How do you spell bird?

EFFECTIVE PARENT PROGRAMS TO ENHANCE 4-6 YEAR OLD CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Susan Hill, Susan Krieg, Jill Forster, Sarah Rose, Lisa Nechvoglod

University of South Australia

Flinders University
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The title for this report came from a child’s question ‘How do you spell ‘bird’? The parent in a focus group said ‘What do I say b-i-r-d or b-ir-d? I don’t want to say the wrong thing’ This highlights a number of issues including the centrality of children’s questions when engaging parents with children’s literacy learning.

January 2008

The advisory group

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The researchers gratefully acknowledge the participation of teachers and parents in this project and the University of South Australia and Flinders University. We also wish to acknowledge the support of the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services and in particular the advisory group.
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Chapter 1

PROJECT SUMMARY
Introduction
This research examined the effectiveness of parent programs designed for families to support the literacy learning of their 4-6 year old children. The project began with a literature review analysing six established, effective parent programs that have been reported in the international and national research literature. An analysis of what made each of the programs effective entailed an analysis of the program’s target population, the project inputs and activities and the initial, immediate and long term outcomes.

To explore further what local parents and families view as effective parent programs for 4-6 year old children the research explored individual site-specific parent programs in operation in South Australian childcare centres, preschools and schools in a range of diverse socioeconomic and geographic sites. Parents and teachers engaged in focus groups to describe ways the schools and centres sustain links between home and school learning.

To assess the elements of two existing parent programs to support children’s early literacy development, parents and teachers participated in several focus groups. The two programs were the parent component of The Abecedarian Program (2001, 1979) developed in the United States and the South Australian Early Childhood Literacy Includes Parents Staff and Education ECLIPSE program (1997) developed by the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS).

Research questions
The research project, Effective approaches to promoting parent programs to enhance 4-6 year old children’s literacy development, was developed around the following questions.

- What does ‘effective’ mean in terms of approaches and programs designed to support parents to enhance children’s literacy development?
- In what ways are educators currently working with parents to support early learning of 4-6 year old children?
- How may the Abecedarian and the ECLIPSE parent programs relate to diverse early childhood contexts?
- In what ways do various programs sustain links between home and school learning?

This research project is vitally important because an existing research base overwhelmingly highlights the connections between home and school and shows that early literacy learning at school is contingent on children already having or quickly developing a ‘habitus’ that disposes them towards educational institutions and the forms of participative repertoire that characterise classroom pedagogical routines. Early childhood classrooms require children to participate in particular social practices such as ‘question-and-answer sequences’, book talk, recounts of events, and demonstrations of current knowledge and expertise. Some children are more comfortable than others in these school language practices because they are similar to the interactional patterns of their homes. These school language practices are central to classroom life, and they form the framework upon which many literacy lessons are shaped. An emerging challenge for teachers is twofold—to understand children’s home language practices and to communicate school language practices in order that all children get real opportunities to participate in literacy learning.
### Comparison of six early literacy parent programs

This project summary compares six parent programs developed to support young children’s literacy development shown in Table 1. The six programs are the Abecedarian Program; Perry Preschool Program; Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP); Chicago Child-Parent Centers; Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY); and ECLIPSE. The table organises the data from the literature review in terms of the targets and venues, the inputs, activities and where evaluations have been carried out, and includes the initial, intermediate and long term outcomes of the programs.

