

EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY AS SOCIAL PRACTICE: ENGAGING FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND PRESCHOOL STAFF IN AN EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY

A Joint *Invest to Grow* Project between the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs and KU Children's Services¹

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ABSTRACT

Children from educationally disadvantaged communities tend to have lower levels of engagement with language and literacy in their early school years. Staff from two KU Children's Services preschools located in an educationally disadvantaged outer metropolitan community in Sydney engaged in an Early Language and Literacy Initiative (KU ELLI) designed to undertake focused language and literacy planning for children aged 2-5 years attending preschool. Children's early language and literacy learning has been conceptualised by Snow and by Dickinson to be an inherently social experience, an interactive process by which a child constructs a social reality making their own meaning of sounds, words, reading, and writing. It is a process influenced by the language and culture of the child's family and their ethnic group. KU ELLI involves (a) staff development and consequent action research, (b) language assessments and intervention covering phonemic, semantic, morphemic, and syntactical awareness, and (c) literacy initiatives covering speaking, listening, drawing, reading, viewing, and writing.

The paper will present as a case study the process of action research undertaken by the staff together with their supporting documentation, photographic evidence, and their reflections about evidence-based practice. Three year evaluative findings for 77 children progressing to school are also presented. The children came from 68 families with a modal income of less than \$20,000 pa, the parents were aged about 37 years and had lived in the area for about 11 years. The families valued preschool experiences for their children and were able both to pay any fees over and above the maximum fee relief in NSW and to organise themselves to get their child to the preschool on a regular basis. The findings indicated a positive effect of KU ELLI on children's oral language and literacy measured by the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary*

Test III, the Teacher Rating Oral Language and Literacy, and the Early Childhood Environment Language and Literacy Scale. Finally, the paper will draw out the implications for preschool teachers if they (a) have a clear theoretical framework for their language and literacy programming, (b) feel that their autonomy is valued when they are receiving language and literacy advisory support, (c) incorporate purposeful planning into their practice with children and families, and (d) recognise cultural and social diversity of the families, children, and their peers.

THE KU EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY INITIATIVE (KU ELLI)

Children's early language and literacy learning has been conceptualised by Snow (1998) and by Neuman & Dickinson (2002) to be an inherently social experience, an interactive process by which a child constructs a social reality making their own meaning of sounds, words, reading, and writing, meanings that will vary according to the language and culture of the family and the ethnic group. Parents, other familiar adults, and teachers then help children learn to talk, read, and write by spending time with them, providing them with opportunities to listen, watch, imitate, and practice appropriate language and literacy skills. They can also act as agents of change for children with language delays and disorders.

The Theoretical Basis for KU ELLI

The theoretical basis for KU ELLI comes from the social constructivist view of how children learn (Neuman and Dickinson, 2002; Snow, 1998). A child learns by actively participating in social exchanges, relating to physical objects and actions within the physical world, and acquiring a shared system of symbols that can be used to communicate with others (Bochner and Jones, 2003). Reid and Comber (2002) point out that literacy is learned in meaningful socially specific situations in the everyday life of the home, preschool, and school.

According to this view, literacy learning for young children is certainly not a set of dull, meaningless, and incomprehensible drill and practice routines, "phonics for four year olds", or a downwards extension of a traditional school curriculum. Instead, the child constructs a social reality involving making their own meaning of sounds, words, reading, and writing according to the rituals of the family, the culture of the family and their ethnic group, and early out of home learning experiences such as

preschool or long day care. Language development is central since without language development there can be no literacy development.

Young children engage in reading and writing practices from an early age (Neuman & Roskos, 1997). There is considerable evidence that parents exert a powerful influence on the nature of their children's language and literacy and of their subsequent school achievement (Hart and Risley, 1995). There is also considerable evidence that a preschool program is able to prepare children to succeed in school (Boocock, 2000). Preschool experience seems to be particularly powerful for low income children in the first year of school in narrowing the achievement gap with the middle and higher income children.

There is considerable research evidence that children from low income backgrounds do not enter school at 5 years of age with the literacy skills that enable them to easily acquire the reading skills that children from higher income levels are able to acquire. There may well be a mismatch between what the children know and can do, what they bring to their beginning school experience, and the school's expectations of kindergartners.

Without competence in literacy, formal educational achievement is seriously limited. Previous studies addressing poor early school literacy achievement have focused on aspects such as (a) teaching parents how to read books to preschool children, (b) addressing parent beliefs and literacy behaviour, (c) enhancing early childhood teachers' capacity to interface with communities' and parents', (d) different theoretical conceptions of early literacy learning, such as the *Literacies, communities and under 5's* project initiated by the NSW Department of Community Services and the NSW Department of Education and Training (Jones Diaz, Beecher, Arthur,

Ashton, Hayden, Makin, McNaught, & Clugston, 2001), and (e) intervening in early language development. Yet there seems to date to have been no applied Australian project which links language learning with early literacy learning in any systematic way.

Yet there are still many young children, particularly low income children, who on transition to school, experience difficulty with reading and writing (Snow et al, 1998). Some have not had the opportunity of any significant language and literacy experiences with their parents. Snow et al (1998) identified 6 family-based literacy learning risk factors: (a) a family history of reading problems, (b) the nature of the home literacy environment, (c) verbal interaction with children, (d) home languages other than English, (e) use of a non-standard English dialect, and (f) family socioeconomic status. Other children have not had the opportunity of any preschool experience. Others may not have had the opportunity of a preschool program that provided an adequate focus on language and literacy.

The Nature of Parent Language and Literacy Activities

Families vary enormously in the way they promote their child's language and literacy (Hart & Risley, 1995). Language and literacy learning in young children seem to be related to different things that their parents, or significant adults do: a valuing of literacy, a press for achievement, the availability and use of reading materials, reading aloud with children, and the quantity of verbal interaction. Middle and higher income families tended to provide a language rich environment with many conversations (eg over meals) and book readings. Low income families tended not to. A study by Freeman and Bochner (2002) investigated the effect of helping the parents of young Australian Aboriginal children understand culturally appropriate

ways of supporting literacy development. Their intervention indicated that there were positive effects on the children's language and literacy development.

It is possible, then, to conclude that programs which encourage parents to modify or increase the ways they support their child's language and literacy development will impact on their child's language and literacy.

The Uncertainty about the Role of Literacy in Early Childhood Programs

Early childhood teachers do not agree with each other on their role in early literacy development. Hannon and James (1990) found that such teachers did not see literacy as a central concern of their curriculum. Studies by Raban and Ure (2000) suggested that early childhood teachers saw the development of literacy as the role of the school, and believed that their role was to foster the social and emotional development of children in preparation for school. They reported that they were uncertain about how young children became readers and writers and did not know how to advise parents. They also were not knowledgeable about reading programs in the first year of school.

