning (Adams, 1990; Bryant & Bradley, 1985; Ehri, 1998; Goswami, 2000). The data in this study indicates that preschool teachers tend to emphasise children hearing rhyme and perhaps larger sound units (syllables and onset and rime) with the explicit teaching of phonemes left for when children learn to read and write through more focussed school-based instructional processes (Clay, 1991; 2001; Goswami, 2000). Notwithstanding this outcome, Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti and Lonigan (2008) state with reference to phonological awareness instruction, "it is likely that many preschool teachers are lacking in clear pedagogical understanding of the relevant constructs as well as lacking in appropriate curricular materials" (p. 14).

### **Teacher beliefs and educational theories**

The observations of teacher practice were considered with reference to the teachers' perceptions of literacy and the ways they teach. When asked to reflect on their definitions of literacy, teachers used terms such as communication (n=4) understanding or gaining meaning (n=3) and interaction (n=2), with literacy also defined "as a way of knowing, understanding and doing" (n=1). Literacy was also identified by a skill set that included recognising symbols and an ability to construct meaning from print (n=3). Furthermore, teachers saw the traditional areas of language, reading and writing as connected to children's literacy development (n=4). However, while less frequent, teachers' comments also suggested an orientation to

multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), as encompassing a range of semiotic modes enabling a plurality of forms of expression and interpretation (n=2). Missing from their definitions were the purposes and functions of literacy, with this more evident in the lists of activities and experiences teachers planned and used to support children's learning.

An analysis of key concepts evident in eight teacher surveys indicates several dominant beliefs. In response to the question, how do you believe children learn? the most prevalent responses were through play (n=5) and active, hands-on' life experiences (n=5). These themes resonate with long-standing developmental theories that espouse the importance of concrete and active learning through child-directed play. The teachers also gave emphasis to discovery-based learning involving constructing, testing, problem-solving, and experimentation (n=4) concepts that align with both developmental and socio-constructivist theories. A focus on developmental theory was further supported by importance given to imagination (n=3) a concept commonly associated with play-based learning. The importance of interactions and social acts of learning a central tenet of socio-cultural theory was supported by several teachers (n=3). Another key theme evident in the surveys was the concept that for children to learn they require teacher-directed learning and instruction (n=4). This contrasting orientation between adult-led instruction and child led play and imagination indicates awareness by the teachers for the need to balance their roles when working with young children.

A range of beliefs is evident in the survey responses to the second and fifth question, What is your role in young children's learning? and What role (if any) do you consider you play in fostering children's literacy development? Three interconnected key themes were identified, ranging from giving emphasis to identifying and interpreting children's interests, needs and 'tools for learning' (n=6), scaffolding and facilitating learning (n=6) and instructing, informing, modelling and developing skills (n=4). Specific to their role in fostering children's literacy learning was that of planning for and providing opportunities and resources that allow children to explore and develop concepts and knowledge, both independently and with an enabling other (n=7).

Together these views indicate a balance of roles including planning based on child observations (child-directed learning), adult-facilitated learning and adult-led learning. Interestingly only one teacher noted evaluation as a significant role. Emphasis given to observations is a central tenet of developmental theory whilst concepts such as facilitate and scaffold are closely aligned with socio-cultural theory. The concept of adult-led learning does not indicate a particular theoretical perspective in itself though an acknowledgement of this role can be linked to the view that there are universal milestones in children's development that teachers can and should teach to (developmental).

A summary of the results of the teachers' self assessment indicates varying perspectives for environment and pedagogy dimensions (see Table 2). In relation to the environment, teachers (n=6) gave strong emphasis to developmental and psychodynamic theories indicating a focus on learning environment design that guides child-directed learning and also gives emphasis to representing children's interests and relationships. Socio-cultural theory also scores highly in relation to the environment, particularly so in the responses of Teacher 4 (Sabrina) and Teacher 3 (Jenny). In both cases, this orientation to theory is supported by survey comments that advocate that teachers "create provocations" and "increase the possibilities for the child to invent and discover" (Sabrina) and "facilitate the journey of each child to develop social acts of communication, collaboration" (Jenny). This same theory dominates the teacher self-assessments in relation to Pedagogy, with 7 out of the 8 teachers scoring highest in this area.