### Table 1: Comparison of six early literacy parent programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abecedarian Target population and site</th>
<th>Abecedarian Inputs</th>
<th>Abecedarian Activities</th>
<th>Abecedarian Outcomes Initial</th>
<th>Abecedarian Outcomes Intermediate</th>
<th>Abecedarian Outcomes Long term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centre-based. Targeted African American children at risk of delayed development Birth to 5</td>
<td>Free full time childcare Well educated and trained workers Low staff turnover Support services for family where required. Continued support with a Home School resource Teacher</td>
<td>Special curriculum developed by research staff Individualised curriculum packets Individualised educational games focused on social, emotional, cognitive development Particular emphasis on language acquisition</td>
<td>Increase in IQ and other measures of development.</td>
<td>Continued / sustained improvement of IQ and development.</td>
<td>Enhanced academic achievement, greater attendance of college, reduction in teenage parenthood, greater likelihood of obtaining skilled employment, reduced smoking, reduced use of marijuana</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perry Pre-school Program Target population and site</th>
<th>Perry Pre-school Program Inputs</th>
<th>Perry Pre-school Program Activities</th>
<th>Perry Pre-school Program Outcomes Initial</th>
<th>Perry Pre-school Program Outcomes Intermediate</th>
<th>Perry Pre-school Program Outcomes Long term</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centre and home based. Targeted 3-4-year-old African-American children who were living in poverty. Long term project from 1962 to 1967</td>
<td>Daily two and one-half hour-long classroom sessions Weekly one and one-half hour-long home visits during 30-week school year Trained teachers, teacher’s</td>
<td>Based on supporting children’s natural play with appropriate activities and learning environment children learn through self-initiated and directed activities Not defined</td>
<td>Program participants had significantly higher achievement scores and were less likely to receive special education services in school.</td>
<td>Although significant program effects were found for cognitive test scores through first grade, this difference was no longer significant by second grade.</td>
<td>Program participants were more likely than controls to be high school graduates, had significantly higher earnings, were more likely to own homes and second cars, and were less likely to need welfare or to be involved in criminal activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEEP Target population and site</td>
<td>PEEP Inputs</td>
<td>PEEP Activities</td>
<td>PEEP Outcomes Initial</td>
<td>PEEP Outcomes Intermediate</td>
<td>PEEP Outcomes Long term</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long term: 1995 onwards Parents and children</td>
<td>Program focuses on how to make the most of the learning opportunities in everyday life at home - listening, talking, playing, singing and sharing books every day. Supports parents and carers in their role as the first educators of their children.</td>
<td>PEEP had a significant impact on children’s rate of progress in a number of literacy-related skills, as well as in measures of their self-esteem. The results strongly support existing evidence that good quality parenting leads to improved cognitive and social skills for the children.</td>
<td>PEEP had a significant impact on the quality of parents’ interaction with their children when they were one and two years old.</td>
<td>A significant improvement in parent’s socio-economic status Parents accessing significantly more basic skills courses Parents reported significantly greater awareness of their child’s literacy development and of ways to foster it</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Targeted preschool to year 3 children from high poverty families. Long term: 1967 onwards Part of, and co-located with public schools and home visits.</td>
<td>Trained teachers and teacher’s aides. Outreach services to CPC families. Administrati ve teachers, head teacher, parent-resource coordinator on each site. Child health screening</td>
<td>In order for children to participate, parents are mandated to commit time to the centre on a weekly basis. Conducting home visits to families upon child enrolment and on a continuing as-needed basis</td>
<td>When compared with children who had not attended pre-school participants; scored higher on ITBS reading and math tests; were less likely to have ever been retained a grade; spent fewer years on average in special education.</td>
<td>Participants who had been involved in the program for the full 6 years: higher reading and math test scores a lower percentage of children who were ever retained in grade.</td>
<td>At a 15-year follow-up children who attended a CPC preschool program were more likely to have completed high school; less likely to have been retained in a grade by age 15; less likely to have been in special education by age 18; had fewer arrests of any type</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**HIPPY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target population and site</th>
<th>HIPPY Inputs</th>
<th>HIPPY Activities</th>
<th>HIPPY Outcomes Initial</th>
<th>HIPPY Outcomes Intermediate</th>
<th>HIPPY Outcomes Long term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters The target group is families with preschool age children within targeted communities</td>
<td>The program operates at the same time as the school year. Parents make a two-year commitment to take part for 30 weeks per year. Weekly half hour home visits by a para-professional, herself a mother and a member of the same community. The home visitor works under the guidance of a professional coordinator whose qualification include higher education and experience in community work.</td>
<td>HIPPY is a home-based intervention in which a parent, most often the mother, works with her preschool-aged child on a prescribed set of educational activities. Home visitor and participating parents meet weekly as a group with their local coordinator to role play materials, discuss and report the previous weeks work. The curriculum is written in a structured format with 30 easy-to-use activity packets for each age of the program. Activities generally take as little as 15-20 minutes a day for the parent and child to complete.</td>
<td>In a New Zealand evaluation, with a sample of 38 children, the Children who had completed 2 years of HIPPY and one year of kindergarten, scored higher than non-HIPPY children on all of the 11 measures obtained. The difference reached statistical significance on four measures. These were three of the six New Zealand Reading Diagnostic tests, Concepts About Print (p&lt;0.01), Word Tests (p&lt;0.001) and the Burt. On the measure of children’s academic self-esteem (the BASE), the mean of HIPPY children was slightly higher than that of the comparison group and significantly higher than all other children in their class.</td>
<td>HIPPY caregivers and tutors also obtained slightly higher scores indicating more positive attitudes, behavioural involvement and self-esteem than comparison caregivers on all eight of the caregivers’ questionnaire sub-sections. This difference reached statistical significance on three sub-sections. HIPPY caregivers and tutors were significantly more likely to be involved in formal educational activities than comparison caregivers, performed significantly more educational activities with their child in the previous week and were significantly</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
What made the established parent programs effective?

The early literacy programs analysed in detail in this research report revealed the most effective programs were long term projects with lasting impacts on many facets of children’s lives. Although often initially expensive these programs pay back to the individual and society in many ways improving educational attainment; improving job prospects; reducing reliance on welfare; reducing criminal activity and improving health outcomes for participants.

Many of the programs that were situated in low income areas and what made them effective was that while they targeted children’s literacy development they were also multifaceted. They were multifaceted in that they targeted a number of factors relating to education, health and parenting.