Raban (2000) reports the impact of a professional development literacy program for early childhood teachers addressing how literacy development was being conceptualized for preschoolers and what the implications were for early childhood practice. The teachers identified four relevant dimensions: (a) creating a literacy environment in the preschool, (b) encouraging and supporting children's attempts at writing for themselves, (c) giving reading and writing a purpose (the "big picture"), and (d) creating an awareness of the conventions of print. Raban found that the children who had experienced a print-rich environment with supportive interactions

around literacy experiences made more rapid literacy progress in their first year of school.

It is possible to conclude that a program which enables early childhood teachers to draw out implications for language and literacy in their day to day practice with young children may well enable them to impact on those children's language and literacy development.

THE KU ELLI PROCESS¹

Adopting the KU ELLI's perspective of "literacy as social practice" means acknowledging that language and literacy development are both socially constructed and socially mediated. It was considered important that similar active social learning processes should be modelled through the staff development/change process and the activities chosen for focus in the project. Likewise, a parental empowerment perspective rather than direct parent education (or what is sometimes considered to be a more deficit oriented approach) was considered to offer the best chance of sustainable and long term benefit for both children and their families. Engagement with language and literacy learning is personal and sometimes threatening for families in communities where relationships with schools have been troubled. It was hoped that an empowerment approach would help lower income parents and carers build stronger relationships with their children's preschools now, and with primary teachers in the future. In the project's establishment phase it was noted that neither of the preschools had historically enjoyed a strong base of parent support or of engagement with centre activities. Most parents typically picked up and dropped their children off with minimal contact with staff. Few parents ever volunteered to

¹ The contributions of Margaret McNaught and of Christine Morandini to the discussion of the KU ELLI Process are acknowledged.

help out or to participate in centre programs. Staff were welcoming but initially dispirited!

Staff Support

There is general agreement that “deep” learning or stable changes in teaching practice require a considerable period of time, and that the participants usually need different but continuing forms of support or interactions throughout the process. A series of typical two-hour/half day workshops in which staff are presented with new ideas and then left to implement them on their own do not generally effect long lasting change. Learning communities where there are collegial groups working on developing language and literacy programs, or improving relationships with parents, by using constructivist and enquiry based/action oriented projects appear to offer the best chance of lasting change.

The role of the facilitator/staff developer/support person is critical here. The role of the KU ELLI staff in working with the staff of two preschools evolved over time. The KU ELLI speech pathologist worked with children identified by staff as needing intervention, completing assessments, and liaising with families. The KU ELLI Literacy Support Specialist attended the preschools every week observing the children and helping to devise activities which relate directly to the children’s interests but with specific language and literacy objectives.

The purpose of the visits was to work together to undertake data-based planning. Data on children’s language and literacy were obtained from families and staff when a child enrolled at the preschool. Surveys provided information about the family’s observations of their child’s language and literacy, and parental perceptions of staff. The parent surveys enabled the KU ELLI team to collate and evaluate information about each child’s literacy experiences within the home environment and work out

which books and activities were engaging children. For example, many children responded to DVDs and 'viewing' activities, which include computer games and television. The preschools subsequently incorporated a variety of resources including DVDs which are linked to quality children's literature. The staff survey provided data on the confidence of staff members in exchanging information relating to language and literacy with families and influenced the planning for staff development.

Planning was then developed on an individual basis for the children and the families. Relevant observations of each visit are recorded in an anecdotal format. Strategies to involve families in their child's literacy development include the implementation of coffee mornings for the sharing of ideas and providing activities at the preschool outside normal operating hours which allow fathers to be included. Staff at both preschools were expressing their ideas for literacy based experiences and showing great initiative in devising ways to communicate with other staff and families.

Staff Development and Action Research

One of the key outcomes of the program was to promote sustainability, within the preschools and their communities. It is important to assist the preschool staff to be able to support the families. The staff also needed the skills and the ability to access resources to ensure the long term implementation of a range of strategies at the preschools that enhance language and literacy development. Staff development was seen to be the key to this outcome. A series of sessions was conducted which provided staff with training in the KU ELLI model. The sessions have covered: (a) early language and literacy development, (b) assessing the language and literacy development of children, (c) programming for the language development of young

children, (d) augmentative systems of communication, (e) reflective journal writing, (f) working with families, (g) engaging fathers, and (h) action research.

Reflections

One of the Directors wrote:

The staff language and literacy training sessions have enabled all staff to gain a shared understanding of the basic framework for the language and literacy development of young children. Included here is a respect for the family context of such learning and a partnership between home and preschool in working towards best literacy outcomes for each child and family.

The new knowledge gained through training sessions has led to meaningful shared reflections by all staff. Staff are now working towards sharing their language/literacy based knowledge with families in conversations that respect families values, input and expertise about their own child.

One of the members of the preschool staff commented:

Repetition of stories is valuable, and it is important for parents to understand the need for them to be re-read and loved for familiarisation with text to occur. The misconception seems to be that children become bored after they have heard it once, whereas they are gaining valuable knowledge of narrative structure from the re-reading.

Clearly, the professional development has provided new insights and understandings for the staff. A staff development model which adopts an empowerment perspective by acknowledging and sharing the teachers' insights into their respective centre communities and using their own personal strengths, interests and commitment as teachers provides an appropriate framework within which to move towards achieving the project aims of enhanced knowledge and skills of all participants.

Language and Literacy Initiatives and Strategies

Language Initiatives and Strategies

At each preschool the speech pathologist assessed the pre- and post-communication development of all children attending the selected preschools.

Family meetings were conducted with all families of identified children to discuss assessment results and recommendations, and these families were provided with some practical ideas to assist them in encouraging their child's communication development in everyday contexts within the home environment. *Speech pathology intervention* was provided for approximately six children in each preschool per preschool term. *Ongoing communication with families* occurred via periodic informal meetings at drop-off or pick-up times or at preschool events, and via written communication books. *Home and preschool programs* were provided for all other children identified as requiring speech pathology intervention (i.e. younger children, children with milder delays/disorders), and their progress was reviewed periodically. Parents of children identified as requiring referrals to other agencies were contacted to ensure that follow up occurred.