**Table 2: Teachers' theoretical orientations (n=8 teachers)**

	<b>Maturational</b> Biological Models of Development	<b>Behaviourism</b> Social Learning Theories	<b>Psycho- Dynamic</b> Psycho- analytic Theories	<b>Developmental</b> Developmental Psychology Theories	<b>Socio- Constructivist</b> Socio-Cultural Theories	<b>Ecological Systems</b> Bio- ecological model
<b>Environment</b> %	11	7	24	31	25	2
<b>Pedagogy</b> %	8	3	18	18	40	13

In summary the data collected from surveys and teacher self-assessment indicates that the teachers' beliefs are generally aligned with relevant educational theories, particularly developmental and socio-constructivist, though differences are notable in the varied emphasis given by teachers to them. The strong support for psychodynamic theories indicated in the self-assessment data, particularly in relation to the learning environment, is not apparent in the survey responses. What is clear is that teachers are aware of the need for a balance of approaches to teaching and learning.

## **Conclusions**

The formative analysis given here, developed from the first phase of a larger continuing study, profiles the beliefs, theories and practices of eight pre-school teachers working with children in their year prior to school. Adopting mixed-methods, the study aimed to map and reveal the complex and inter-related factors that impact on early literacy teaching. Emergent findings drawn from this work indicate that the beliefs and theories of early childhood teachers do align with practice. Teachers emphasised the meaningful nature of texts in all interactions, with

activities as the contexts for literacy concept development and the basis for children's developing awareness of literacy (Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 1996).

Prominence was given to developmental and socio-constructivist educational theories. In contrast to the findings of Fleer and Raban (2006) teachers did not appear restricted to long-standing Piagetian theory, which they had layered with socio-cultural perspectives that give emphasis to situated learning and interactive teaching. This orientation to socio-cultural theory is consistent with approaches to emergent literacy evident in the surveys that refer to discovery learning, teacher facilitation and modelling. The observations also confirmed this perspective through activities, such as dialogic reading, where the teacher actively interacted with the children to co-construct meaning.

Acknowledging the need for diagnostic planning, teacher facilitation and skill-based learning, the teachers' responses pointed to approaches to teaching that are precise yet flexible, personalised and generalised (Fullen, Hill & Crevola, 2006). To do so the teachers drew from a repertoire of practices that imbedded specific skill instruction, such as awareness of rhyme, letter identification and text prediction, within experiences that were social and playful. This integration is appropriate for children aged 4-5 years though it creates a challenge for teachers as to how best to monitor and track literacy development, an area given little note in the key roles articulated in the teacher surveys. There was also minimal reference to social and emotional learning in the teacher surveys, which contrasted to the self-assessment data that gave significance to psychodynamic theories that prioritise these areas of development. Possibly the nature of research, with its explicit focus on learning steered the teachers away from development concepts linked to drawing out children's feelings and promoting relationship-building skills.

The teachers in this study attended to a range of literacy practices that arguably equipped children well for the transition to formal schooling. These included verbal and non-verbal interactions; engagement with a wide variety of texts; making meaning using a range of media, and interpreting symbols and pattern-systems. All of these are explicitly now promoted through the Australian Early Years Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), a policy document that has the potential to become a key reference for curriculum planners to ensure continuity of learning across early years learning contexts, though it has yet to detail the specific roles and pedagogies of early childhood teachers in relation to facilitating children's early literacy learning.

The achievement of continuity between prior-to-school and school contexts requires a movement away from generalisations and assumptions to a fuller understanding of the types of activities children engage in, supported practices adopted by teachers and beliefs that influence how literacy is interpreted and enacted. Through the development of detailed and multi-dimensional teacher profiles, this study aims to provide insight into the how, what and

why of early literacy teaching. It will continue to profile another 22 preschool teachers, and will also survey the beliefs and theories of primary school teachers in Victoria. In doing so, the study aims to draw attention to common and contrasting pedagogies and the influence these have on early literacy development and transition from preschool to school.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1 – Theoretical orientations underpinning SAM