The programs were effective because they were multigenerational involving parents, grandparents and children. All programs were non-stigmatising and avoided labelling ‘problem families’. The programs were all locally driven and based on consultation and involvement of parents and local communities and culturally appropriate and sensitive to the needs of children and parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECLIPSE Target population and site</th>
<th>ECLIPSE Inputs</th>
<th>ECLIPSE Activities</th>
<th>ECLIPSE Outcomes Initial</th>
<th>ECLIPSE Outcomes Intermediate</th>
<th>ECLIPSE Outcomes Long term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECLIPSE Early Childhood Literacy Includes Parents, Staff and Education Resource package</td>
<td>The materials were trialled in 16 centres and then disseminated to all preschools in South Australia. The package contained a book and literacy information sheets to be used by preschool educators and parents. The materials designed as a resource to support literacy teaching and learning in the early years. Ninety per cent of the centres sampled indicated that they had used the resources for parent information sessions, to promote parent involvement in newsletters and for staff development. Over 800 parents attended information ECLIPSE sessions.</td>
<td>Ninety per cent of the centres sampled indicated that they had used the resources for parent information sessions, to promote parent involvement in newsletters and for staff development. Over 800 parents attended information ECLIPSE sessions.</td>
<td>Parents reported that they were more likely to engage with the resources when they were used in conjunction with involvement from early childhood educators in interactive sessions.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ECLIPSE</td>
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The six programs varied considerably in terms of program objectives (e.g. parent/child relationships, literacy learning, behavioural change etc); the targets for the program (whole family, maternal health, local community); and whether the program targets children of a particular age within the broad pre-natal, birth-8 range or specific groups of parents. Other variations between parent programs include the venue for the program (home only, centre, clinic, school or a combination of these); and the providers of the program – government, multiple government departments, NGO (non government organisations) or international agencies. Variables related to the resourcing of parent programs determine the intensity (full day, half day, weekly etc) of programs and the extensiveness of the interventions (birth-8 years) and all these variables need to be considered for comparison between programs to be reliable.

In all the effective early literacy parent programs there was a common understanding that the quality of parenting and parent involvement in children’s learning were powerful determinants of schooling success. Recently, however, ‘knowledge of how to effectively support parents has not kept pace with our knowledge of the importance of parenting’ (Early Childhood Australia, 2007, p. 4). Although many parent programs exist in many developed countries and within Australia, it has been difficult to determine the kind of parental support and involvement that is most important (Jeynes, 2003). Whilst there are some broad principles that might guide policy and practice including, for example, the need for a ‘strong and coherent theoretical base to guide the program’ and a ‘strength based approach’ and the need for highly skilled early childhood educators (Early Childhood Australia, 2007), further ongoing research is essential if we are to move beyond the status quo and address the inequitable literacy learning outcomes for many groups of children.

**In what ways are local sites already working with parents?**

To investigate the research question – In what ways are educators currently working with parents to support early learning of 4-6 year old children? – focus groups were held at the six research sites to explore how centres and schools support parents. The focus groups explored what was already happening in the sites and the ways schools sustain links between school and home. The parents and the teachers met in two different groups at each site. Importantly the six research sites were geographically, culturally and socioeconomically diverse and spread throughout metropolitan and semi rural Adelaide South Australia. Some sites had high achievement in children’s literacy and others low-average or low literacy achievement.

All parent focus groups at all sites commented on the importance of a positive relationship developed between the school and home. Many parents noted the importance of a welcoming, cheerful, friendly face at the entrance to the preschool or school. The parents commented on the need for teachers to be approachable and ‘prepared to go that extra step’ to talk about the child’s daily learning with the parent. They appreciated the teacher’s availability at drop off and pick up time for direct and personal communication.

Communication via newsletters, emails and websites was important. Parents found acquaintance nights, transition visits, special workshop sessions, communication books, learning story records sent home and special events like shared breakfasts were effective for building strong relationships with the school.
Some schools and centres had developed local parent programs such as PALS (Play and learning in school) and literacy packs to take home with books and a variety of story props for parents to use at home. One school had been involved in a six week parenting program in conjunction with Mission Australia. Other centres in low-average and low literacy achievement centres spoke about how the Early Learning Parent Program, Learning Together and the Smith Family Program had helped them. Several centres used parts of the ECLIPSE quilt of literacy activities with literacy activities for parents to engage in at home. Schools with a high proportion of families with English as a Second Language (ESL) described the bilingual worker as imperative for communicating with parents. In some centres in areas with low-average and low literacy achievement the parents were involved in further studying for various certificate courses at the same site their children were attending.

Several teachers in schools with low average or low literacy achievement spoke of the need to ‘get more people in’ and said that the greatest challenge was to involve more parents in the various events or programs offered.

**In what ways are the Abecedarian and ECLIPSE programs effective?**

To investigate in detail the effective features of two parent programs teachers and parents trialled and evaluated the Abecedarian and ECLIPSE parent programs in a range of focus groups.

The Abecedarian and ECLIPSE parent programs had several features in common. Both programs generated positive one-to-one interactions between parents and children. In both there was a focus on the development of cheerful and confident relationships between parents and children. The activities suggested were those that created affirming feedback for the child because activities were easily achieved and enjoyable for both parent and child. In both programs there was a dedicated focus on the role of parent in children’s learning. Along with the strong emphasis on the importance of the parent’s role was the parents’ reciprocated fascination in what and how children were learning. So in both programs families were inducted into the guiding role of educators with opportunities for increased parent understanding about their individual child’s literacy learning.

In all sites it was suggested that more than just presenting a book of ideas to parents was needed. Family or parent workshops were suggested because of the need to communicate the importance of building strong relationships and attitudes to learning. Just doing the cognitively oriented activities shown in the photographs does not, in itself, communicate the positive effect and constructive emotional interactions which underpin both programs.

In all sites parents commented positively on the grid in the Abecedarian program that showed the age appropriate suggestions for activities. Parents appeared to respond to specifically focused materials that could be matched to children’s needs. For example, one site wanted to break the Abecedarian material up into packs suited to an individual child’s learning stage and another wanted sets of laminated pages of activities that could be matched to children’s learning needs. Two sites suggested combining aspects of ECLIPSE and the Abecedarian materials.