The preschools implemented many strategies to assist in encouraging the communication development of all children attending their service. For example,

1. The use of language stimulation techniques (e.g. modelling, self talk, parallel talk, extension, open-ended questioning) with children in play-based contexts.
2. The regular provision of (a) experiences to promote the vocabulary development of children (e.g. categorisation games, games to investigate part-whole relationships, divergent naming games) (b) sound stimulation activities to promote the articulation development of children, (c) experiences to promote the development of phonological awareness skills (e.g. alliteration

games, rhyming games, syllabification games), (d) experiences to encourage the development of oral strength and co-ordination (e.g. the use of feather blowing, bubble blowing, straw painting /blowing, and tongue plays), and (e) the introduction and/or extension of signed communication systems within the preschool setting, to enhance the communication skills of children with communication delays/disorders and other populations (e.g. children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds) whilst they are acquiring oral language.

3. The introduction and/or extension of visual communication systems within the preschool setting, to assist with the execution of daily routines, specific routines and transition times, to enhance play skills, to promote the development of social skills and to enhance the communication skills of children.

Staff have demonstrated an ability to identify emerging concerns regarding the communication development of children that have already been assessed (eg., the onset of stuttering in children). A number of staff training sessions has been provided that have focussed on normal communication development, language stimulation and the use of augmentative communication systems to develop staff understanding of early communication development and to assist staff in planning to meet the needs of all children attending their services. There have also been regular intensive discussions held on early language development to enable teachers, trained staff, untrained staff, and volunteer staff working in the preschools to program more effectively for the communication needs of children attending their preschools.

Literacy initiatives and strategies

The preschool staff assessed the pre- and post- language and literacy development of all children attending the selected preschools.

The assessment data provided a snapshot used as a basis for implementing literacy strategies, which address the strengths and areas of need in each preschool.

Following discussion of the pattern of the data, the preschools established:

1. *A home borrowing library* (at one of the preschools). Each child had decorated a library bag and had an allocated borrowing day. Parents were encouraged to spend time choosing a book with their child, and they borrow for a week.
2. *Children's photos* were placed on the blocks that were part of block corner at one of the preschools.
3. *A writing centre*. Children had access to a range of materials, including a variety of writing tools, papers and name cards. They were encouraged to draw, write letters, invitations, create recipes and make maps. An example of this was mapping the local community, with landmarks suggested by children after a child discussed how he travelled to his cousin's house.
4. *Visual displays in the preschools*. Staff prepared displays which illustrated many ways in which parents could be involved in everyday literacy experiences with their children (e.g., writing shopping lists).
5. *Accessible message pockets*. Each had a child's name, so they could locate their own name whenever they were working on a task which they wanted to label. This could be extended to include other words meaningful to each child, so children could develop their own written vocabulary resources.
6. *A book reading morning*. Parents were invited to read with their children, and sit in on a story reading group time. A DVD modelling strategies for encouraging

reading to young children was shown. Morning tea was provided, so parents had a chance to interact with other parents and staff.

Reflective diaries, day books, feedback after workshops and notes of all meetings, conference attendances and in-services were maintained. Analysis of materials written by staff members, and the formal feedback gained after staff workshop days indicated an increased awareness of the importance of planning much more specifically for language and literacy learning in the preschool environment. Staff acknowledged that language and literacy extension could be incorporated purposefully into activities across the day (sometimes spontaneously) and that it required much more than reading quality children's literature, important though that is.

The setting up of a lending library in each centre for the children to borrow specially purchased books was a very successful activity. Children living in families where book ownership is not part of everyday life depend on their local libraries and on the facilities and resources of their preschool settings. Special provision needed to be made to encourage and support book lending and libraries in centres where parents might not have been able to access the local library easily or where parents/family had no experience of library borrowing.

There were numerous documented examples of teaching activities which draw on the children's interests and ideas and help to extend them to incorporate literacy events.

Staff Reflections

Staff wrote a reflective journal, directly relating to the language and literacy outcomes of experiences which they have implemented and are using a reflective day book as a communication method for families. Photos of children's activities and

interactions during the day were displayed with captions dictated by children or written by staff.

During the initial training period, one of the preschools initiated using emails as a way of increasing the children's awareness of early literacy.

The emails: reflections by a director

"I was preparing to go to the conference "Bringing Fathers In" on Sunday evening when I realised that I hadn't let the children know where I was for the week. How awful! I had written a note to the parents about where I was going. I thought through many options – phoning in the morning, asking Jenelle (the teacher) to explain my absence, and then I decided upon writing an e-mail. This decision was definitely highlighted or influenced by the fact that we are currently focussing on literacy. Writing an e-mail letter to the children would also be a way of letting them know that they are important and are informed of what happens at preschool.

This was a great opportunity for a real need to write to the children. It was also a great opportunity to use another form of literacy (multi literacies). I informed Jenelle of the e-mail she should expect and Jenelle read the letters to the children daily and helped them to respond to my e-mails. In the letters I also took the opportunity to focus on other areas that we were talking about. On my return the children were talking about the e-mails and drawings". The e-mails that went between the children and myself were also sent with the aim of encouraging oral discussions within the group. Jenelle read these letters to the children; they discussed the letters, asked questions (eg. Do you like Jessie in Toy Story?), made comments and answered the questions that I asked (eg., What did you eat today?). This involved recalling events and experiences.

The children were introduced to a form of written communication which was instantaneous, unlike the postal service, which is often modelled as the standard form of written communication. There was an exchange of ideas and information, and a comfort of keeping the absentee director involved with what was happening in the centre.

Play and Stay: reflections by a director on engaging fathers

Following a family morning at one of the preschools when no fathers attended, the staff saw the importance of engaging fathers in early literacy with their children.

They then planned for a week of activities with a focus on engaging fathers after the Director had had the opportunity to attend a conference on working with fathers. The staff arranged for invitations to be produced by the children. Those children who were able to write on them with the assistance of staff. Invitations were addressed to mothers and fathers, but the programmed activities were designed to appeal to fathers. One father attended the *Play and Stay* mornings each day his child was at the preschool. The learning experiences included a learning centre featuring dinosaurs, block play with props of floor mats and wooden accessories, and the provision of sporting pictures for creating collages.

“We organised our Play and Stay for the week beginning 20-24th March.

There was a wonderful response over the week with 21 families attending including 6 Dads. The most rewarding insight for me was the joy on the children's faces having their parents' undivided attention free from any other pressures/problems experienced in the home life.

I observed the relationship between the parent and the child and could identify both strengths and needs of families after which I could later plan events, activities or written material to promote language and literacy within the home

environment, thus making significant connections between preschool and home.

It was interesting to observe some children with speech difficulties have parents with similar delays and the importance of appropriate language role modelling. It also impacted upon written material we provide to families and their ability to both read and understand the written word themselves.

In conclusion we captured our memories using digital photography and made a display for the families and children to revisit and discuss.