<b>Theoretical Paradigms:</b>	<b>Maturational</b> Biological Models of Development	<b>Behaviourism</b> Social Learning Theories	<b>Psycho-Dynamic</b> Psycho-analytic Theories	<b>Developmental</b> Developmental Psychology Theories	<b>Socio-Constructivist</b> Socio-Cultural Theories	<b>Ecological Systems</b> Bio-ecological model
<b>Major Theorists:</b>	Gesell 1925	Skinner 1957 Bandura 1986	Erikson 1963 Fischer & Bidell 1998	Piaget 1950 & 1952	Vygotsky 1978 Rogoff 2003	Bronfenbrenner 1979 Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1998
<b>The Role of the Professional:</b>	<b>Manage:</b> Monitor and intervene only where necessary for safety	<b>Direct:</b> Assess and provide what is necessary in response to children's behaviour	<b>Discuss:</b> Acknowledge & draw on children's feelings & thoughts	<b>Guide:</b> Observe, assess & support children's development with reference to developmental milestones	<b>Engage:</b> Scaffold & transform learning in response to children's prior understandings	<b>Frame:</b> Monitor, review, evaluate & determine actions & future progress of children, in partnership with others
<b>Outcomes for Children:</b>	<b>Maturation:</b> Grow & develop in their own time	<b>Acquisition:</b> Gain attitudes, skills & knowledge with practice	<b>Personal Growth:</b> Achieve autonomy through a growing sense of self	<b>Developmental Appropriateness:</b> Build independently knowledge in line with age & stage of development	<b>Co-construction:</b> Create their worlds through interactions with more knowledgeable others	<b>Cultural Embeddedness:</b> Experience knowledge being shaped in the context of cultural expectations & societal roles

Source: Raban, B., Waniganake, M, Nolan, A., Brown, R., Deans, J. & Ure, C. (2007) *Building Capacity: Strategic professional development for early childhood practitioners*, South Melbourne: Thomson, Social Science Press.

## Appendix 2 - Teaching observations

	Reading to children	Drawing/writing task	Teacher selected activity
Teacher 1 Cathy	<i>Where the Wild Things Are</i> (Maurice Sendak)	Based on reading experience – teacher records text for children	Letter concentration – linked to children's names
Teacher 2 Leah	<i>Bears Can't Fly</i> (Val Biro)	Book making - children are supported to recount holiday events to share with "Nicole".	<i>Green Eggs and Ham</i> (Dr. Seuss) - Children invited to read this text with the teacher. Activity concluded with children identifying the letters in their names
Teacher 3 Jenny	<i>Finding Time</i> (Vladimir Skutna & Marie-Jose Sacre)	Based on reading experience – teacher supports children to record text	How my fan works - children provide explanations as the teacher records the text for children
Teacher 4 Sabrina	Haiku poems - Japanese cherry blossom	Watercolour painting on hand made paper – blossoms – with children asked to provide a name/label for their blossom picture – teacher records text for children	Describing blossom - Vocabulary development (delicate, fragile) and use of metaphor (it's raining petals)
Teacher 5 Robyn	<i>The Purple Kite</i> (Gay Colour Book)	Based on reading experience – teacher records text for children	<i>Tiddalick: The Frog Who Caused a Flood</i> (Robert Roennfeldt) - using puppets to retell this familiar story. Activity concluded with the singing of known rhymes
Teacher 6 Sophie	<i>Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?</i> and <i>Panda Bear, Panda Bear, What Do You See?</i> (Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle)	Innovation of text Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? – "Multicoloured bird, multicoloured bird, what do you see?" – teacher	Singing rhymes - <i>Little Bunny Foo Foo</i> , <i>One Finger One Thumb</i> and <i>The Wheels on the Bus</i>

		records text for children	
Teacher 7 Keira	<i>Mr McGee and the Blackberry Jam</i> (Pamela Allen)	Based on reading experience – teacher records text for children	The Three Bears - felt board story retelling
Teacher 8 Maree	<i>Jennie's Hat</i> (Ezra Jack Keats)	Based on reading experience - teacher supports children to record text	Making hats – children work with the teacher to construct hats and describe the process.