Some parents and teachers commented that the existing materials that were trialled appeared dated and suggested that an up to date set of materials was needed that would support parents.
in developing children’s literacy at home. One parent focus group in a category 2 area was highly critical of the Abecedarian materials saying that the photographs were ‘fake and dated’. The researcher commented that this group had very sophisticated critical text analysis skills possibly because they had been involved in the Learning Together Program which was developed for 0-3 year old children. Most sites wanted to combine aspects of the programs with digital cameras and pedagogies that actively engage parents in participating in and recording their children’s literacy (and numeracy) learning at home.

The research in six diverse socioeconomic sites revealed a pattern of home-like-school families appreciating the program with games and activities and the less home-like-school families saying the materials don’t match children’s world and look ‘set up’. Perhaps the photographs in both set of parent materials focus on parents interacting with children in school-like-activities which may better fit families who already engage in home-like-school activities.

**Recommendations**

In the six research sites in South Australia there was an urgent need for coherent parent support materials and associated workshops for parents to support 4-6 year old children’s early literacy development. We recommend that future development of parent support programs for children’s early literacy take into account the following factors:

- Parent programs be developed that take into account the very diverse experiences of Australian children and families including changes in family structure, working patterns, levels of parental education, life expectancy, mobility and other demographic patterns that affect parental needs and expectations.

- Highly qualified early childhood educators are involved in the development of parent support program for children’s early literacy and also in the implementation and evaluation of these parent support programs.

- Programs developed for families include both print based and other materials plus positive interactive workshop processes that enable groups of parents to share information and work together.

- The programs are all locally driven, culturally appropriate and sensitive and actively involve parents in the development design, implementation and systematic evaluation of programs.

- Programs for parents to enhance 4-6 year old children’s literacy development are based on a coherent set of principles and developed over a long term.

- The programs for parents to enhance 4-6 year old children’s literacy development have clear outcomes that guide both formative and summative evaluation.

- A final recommendation is that resources are developed to support face-to-face teacher and parent conversations about children’s literacy development as well as a range of suggested take home activities.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW
Introduction
The purpose of this literature review is to evaluate the effectiveness of various parent programs in enhancing 4-6 year old children’s literacy development. The report will begin with an overview of recent research that focuses on home/centre/school links. It was considered beyond the scope of this project to examine the challenges and special requirements of developing countries so these were excluded from the literature review.

Following this section of the literature review, a summary of the Abecedarian, Perry Preschool, PEEP, Chicago Child Parent Centre, HIPPY and ECLIPSE programs is provided. The literature review contains, where possible, any information relating to evaluations of the listed programs such as longitudinal studies that follow up participants to establish the long term benefits of the projects.

The Australian context: Early childhood education and care
The changes in family structure, working patterns, level of parent education, life expectancy, mobility and fertility patterns all effect the needs and expectations of families accessing early childhood education and care (ECEC) facilities and programs. These changes challenge the traditional philosophies and structures underlying the way children are cared for and how intervention programs are best designed. The requirements for access to high quality care with a sound developmental aspect for young children are growing as parent expectations increase and more young children attend full-time care due to women’s increased participation in the workforce. Parental participation in ECEC is impacted by the increasing proportion of Australians now working non-standard hours resulting in greater variation in the hours of work, the pattern of work across the year and, in some instances, the places of work. ‘The needs of families may conflict with employer demands and family-friendly work practices are still not extensively available’ (Press & Hayes, 2001, p. 57).

The importance of early learning: Earlier is better
It is well recognised that access to quality early childhood education and care provides young children with a good start to life (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Children’s ability to build strong social and emotional skills are based on the relationships developed early in life. The ability to form meaningful relationships with others “…greatly increases the likelihood that children will develop early emotional competence, will be better prepared to enter school and less likely to display behaviour problems at home and at school” (Boyd, Barnett, Leong, Bodrova, & Gomby, 2007, p. 2). Children who experience higher rates of literacy have more chance of continuing their education and positively benefiting their prospects for stable employment and financial stability.

The flow on benefits to society of well developed, well funded, early childhood education is well documented (Bennett & Taylor, 2006; Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, & Barnett, 1996). Public investment in early childhood education and care has shown many benefits to society in the long term (Karoly, Kilburn, & Bigelow, 2001; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).

Improved brain (cognitive) and social development of children in early years can enhance schooling success and have long term payoffs in abilities, income, productivity and economic growth, reduced delinquency and criminal activity, improved health, higher tax revenues and
better citizenship. Public investment also promotes equality of opportunity, a fundamental value in most advanced societies. Early intervention is the most effective way to address disadvantage, both in term of lasting benefits to the individual child and also to the wider society (Bennett & Tayler, 2006).

The mismatches between home and early childhood educational practices have often impacted on children’s literacy achievements and contributed to inequitable literacy learning outcomes (Cairney & Ruge, 1997; Marsh, 2003; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). There have been many different programs that have attempted to address this mismatch. ‘Differences between the home environment and a child care environment of higher quality have been found to compensate for home deficits among children who are economically and socially disadvantaged in terms of children’s cognitive development, socialisation and school success’ (Barnett 1995; Barnett 1992; Farquar 1990).