For this program to be successful we need to work on empowering, educating and promoting early language and literacy experiences for the whole family.

IMPACT OF KU ELLI

Family Characteristics

Table 1 indicates the number of families with children who progressed to school at the end of 2005 to the end of 2007.

Table 1: Number of Families whose Children Progressed to School 2005-2007 (N = 68)

	2005	2006	2007	TOTAL
Number of Families	26	19	23	68
<i>Preschool A</i>	9	11	11	31
<i>Preschool B</i>	17	8	12	37

The family demographic data in Table 2 consisted of *gender of respondent, employment status, source of income, income level, education level, Indigenous status, languages other than English being spoken at home, years spent in the locality* and included the data mandated by the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA).

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Families whose Children Progressed to School in 2005-2007

	2005 N = 26	2006 N = 19	2007 N = 23	TOTAL N = 68
Gender of Respondent				
Male	2	2	1	5
Female	17	13	20	50
Employment Status				
Full Time Work	2	1	0	3
Part Time Work	6	2	5	13
Casual Work	0	0	1	1
On Leave	0	0	1	1
Unemployed (but looking)	2	2	1	5
Not Working, (not looking, not retired)	11	10	12	33
Source of Income				
Wage/salary earned by Self/Partner	13	5	13	31
Government Pension/Benefit/ Allowance	8	10	7	25
Income Level				
<\$20,000	7	5	8	20
\$20,000 - \$40,000	1	3	3	7
\$40,000 - \$60,000	4	2	4	10
\$60,000 +	5	1	5	11
Education Level				
Degree	1	1	3	5
Vocational	4	1	5	10
Diploma	4	1	4	9
Year 12	9	8	9	26
Year 9				
Indigenous Status				
Indigenous	2	1	0	3
Non Indigenous	20	15	22	57
Languages Other than English				
English Only at Home	20	14	19	53
Other than English at Home	2	2	3	7
Years Spent in the Locality				
<i>X</i>	9.99	11.52	10.51	10.60
<i>SD</i>	9.69	7.72	7.84	8.41
<i>N</i>	21	16	21	58
Age in Years of Responding Parent				
<i>X</i>	38.05	39.43	34.10	36.87
<i>SD</i>	5.00	8.30	5.30	6.42
<i>N</i>	19	14	21	54

	2005 N = 26	2006 N = 19	2007 N = 23	TOTAL N = 68
Number of Children below School Age at Home				
<i>X</i>	1.45	2.06	1.68	1.70
<i>SD</i>	.96	1.24	.78	.06
<i>N</i>	22	16	21	60

The respondents, in the main:

- a. were female,
- b. were not in paid employment nor seeking employment,
- c. relied on wages earned by a partner or on government benefit,
- d. had a modal income of less than \$20,000 pa with some on relatively higher incomes,
- e. had a modal education level up to Year 9 at high school with some having TAFE/university qualifications,
- f. were mainly non-Indigenous,
- g. were unlikely to be using a language other than English at home.
- h. had been settled in their community for about 11 years,
- i. were about 37 years of age, and
- j. had about two children under school age at home.

There are few families at the two preschools that:

- a. had been in their community for a short time,
- b. were young,
- c. were Indigenous, or
- d. spoke a language other than English at home.

Child Characteristics

Table 3 indicates the numbers of children who progressed to school 2005 to 2007.

Table 3: Children Progressing to School in 2005-2007

	2005	2006	2007	TOTAL
Progress to School	30	20	27	77
<i>Preschool A</i>	11	11	14	36
<i>Preschool B</i>	19	9	13	41

The child demographic data are reported in Table 4 and consisted of *affordability assistance level²*, *age on entry to KU ELLI*, *age on leaving preschool*, *months of attendance at preschool*, and *hours in KU ELLI*.

Table 4: Demographic Characteristics of Children who Progressed to School in 2005-2007

	2005 N =30	2006 N =20	2007 N =27	TOTAL N =77
Affordability Assistance				
	9	14	13	35
Level 1	1	0	2	3
Level 2	5	3	1	9
Level 3	10	0	0	10
Level 4				
Age on Entry to KU ELLI				
3 year old	-	38.33	35.5	36.44
X		3.5	5.11	4.73
SD		6	12	18
N				
4 year old	50.31	47.29	46.75	48.29
X	2.27	3.15	3.65	3.35
SD	16	14	12	42
N		-		
5 year old	59.00		59.33	59.06
X	2.51		3.06	2.51
SD	14		3	17
N				
Age on Progressing to School				
3 year old				
X		58.33	63.00	61.44
SD		3.50	3.46	4.06
N		6	12	18
4 year old				
X	57.44	64.64	62.33	61.24
SD	2.22	3.80	4.21	4.60
N	16	14	12	42
5 year old				
X	64.86	-	67.67	65.35
SD	2.80		4.04	3.10
N	14		3	17
Hours in KU ELLI				
3 year old				
X		1288	1359.00	1335.33
SD		490.15	515.21	515.28
N		6	12	18
4 year old				
X	503.25	1107.14	785.17	785.10

² Children from low income families attract affordability assistance from the NSW Department of Community Services to subsidise their preschool fees based on four levels of affordability assistance determined by family income, with the highest level of subsidy being attracted by the lowest income level with the quantum determined by the historical DOCS funding allocation for each preschool so that Preschool A families on Level 1 maximum subsidy needed to pay only \$2 per day while at Preschool B they had to pay \$10 per day.

		2005 N =30	2006 N =20	2007 N =27	TOTAL N =77
	SD	270.68	443.33	407.91	447.41
	N	16	14	12	42
5 year old	X	428.14	-	304.00	406.24
	SD	257.64		143.16	242.64
	N	14		3	17

The children, then:

- a. were mostly receiving fee relief with the mode being at the highest level of subsidy,
- b. entered KU ELLI at 3, 4, or 5 years of age, spending about 1335, 785, or 406 hours respectively in KU ELLI, and
- c. were about five years at the beginning of the year they started school.

Impact on Early Language

The evaluation investigated whether there would be an increase in the language skills of the children involved in KU ELLI. Lahey (1988) defined receptive and expressive language as consisting of content, form, and use. Children, in becoming competent language users, begin to understand and express the meaning conveyed in language. They begin to:

apply rules governing the form, or structure, of language (i.e. word order and word endings) while acquiring new vocabulary concepts. . . (They develop) skills that reflect an awareness of the social functions of language (e.g. use of language to get someone's attention, to protest, or greet people, to converse). Finally (they) integrate these language skills to solve problems, categorise, and make inferences. (Zimmerman, Steiner, & Pond, 2002, p. 191)

There were two areas of language functioning which were identified as being important: (a) understanding the meaning conveyed in language (receptive language) and (b) expressing the meaning conveyed in language (expressive communication). The expectation was that the KU ELLI children would show improvement in each area.

Receptive Language

The *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test III (PPVT-III)* (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) is a measure that has been used extensively in many studies. It is designed as a measure of receptive language assessing listening comprehension for the spoken word depending on a child's vocabulary acquisition. Table 5 reports the pre- and post-means on the PPVT-III.

Table 5: PPVT-III Pre- and Post-Means for Children Progressing to School from KU ELLI (N = 77)

Standard Score		Pre	Post	N
PPVT-III	X	89.78	100.03***	37
	SD	12.62	12.96	

***t(36)=5.25 p<.001

The children had made significant gains in their receptive language during the time they had been in KU ELLI.

Expressive Language

There were two measures of expressive language. The Teacher Rating of Oral Language and Literacy (TROLL) (Dickinson, McCabe, and Sprague, 2001) has a language scale that measures the level of conversational skills of the children with adults and with other children. It involves enhancing children's ideas and vocabulary both in receptive language (understanding what others are saying) and their expressive language (communicating ideas and needs). It consisted of a set of 8 items from the TROLL. Dickenson et al provide reliability and validity data in their manual.

Table 6: Measures, Item Content, and Definitions for Expressive Language for the TROLL Oral Language Scale.

Measure	Item Content	Definition of Score
TROLL Oral Language (Items 1-8)	1. Start a conversation	1. <i>Begins to persist in attempting to engage in conversation using varied vocabulary to gain attention and/or share information.</i>
	2. Communicate personal experiences	
	3. Ask questions	2. <i>Engages in brief and limited conversations using occasional questions and limited talk during play.</i>
	4. Pretend talk	
	5. Recognise and produce rhymes	
		3. <i>Asks interesting questions,</i>

Measure	Item Content	Definition of Score
	6. Varied vocabulary 7. Understandable 8. Expresses curiosity	<i>involved in pretend play, and expresses curiosity.</i> 4. <i>Understandable, extended conversation relevant and important to play and seeking out information appropriate to the situation.</i>

Table 7: Expressive Post Language Measures on the TROLL for Children Progressing to School from KU ELLI at Five Years (N = 77)

		Post	N=77
TROLL Oral	Median	3.25	72
Language ¹ (8 items)			

¹ The TROLL median rating of the 8 Oral Language items on a 1-4 scale (1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often) is reported. For each set of items, the 4 points on the scale were given an educational meaning in Table 5 to assist in interpreting the median.

The post TROLL Oral Language median was 3.25 on the 1-4 scale to provide a standards based indication of what the children were able to achieve when they left the preschool for school. It was not possible to report a meaningful pre median for the TROLL Oral Language Scale that was comparable for the whole group of children since some started at 3 years, some at 4, and some at 5 and percentiles are not provided for the three TROLL scales.

The children who progressed to school were able to engage in more extended conversations, relevant and important to their play, as indicated by the TROLL Oral Language Scale.

Impact on Early Literacy

The evaluation also investigated whether there would be an increase in the early literacy skills of the children involved in KU ELLI. Dickinson, McCabe, and Sprague (2001) had developed a teacher rating tool not only for oral language but also for early literacy, the *Teacher Rating of Oral Language and Literacy* (TROLL) based on the body of theory that provided the foundation for *Speaking and listening from preschool through third grade* (New Standards, 2000).

Table 8 reports the pre- and post medians and percentiles for the children who enrolled at three years of age, those who enrolled at four years of age, and those who enrolled at five years of age for the TROLL Total Scale. This will indicate any

change in the relative standing of the children independently of the change in chronological age. The norms provided by Dickinson & Sprague (2001) are those for some 900 low income children in the US. This is able to provide a comparison indicating the relative standing of the KU ELLI children in relation to low income children. The findings cannot be dismissed, then, just as the effect of economic disadvantage since any children below the 50th percentile are achieving below their economic peers.

Table 8: Pre-Post TROLL Total Scale and Percentile Rank for Children who Progressed to School at Five Having Started in KU ELLI at Three, Four, or Five Years (N = 77)

Age Starting KU ELLI	Median		Percentile		N=69/77
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	
3 year old	49.25	65.50	25	25	18
4 year old	53.3	72.50	25	50	36
5 year old	62	73	25	50	15

All 6 children at one of the preschools (1/3 of the 18 who started at 3 years) did show the gain from the 25th to the 50th percentile. The gain reflected the work that that preschool had done in the area of early writing. All 12 children at the other preschool (2/3 of the total of 18) remained on the 25th percentile.

The children who, on enrolling in KU ELLI at four- or at five- years of age better than 25% of comparable low income children, were, on progressing to school at five years, better than 50% of comparable low income children.

The children who started at three years of age better than 25% of comparable low income children, were, at one preschool, on progressing to school, better than 50% of comparable low income children while, at the other, they remained better than 25% (when perhaps they might have been expected to fall further behind, based on the research by Brooks-Gunn & Duncan 1997).

Early Reading and Listening to Stories

The expectation was that the KU ELLI children would show improvement in the following variables of interest derived from a content analysis of the TROLL Reading Scale: (a) *Listening to Stories*, involving understanding of how the illustrations and

the text interact to convey the narrative discourse of the story, (b) *Concepts about Print*, involving children’s letter-word recognition and understanding that letters are symbols for sounds which can be put together to form a word (such as the child’s own name or the main characters in the stories), and (c) *Phonemic Awareness*, involving the children’s ability to attend to the sounds which are used in their first (and second) language.

Table 9: Measures, Item Content, and Definitions for TROLL Reading Scale

Measure	Item Content	Definition of Score
TROLL Early Reading (Items 9-19)	Experience of stories Involvement with stories Understanding of books Recognising words	1. No experience with stories. 2. Begins to be involved with stories. 3. Interprets words and pictures. 4. Recognises words.
Listening to Stories (Items 9-13)	Likes to listen to stories being read to a group Understands stories read to a group Reads stories on their own Remembers story and characters Reads books alone or with friends	1. Begins to listen to stories. 2. Reads books with friends. 3. Reads books alone. 4. Recalls the story line.
Concepts about Print (Items 14-17)	Recognises letters Recognises own name Recognises the names of others Reads other words	1. Recognises none of the letters of the alphabet. 2. Names some letters. 3. Recognises own name. 4. Recognises a number of names and other words.
Phonemic Awareness (Items 18-19)	Understands relationship between sounds and letters Attempts to sound out new words	1. No link between sound and letters. 2. Sounds out some letters. 3. Sound out letters in names and plays with sounds. 4. Tries to sound out new words.