**Barriers to children’s participation in ECEC**

All children can benefit from some amount of early childhood education. Children from low-income families incur especially large benefits as in many cases they experience interrelated factors which have the effect of compounding their disadvantage.

Poverty affects different aspects of people’s lives, existing when people are denied opportunities to work, to learn, to live healthy and fulfilling lives, and to live out their retirement years in security. Lack of income, access to good-quality health education and housing, and the quality of the local environment all affect people’s wellbeing. (DSS, 1999, p. 2, cited in Evangelou & Sylva, 2003).

Many children experience poverty and this often affects their ability to access the early childhood services that might improve their situation and learning opportunities. Indigenous people, especially in remote Australia endure extreme poverty and restricted access to quality educational and other important services. Culturally and linguistically diverse (CAULD) families face special challenges as in many cases they need to adapt to a new country, culture and language (Jeynes, 2003). Participation rates of disabled children (physical, mental or sensory) are also lower. Lower participation is attributable to ‘lack of services available, the physical or cultural inappropriateness of services, language barriers, insufficient numbers of staff to provide the level of care and education required, or a lack of specific expertise in staff’ (Press, & Hayes, 2001, p. 36).

Recent studies have shown a positive relationship between increasing income and child participation in early childhood education (Barnett & Yarosz, 2007). Parents are able to access high quality care which has positive long term effects for children. However, this relationship conversely effects children’s participation for income in the lower brackets potentially leaving this group at risk of compounding disadvantage.

Despite the existence of many support programs and policy statements with the aim of inclusion there are still children who are missing out ‘International data show that child poverty is growing in several OECD countries. For governments to put much effort and investment into targeted early childhood programming – dedicated to assisting young children from disadvantaged backgrounds – while at the same time, doing little to stem the reproduction of family poverty indicates a failure of integrated policy-making’ (OECD, 2006).
Involving parents and families

Parent involvement has emerged as one of the most important topics in contemporary educational policy and practice (Brown, 2000; Jeynes, 2003). It is recognised that families play a central nurturing and educational role in their children’s lives, particularly in the early childhood period (Bennett & Tayler, 2006; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Sylva, Evangelou, Taylor, Rothwell, & Brooks, 2004). The continuity of children’s experience across environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff members exchange information regularly and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning (Hill, Comber, Louden, Reid & Rivalland, 1998). Community involvement in the pre-school is important, not only for providing expanded services and referrals where necessary, but also as a space for partnership and the participation of parents (Bennett & Tayler, 2006).

There has been increasing recognition that a proactive approach to involving families with their children’s learning pays many dividends for the individual child, their families and broader society (Cairney & Ruge, 1997; Darling & Westberg, 2004; Hill, 1997; Stanley, 2000). This awareness is, in part, the result of increased research into the types of approaches that might be most effective when working with parents (Brown, 2000). The concept of parent involvement is broad and is open to very diverse interpretations (Jeynes, 2003). Earlier research often drew conclusions regarding the effectiveness of parent programs from limited data and the claims of ‘cause and effect’ were often difficult to substantiate (Brown, 2000, p. 1). The studies often drew from very small samples, focused on either general aspects of parent involvement or one aspect only, and often targeted particular groups of children (Jeynes, 2003). More recent research has examined the interrelationship between ‘parenting, non-familial factors, and the role of the broader context in which families live’ (Collins et al., 2000, p. 228) and has ‘revealed a reality that is far more complex than critics expected or the writers can convey’ (p. 228). Many contemporary parent programs have moved away from a ‘deficit’ view of families and parenting styles according to membership of particular societal groups and are examining home and school practices from perspectives that consider similarities and differences rather than deficit (Heath, 1983; Hill & Nichols, 2004; Kalantzis, Noble & Poynting, 1990; Marsh, 2003).

Parent programs focused on enhancing children’s literacy success have often done little more that ‘introduce parents to school literacy practices and strategies for supporting these practices’ (Cairney & Ruge, 1997, p. 24). Hill (1997; Hill & Nichols, 2004, 2005) has demonstrated how the beliefs and values that early childhood educators have about early literacy are reflected in their approaches to their work with parents. Her analysis, drawing from the work of Crawford (1995) illustrates how, from a social constructivist perspective, when early literacy is perceived to be a process of evolving participation in social practices, educators view children as ‘competent and capable users of oral and written language’ (Hill, 2005, p. 9) and therefore, working with parents involves parents sharing their knowledge of the literacies used at home and the parent program uses and builds on the strengths of these family literacies rather than constructing them as deficit.

Research into the reporting of student and school achievement has shown that parents place a higher priority on receiving information about their children’s progress than any other type of information they receive from schools. The research attempts to define what constitutes best practice in school reporting to parents and demonstrates that parents want to play a more active role in the management of their children’s education. Parents want to be provided with
timely, objective and accessible information about their children’s progress and how their school is performing (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000).

There are many programs worldwide which aim to support literacy and numeracy development in young children. Some of these programs have been quite successful in their aims. The following section of the literature review focuses on six programs which successfully supported young children’s literacy development and showed lasting benefits for those who participated in the programs.

**Program 1: The Abecedarian Program**

General features / Program design:
- Program operated in a single site, 1972 and 1985, North Carolina
- Participants drawn from recommendations from local social workers
- Participants selected using multiple criteria to assess the likelihood of developmental retardation based on poverty and other factors.
- Majority African American children at risk of delayed development
- Birth to 5
- Free full time childcare: 8 hours a day, five days a week, fifty weeks a year
- High quality childcare
- Well educated and trained workers
- Low staff turnover
- High ratios of carers to children
- Free nappies
- Free nutritional food
- Free transport to the childcare service and any project activities

Philosophy:
- Child focused learning
- Individualised programs
- Responsive to individual and group requirements
- Whole child holistic view of child development
- Children as active and experimental learners
- Responsive teaching and direct teaching styles used
- Carer support via continued education and reflective practice

Curriculum:
- Two parts to the program one was preschool intervention the other a school aged intervention.
- Purpose of preschool intervention was to develop an educational, stimulating, and structured environment to promote growth and learning and to enhance school readiness.
- The school aged intervention provided a resource teacher who:
  1. Prepared an individualised set of home activities to supplement the school’s basic curriculum in reading and math
  2. Taught parents how to use these activities with their children
  3. Tutored children directly
  4. Met regularly with classroom teachers to ensure that home activities matched the skills being taught in the classroom
5. Served as a consultant for the classroom teacher when problems arose, and advocated for the child and family within the school and community
6. Resource teachers made approximately 17 school visits and approximately 15 home visits per year for each child
7. Also offered children a variety of summertime support, including summer activity packets, help in arranging summer camp experiences, trips to the public library, and tutoring in reading skills
   - Special curriculum developed by the research staff for the project
   - Individualised educational games that focus on social, emotional, and cognitive development
   - Particular emphasis on language acquisition
   - Regular testing of children’s IQ

Staff:

Infant:
- 1:3 staff ratio
- Specially designed curriculum focusing cognitive, fine motor development, social and self help skills, language and gross motor skills

Toddler:
- 1:6 staff ratio
- Special curriculum interest centres for art, housekeeping, blocks, fine motor manipulatives, language and literacy
- Special emphasis on language acquisition via daily or semi-weekly individual sessions with child teacher

Kindergarten:
- Special summer transition school before entering school to facilitate socialisation

School:
- Support services for family where required
- Continued support with a Home School resource Teacher serving as liaison between school and families in first 3 yrs of attendance at school
- Individualised curriculum packets and parent encouragement to spend time teaching child
- Social supports for families
- Other supports such as summer activity packs, summer camps, trips to the public library tutoring reading skills

Parent component of program:

Preschool intervention:
- Parents involved on advisory board of project
- Social events
- Received counselling on health and development from centre’s health care staff
- Parents received payment for their time involved in tests and interviews
- Free transport
- Access to social support as required
School intervention:
- Parents of school children provided with individualised curriculum packets regularly and encouraged to work with their children for 15min each day.
- Social support as required by family.

Discussion:
The Abecedarian project is the most intensive early childhood program undertaken in the United States to date aimed at children believed to be at risk of lower intellectual and social development. One hundred and one infants were enrolled between 1972 and 1977, 57 were randomly assigned to be involved in the center-based early educational intervention and 54 in a control group that did not receive the early educational treatment but received family support and nutritional supplements (Crans-Stafford, 2006). The Abecedarian project is the only program to begin from infancy and to continue into kindergarten, the level of care was full-day and year-round as well as supporting activities, health care and support services for families where required. The design of the program was child-centred with a systematic curriculum involving educational ‘games’ that emphasised the development of skills in cognition, language, and adaptive behaviour:

Infant games consisted of simple, age appropriate, adult-child interactions that included talking to the child, showing toys or pictures, and offering infants a chance to react to sights or sounds in the environment (Zimmerman, 2007).

Activities were individualised for each child by the staff and as children develop the educational content became more conceptual and skill-based. Each stage of the child’s development was considered and curriculum was planned around the requirements of the children and their learning needs. As children got older they participated in more group based activities, however they always had the option to choose the activities they wanted to join in.

This type of intensive high quality program, designed to meet the needs of the individual children, coupled with the high ratio of carers to children and the other support services for families and children provided an environment in which children had the opportunity to explore, learn, interact with carers and develop close and meaningful relationships with others.

An additional feature of the treatment program was that children attending the child care center had their primary paediatric care on site. A medical team comprised of paediatricians, a Family Nurse Practitioner, and a medical aide did well-baby check ups and monitored the health of the children every day. Low-cost medical care was available to control group families at local hospitals or public health clinics (Zimmerman, 2007).

The high-quality child care provided in the Abecedarian program came at a high cost. In 2002 dollars, the annual cost of care per child was nearly $14,000 (U.S.). The benefits were found to outweigh the costs at 4 to 1 return on investment (Masse & Barnett, 2007). Other cost benefits analysis puts the cost at $12,000 per year per child (Crans-Stafford, 2006). The benefits to the participants and wider society are favourable.

The participants of the Abecedarian project were followed up and tested to see what effect the intervention had on improving the outcomes. Pungello, Campbell, and Barnett (2006) found that at age 21:
• Scored 1.8 grade years higher in reading and 1.3 years higher in math as young adults
• Were more likely to attend a four-year college (36 percent versus 14 percent)
• Were more likely to have a skilled job (47 percent versus 27 percent)
• Were less likely to have had their first child at age 18 or younger (26% versus 45%)
• Tended to smoke less (39 percent versus 55 percent)
• Were less likely to use marijuana (18 percent versus 39 percent)

These results suggest the benefits of participation in the Abecedarian have lasting effects for participants. Additionally, participants also had improved health, less welfare use and higher earnings (Zimmerman, 2007). Combined these outcomes suggest that intensive early childhood educational intervention made a dramatic difference in long-term outcomes for children in raised in poverty (Pungello, Campbell & Barnett, 2006).