Table 10 reports the post median scores on the TROLL for the Early Reading Scale and the three sub-scales derived from it (*Listening to Stories*, *Concepts about Print*,

and Phonemic Awareness) that were developed by KU ELLI from a content analysis of the Reading Scale.

Table 10: TROLL Post Median Rating for Early Reading for Children Progressing to School from KU ELLI (N = 77)

Scale	N of Items	Post Median ¹	N of Children
Reading Scale	11	2.64	69
<i>Listening to Stories</i>	5	3.4	71
<i>Concepts about Print</i>	4	2.25	72
<i>Phonemic Awareness</i>	2	1.00	72

¹ For each scale and sub-scale of the TROLL the median rating on a 1-4 scale (1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often) is reported. For each set of items, the 4 points on the scale were given the educational meaning in Table 9 to assist in interpreting the median.

The children who proceeded to school at five years of age were now involved with stories and were beginning to interpret words and pictures. They were naming some of the letters of the alphabet (such as those in their own name) but had not yet acquired an understanding of the link between letters and sounds. Nor were they attempting to sound out new words (the sub scale, however, consisted of two items so the finding might need some qualification).

Impact on Early Writing

Early Writing involves the children using symbols to represent words and ideas through the transfer of their conceptual knowledge of letters and words into a scripted symbolic code. The TROLL *Early Writing Scale* assessed the way the children were using the marks and other symbols that they wrote to approximate letters and words. Table 11 presents the measures, item content, and definitions for early writing while Table 12 presents the post-median rating for the early writing scale.

Table 11: Measures, Item Content, and Definitions for Early Writing

Measure	Item Content	Definition of Score
Early Writing (Items 20-25)	What child’s writing looks like Child pretends to write Writes first name Writes other words Writes signs, labels Writes stories, songs, poems	1. Draws and scribbles non-representationally. 2. Makes letter-like marks and some approximations of letters. 3. Begins to draw conventional letters and approximates real words. 4. Writes names and other real words.

Table 12: TROLL Post Median Rating for Early Writing for Children Progressing to School from KU ELLI (N = 77)

Scale	N of Items	Post Median ¹	N of Children
Early Writing Scale	6	2.33	73

¹ For each scale and sub-scale of the TROLL the median rating on a 1-4 scale (1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often) is reported. For each set of items, the 4 points on the scale were given the educational meaning in Table 11 to assist in interpreting the median.

The children who proceeded to school were now beginning to draw conventional letters and were starting to approximate real words.

Impact on the Learning Environment

The evaluation also investigated the language and literacy experiences available in the preschool. The expectation was that the staff would be providing an environment that better facilitated language and literacy than at the start of KU ELLI. It was anticipated that the preschools would provide a more enriched environment to support learning, particularly language and literacy learning.

To evaluate both the early childhood environment and map the literacy practices in each of the early childhood preschool settings, the Early Childhood Environment Language and Literacy Scale (ECEL&LS) was used. It consisted of a modification of The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised Edition (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005) (ECERS-R) to include a number of additional language and literacy items developed by the Early Literacy Research Group from the Universities of Newcastle, Western Sydney – Nepean, Western Sydney – Macarthur, and the

Macquarie University Institute of Early Childhood as part of the Literacies, communities and under 5's project (Jones-Diaz et. al 2001). The ECEL&LS describes the program structure, space and furnishings, learning experiences, language and literacy reasoning opportunities, and personal care routines at a preschool and includes the language and literacy experiences available within each dimension. The additional items are listed in the Appendix 3.4 which shows where they have been included into the items from the ECERS-R. Table 11 shows the pre- and post-ratings for each preschool while Figures 1 and 2 display the data for each preschool.

Program Structure

1. The ECEL&LS for *Group time* (ECERS-R Item 36) yielded a rating of 6 and 5 for Preschool A, indicating that the staff was using different types of small groups for extending children's language and literacy. For Preschool B the ratings were 4 and 5, indicating that there were now similar opportunities for children to be part of self-selected small groups.

Space and Furnishings

2. The ECEL&LS for *Room arrangement for play* (ECERS-R Item 3) yielded a rating of 5 and 7 for both preschools, indicating that there were books and other literacy resources available both outside and within the book corner in both the preschools.

3. The ECEL&LS for *Child-related display* (ECERS-R Item 4) yielded a rating of 5 and 7 for Preschool A indicating that there many items of children's work displayed at children's eye level. For Preschool B the rating was 3 and 7, indicating that the children's work was now being displayed

Learning Experiences

4. The ECEL&LS for *Dramatic play* (ECERS-R Item 24) yielded a rating of 6 and 7 for Preschool A indicating that there were a number of literacy-related props included in the dramatic play area. For Preschool B the rating was 5 and 7, also indicating that there were literacy-related props included in the dramatic play area

Table 13: ECEL&LS Ratings of Aspects of the Preschool Environment¹

Aspect	Focus	Preschool A		Preschool B	
		2005	2007	2005	2007
<i>Program Structure</i>	1. Group time	6	5	4	5
<i>Space and Furnishings</i>	2. Child-related display	5	7	5	7
	3. Room arrangement for play	5	7	3	7
<i>Learning Experiences</i>	4. Dramatic play	6	7	5	7
	5. Literacy interactions in dramatic play	3.5	7	3.5	7
	6. Use of TV, video, and computers	7	7	4	5
	7. Promoting acceptance of diversity	5	7	4	5
<i>Language and Literacy Reasoning Opportunities</i>	8. Quality of literacy interactions	4.5	7	3.5	7
	9. Literacy play	3	5	3	7
	10. Discussion of literacy concepts	3	7	3	7
<i>Personal Care Routines</i>	11. Greeting and departing	3	4.5	4.5	7
	12. Literacy-related events at greeting and departure	4.5	7	3	7
	13. Meals and snacks	4	6	4	5
	14. Interactions at routine times include attention to environmental print	3.5	6	2	5