**Program 2: Perry Preschool Program**

**General features / Program design:**
- Conducted from 1962 to 1967
- 3- and 4-year-old African-American (all were children African-American) who were living in poverty and considered to be at high risk for school failure (sample size: 123)
- Low IQ scores
- All participants drawn from the geographic area that attended the Perry Elementary School in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

**Philosophy:**
- Goal of the curriculum is to promote a child’s intellectual, social, and emotional learning and development
- Drawing on the child development work of psychologist Jean Piaget open framework of educational ideas and practices based on the natural development of young children
- Program emphasises an active learning approach in which children are encouraged to engage in play activities that involve making choices and problem-solving
- The role of adults in the Perry Program model is to observe, guide, support, and help to extend the children’s activities by arranging and equipping a variety of interest areas within the learning environment
- Maintaining a daily routine that permits children to plan and carry out their own activities; and joining in with children’s activities as active participants and helping children to think about their play
- Uses a framework of 'key experiences' derived from child development theory. There are ten categories of key experiences: creative representation, language and literacy, social relations and personal initiative, movement, music, classification, seriation, numbers, space, and time. Within each category, there are several specific key experiences. For example, the social relations and personal initiative category includes decision making, problem-solving, recognising and taking care of one’s own needs, expressing one’s feelings, group participation, recognising and being sensitive to the needs and feelings of others, and dealing with conflict. Another example is the creative representation category, which includes the following key experiences: recognising and using the five senses, imitating actions and sounds, role playing and pretending, building with clay and blocks, and drawing and painting.
Curriculum:
- The program does not have a set or prescribed curriculum
- Based on supporting children’s natural play with appropriate activities and learning environment where children learn through self-initiated and directed activities
- The curriculum does not include defined subject matter, but instead teachers listen closely to what students plan and then actively work with and question them to extend their activities to developmentally appropriate experiences
- Uses a framework of 'key experiences' help teachers to support and extend children’s activities, as well as monitor their progress.

Staff:
- High level of interaction between staff and children
- Teachers conducted daily two and one-half hour-long classroom sessions on weekday mornings for children
- Weekly one and one-half hour-long home visits to each mother and child on weekday afternoons during the course of a 30-week school year
- Teachers certified to teach in elementary, early childhood, or special education settings
- Ratio of 1:5.7 students

Parent component of program:
- Weekly home-visit component by Perry Preschool classroom teachers was intended to involve and integrate parents into their children’s educational activities
- Promote the use of the program’s methods within the home environment
- The role of adults in the Perry Program model is to observe, guide, support, and help to extend the children’s activities by arranging and equipping a variety of interest areas within the learning environment
- Maintaining a daily routine that permits children to plan and carry out their own activities; and joining in with children’s activities as active participants and helping children to think about their play.

Discussion:
The Perry Preschool Project is funded by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. This foundation is a non-profit research, development, training and public policy organisation. Established in 1970, the Foundation originated from research and program activities for three to five year-olds in the Ypsilanti Public School. Children were identified as at risk of failing and randomly assigned to two groups; the Perry Preschool group or the stay at home group (control). According to Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart (1993) the project is based on Piaget theory:

Children are viewed as active learners; the plan to do review’ approach is the way that children are engaged in their daily activities. The approach recognises and supports the unique differences in children and claims to develop their self-confidence by building on what they can do. Children are encouraged to become decision-makers and problem-solvers, who can plan, initiate and reflect on their work; work effectively on their own, with other children or adults; and develop skills that will enable them to learn successfully in different educational settings and experiences (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993, cited in Evangelou & Sylva, 2003, p. 31).
Unlike the Abecedarian program the Perry Preschool Project focuses on older pre-school children (from 3 years to 5 years). Both programs provided rich, interactive, stimulating environments for participants.

Studies evaluating/examining effects of program
It is important to note the evaluations conducted on the Perry Preschool Project have been funded by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. Also important to consider is the small sample size (123) of this program however, due to the use of sound methodologically techniques the program is considered rigorous so conclusions can be drawn. In the evaluations conducted at age 27, 116 (95%) of the original participants were followed up, and at age 40, 112 (81%) of the sample was interviewed. This enables good analysis of the outcomes for participants. The study aspect of the Perry Preschool Project has been running for forty years. Findings from the studies show long lasting benefits to participants and wider society. These findings were important for policy makers as they show that investment in high quality early childhood education could save government money in the future (Sylva, 1999). Barnett (1996) conducted a cost benefit analysis of the Perry Preschool Program and concluded that for every $1000 (USA) spent there was a return of approximately $7000. The Perry Preschool Program has been used in over twenty different countries.