¹ 1=Inadequate 3=minimal 5=good 7=excellent

Figure 7.1: ECEL&LS Ratings of Aspects of the Preschool Environment¹

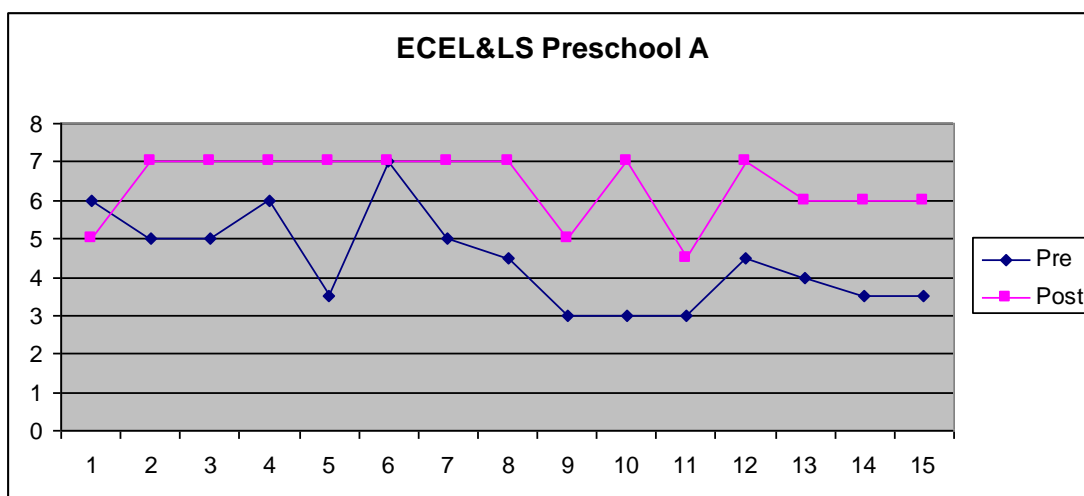
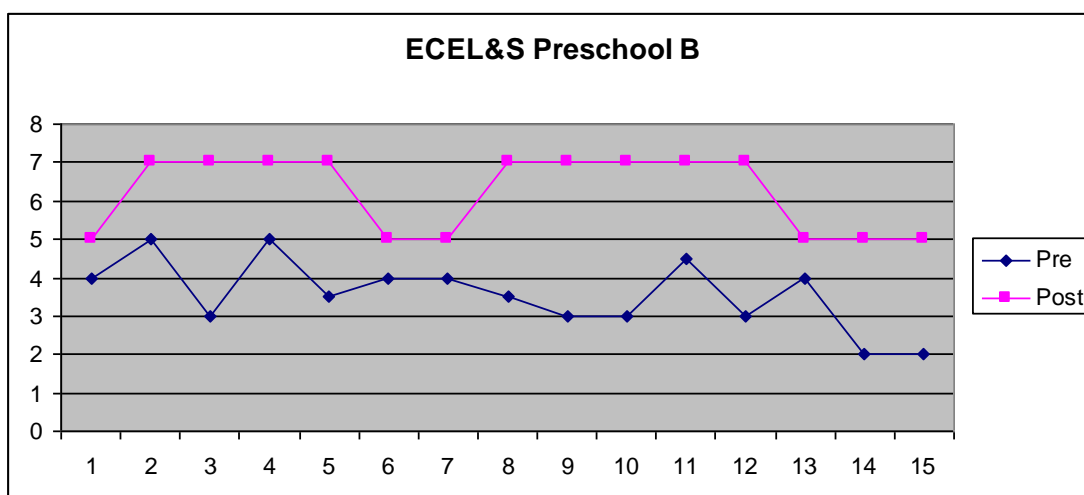


Figure 7.2: ECEL&LS Ratings of Aspects of the Preschool Environment¹



5. The ECEL&LS for *Literacy interactions in dramatic play* (new item) yielded a rating of 3.5 and 7 for both Preschool A and for Preschool B, indicating that adults acknowledged children’s language without necessarily extending it.

6. The ECEL&LS for *Use of TV, video, and computers* (ECERS-R Item 27) yielded a rating of 7 and 7 for Preschool A indicating that there was a strong literacy focus in the children’s involvement with TV, videos and computers. For Preschool B the rating was 4 and 7, indicating an increase in the involvement by the children. Preschool A had been involved in a computer initiative undertaken by the University of Western Sydney while Preschool B had had access only to limited resources.

7. The ECEL&LS for *Promoting acceptance of diversity* (ECERS-R Item 28) yielded a rating of 5 and 7 for Preschool A indicating that staff encouraged children's home languages and literacies. For Preschool B the rating was 4 and 5, indicating that the staff were using relevant resources.

Language-Reasoning Opportunities

8. The ECEL&LS for *Quality of literacy interactions* (new item) yielded a rating of 4.5 and 7 for Preschool A indicating that the staff were supporting languages and literacy. For Preschool B the rating was 3.5 and 7, indicating that the staff were now becoming involved over much greater periods of time to support language and literacy.

9. The ECEL&LS for *Literacy play* (new item) yielded a rating of 3 and 5 for Preschool A and 3 and 7 for Preschool B, indicating that the staff at both preschools were providing much greater encouragement for the children to explore print with Preschool B giving somewhat greater attention to this item.

10. The ECEL&LS for *Discussion of literacy concepts* (new item) yielded a rating of 3 and 7 for both Preschool A and for Preschool B, indicating that a greatly increased use of print and other resources at both preschools with staff and children being involved together.

Personal Care Routines

11. The ECEL&LS for *Greeting and departure* (ECERS-R Item 9) yielded a rating of 3 and 4.5 for Preschool A indicating that the staff used arrivals and departures as information sharing time with families. For Preschool B the rating was 4.5 and 7, indicating pleasant arrivals and departures without being rushed. Preschool A families are able to let themselves into the grounds and can independently settle their child while at Preschool B there is now a procedure for greeting all parents at the door (which is kept locked for security reasons).

12. The ECEL&LS for *Literacy-related events at greeting and departure* (new item), when included with the greeting and departing item, yielded a rating of 4.5 and 7 for Preschool A indicating that the staff were communicating with families about a range of literacy-related events. For Preschool B the rating was 3 and 7, indicating that

there was now a much greater degree of interaction between staff and parents about literacy-related events at greeting and departure times.

13. The ECEL&LS for *Meals and snacks* (ECERS-R Item 10) yielded a rating of 4 and 6 for both Preschool A and 4 and 5 for Preschool B, indicating that most staff tended to sit with the children during meals times, however, Preschool A were using these routine times to encourage more communication and literacy related conversations.

14. The ECEL&LS for *Interactions at routine times include attention to environmental print* (new item), when included with the meals and snacks item, yielded a rating of 3.5 and 6 for Preschool A indicating that the staff acknowledged children's interest in environmental print while focussing on the task of children's eating.. For Preschool B the rating was 2 and 5, indicating that the staff moved from a focus on the task of children's eating to conversing generally with the children.

There have been major observable changes in the physical and social interactive environments in both centres. In terms of the physical environment Preschool A has had an opportunity to set aside a designated space in which they have brought together a range of language and literacy related opportunities in a single room. They also have ensured however, that language and literacy related experiences are included in all other areas of the indoor and outdoor environments. When interacting with the children it is now very apparent that promoting the development of language and literacy outcomes with the children is now part of the day to day practice. The physical context of Preschool B is more restricted, they have however, established a dedicated writing centre as part of their standard preschool playroom environment. They have also included language and literacy related experiences wherever possible in many of the other experiences offered in the indoor environment. They also many provide opportunities for the children to become engaged with language and literacy experiences in the outdoor environment. As with Preschool A, the staff of Preschool B are very conscious of the need to engage in interactions with the children which encourage the development of more sophisticated language and literacy outcomes.

Significant changes in the practice of the staff in both centres is very apparent. Staff of both Preschool A and of Preschool B now demonstrate their enhanced knowledge and ability to promote the language and literacy development of the children through enhancing the social and physical environment.

There was a marked improvement in the quality of the environment that each of the preschools had created in order to facilitate language and literacy interactions between children and staff.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY PLANNING

There are several characteristics of KU ELLI that would seem to be important in planning early language and literacy initiatives.

Theoretical Basis

There is a coherent theoretical base that underlies a holistic approach to language and literacy programming. Experience and language is seen as the foundation of early literacy development that builds cumulatively upon children's experience and language. Not only the social constructivist cognitive understandings of oral and written language but also the sociocultural understandings that look at children's informal learning in their home and cultural settings provide the theoretical basis for KU ELLI. The theories have not only brought out the complexities of early literacy learning but have provided insights as to how literacy can be developed and learned. The KU ELLI preschools have used social constructivist strategies of promoting children's language and literacy based on the many competencies that they bring to the preschool from their homes.

Autonomy of Preschool Staff

The KU ELLI program model leads to sustainability with the encouragement of the autonomy of preschool staff. KU ELLI is not a prescribed "course" but the response

of the staff of the preschools to their theoretical understandings. While KU ELLI is providing early language and literacy support for the preschools, the objective is for the staff to be able to sustain the initiatives as part of their daily practice. The important part of KU ELLI for the staff has been the ongoing professional development which has taken place with an increasing understanding of early language and literacy development, and planning and evaluation through the work on action research. This then enables the staff of the preschool to sustain the initiatives autonomously. The preschool staff are involved in ongoing professional development to underpin KU ELLI practices.

Purposeful Planning

KU ELLI incorporates purposeful planning into best preschool practice with children and families. The literature suggests that more than a rich early childhood environment is needed for the acquisition of language and literacy, that direct, planned, and purposeful planning is integral to utilise the richness of the environment. The preschool staff are including clear early language and literacy goals in their program planning, implementation, and evaluation and are involving the families as integral to their child's language and literacy environment.

Recognition of Cultural and Social Diversity

KU ELLI recognises the differences between preschools in terms of staffing, diversity of children and families, and diversity of the experience of staff. The KU ELLI consultants work uniquely with the staff of each preschool in supporting the work that they are doing. The role of the consultants is to respond to the priorities and issues raised in discussions with the staff so that KU ELLI initiatives are sensitive to each preschool. The preschool staff are putting in place their independent early language

and literacy initiatives reflecting the uniqueness of their own children, families, and program.

DISCLAIMER: Dr. George F. Lewis, the principal author and independent evaluator for KU Children's Services, Sydney, NSW, Australia prepared the information in this paper about the KU Early Language and Literacy Initiative (KU ELLI). It draws on information, opinions and advice provided by a variety of individuals and organizations, including the Commonwealth of Australia and KU Children's Services. Neither the Commonwealth nor KU Children's Services accepts any responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of any material contained in this paper. Additionally, both the Commonwealth and KU Children's Services disclaim all liability to any person in respect of anything, and of the consequences of anything, done or omitted to be done by any such person in reliance, whether wholly or partially, upon any information presented in this paper.

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APPENDIX A

The email The Email Transcripts

Date: 22 May:16:34 PM

To all the wonderful children at Preschool A,

This week Kym and Chris are going to a conference (this is a special meeting) at a place called Bankstown. Kym won't be at preschool on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and she is going to miss everyone. Please tell me all about the things that you do with Jennelle, Terri and Vicky. Maybe you could do some drawings or write a letter about what you are doing at preschool. I will try and write a letter to preschool about all the things we are doing at the conference. Look forward to seeing you on Thursday when I return.

Love from

Kym

Date: 23 May 6:06:01 PM

To all the wonderful children at Preschool A,
Kym & Chris are still at the conference, we are learning some very interesting things. I hope you had a lovely day with Jenelle, Terri and Vicky on Monday. I'm looking forward to seeing all the things you have been doing.
It was a very long drive to the conference and there were lots of cars on the road. At the conference they have given us some nice cakes and sandwiches to eat, I think Chris & I had too many cakes!! The sandwiches were filled with lots of healthy foods, lettuce, tomato, carrot, sprouts, cheese and ham, they were delicious. I wonder what you have been having for lunch?
Have a lovely Tuesday at Preschool.

Love from Kym xxxxx

On 23/05, at 11:27 AM, children from Preschool A wrote:

I had a roll up for lunch today. Love from Nicole

I did a painting for you. I love you Love from Jayden V

I had 2 bread rolls today with vegemite. Love from Kellie

I've done a letter for you. I had a sandwich for lunch Love from Kyle

I maked a picture for you. I had popcorn and BBQ shapes for lunch Love from Caitlyn Mc

I had a sandwich for lunch. Love from Madi

Do you like Jessie in Toy Story? Cause I like Jessie. Love from Oliver

Nikki's talking. I had a sandwich for lunch today. Love from Brendan

From:

Sent: Tuesday, May 24, 6:18 PM

Subject: Re: A letter to the children at Preschool A

To all the wonderful children at Preschool A

How wonderful to get email letters from you, it made me so happy I nearly cried. That sounds funny. I can't wait to see everyone and I'm looking forward to seeing your paintings and drawings. It took a long time to get to the conference again today, I think there were even more cars. We played lots of fun games in the morning and I told everyone at the conference that I loved the games but I was missing the play at preschool. We played balloon games, chasing games, parachute games, obstacle courses and the 3 Bears game, that was my favourite. I can't wait to play them at preschool with you. Today I didn't eat too many cakes, I had healthy salad rolls for lunch.

Have a fun day at preschool on Wednesday

Love from Kym

On 24/05, at 11:27 AM, Preschool A wrote:

Come back to preschool soon. Love from Charmaine.

I've been playing in the sandpit. I've been drawing, too Love from Kyle.

I did a painting for you. Love from David.

I did a painting for you too. Love from Jayden V.

I have a rabbitt in the grass at my home. Love from Coby.

Please write back to us tomorrow.