Longitudinal studies of outcomes/effects of program
Researchers documented many aspects of the effects of the program on participant’s lives. Studies were carried out at ages 19 and 27 and found participants had significantly higher achievement scores and were less likely to receive special education services in school (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1980). At age 27 individuals with preschool treatment were more likely than controls to be high school graduates, had significantly higher earnings, were more likely to own homes and second cars, and were less likely to need welfare or to be involved in criminal activity (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993). At age 19, a significantly higher percentage of program students (38 percent versus 21 percent of control students) were receiving postsecondary academic or vocational training. The age 19 (Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart & Barnett, 1996) and the age 27 (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993) follow-up studies reported the following:

On the age-19 Adult Performance Level (APL) Survey the program group significantly outscored the control group in general literacy (which indicates total score), occupational knowledge, health information, and reading skills. On the age-27 APL survey the program group significantly outscored the control group in health information and problem-solving but not general literacy. This is reflective of larger gains in general literacy on the part of the control population as compared with the program participant group. By age 27, the program group had completed a significantly higher level of schooling than had the control group (11.9 years for the program group versus 11.0 years for the control group), and had a sizably higher rate of high school graduation or its equivalent than did the control participants. Seventy-one percent of program participants versus 54 percent of control participants had earned a high school diploma or GED.
These findings coupled with the improved results in both health and socioeconomic benefits discussed below show the benefits of high quality early childhood interventions and the long term effects.

In the age 19 and the age 27 follow-up studies reported the following benefits:

the program population had a total of 47 property or violence arrests versus 74 such arrests among the control population; more program students were working at the time of their age-19 follow-up interview (50 percent of program students versus 32 percent of control students); and program participants had average monthly earnings of $1,219, versus $766 average monthly earnings among the control group. (Berrueta-Clement Schweinhart & Barnett 1996; Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993).

These results were emulated in a study carried out of participants at age 40 by Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield and Nores (2005). The study found that like previous studies the participants were more likely to be employed, earn higher wages, have savings, own their own home, have lower crime rates and be less likely to use illegal drugs (Schweinhart et al., 2005). The effects of participating in high quality intervention, it can be argued, are long lasting and impact the participants in all areas of their lives improving their potential to participate in society in a meaningful and valuable way.

**Program 3: PEEP**

General features / Program design:

Based in the United Kingdom, the program has run from 1995 to the current day. PEEP (Peers Early Education Partnership) was set up in 1995. It is an early learning intervention which aims to contribute towards improving the life chances of children, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Its purpose is to raise educational attainment, especially in literacy. The PEEP program focuses on how to make the most of the learning opportunities in everyday life at home – listening, talking, playing, singing and sharing books every day. By working with adults about their children’s very early learning, PEEP supports parents and carers in their role as the first educators of their children.

Who:

A voluntary organisation set up the original program.

When:

1995 – to current day. There is currently a new program aimed at attracting individuals who were previously difficult to include in the program. A ‘shop’ has been set up at a shopping centre to attract passers by, this provides a nice comfortable place for parents, carers, grandparents and children to spend time playing under the PEEP program structure. Referral services, social support and information are available to parents.

Philosophy:

PEEP’s aims and practice (now summarised in the Learning Together Program) continue to be centred not on the children themselves but on the relationship between adults and children, which PEEP considers to be at the heart of learning. PEEP works with families from the
child’s earliest weeks, and the curriculum makes explicit the notion that babies are active
social beings and learners from the outset. It supports ‘parents as parents’ encouraging them
in their role as their child’s first and most important educator, not by ‘teaching’ their child,
but by ‘communicating’ with them. Literacy flowing from interpersonal relationships is
central to the PEEP philosophy.

**Parent component of program**

PEEP aims to promote parent and carers’ awareness of children’s very early learning and
development through making the most of everyday activities and interactions. Additionally, it
aims to support parents and carers in the development of their child’s literacy.

**Studies evaluating/examining effects of program**

There have been several studies examining the effects of the PEEP program. Specifically they
are Birth to School Study: A Longitudinal Evaluation of the Peers Early Education
Partnership (PEEP) 1998-2004 (Evangelou, Brooks, Smith & Jennings, 2005); The Effects
of the Peers Early Educational Partnership (PEEP) on Children’s Developmental Progress
(Evangelou & Sylva, 2003); Enabling Parents: The Role of PEEP in Supporting Parents as
Adult Learners (Sylva et al. 2004). These studies all had slightly different aims and these will
be discussed below.

The Birth to School Study (2005) set out to evaluate possible effects of the PEEP program in
Oxford, between 1998 and 2004, on both the parents and children of the families within its
catchment area. The results of the study have demonstrated that:

- PEEP had a significant impact on the quality of parents’ interaction with their
  children when they were one and two years old
- PEEP had a significant impact on children’s rate of progress in a number of literacy-
  related skills, as well as in measures of their self-esteem. The results strongly support
  existing evidence that good quality parenting leads to improved cognitive and social
  skills for the children. In addition, they support previous research that effective early
  interventions lead to enhanced short-term gains in cognitive and social skills,
  particularly for children at risk of low educational achievement. More specifically, the
  evidence from the BTSS suggests that an effective intervention program such as
  PEEP can disseminate effects that filter beyond the families who choose to attend
  education- or parenting-based groups, into the wider community.

**Findings from studies**

The Enabling Parents project studied the effects of the PEEP program on parents as adult
learners. More specifically it investigated the effect of PEEP on parenting skills and on the
support networks used by parents. It employed a quantitative approach to establish the impact
of PEEP on maternal employment, training and parenting skills. In addition, a qualitative
approach was used to investigate mothers’ subjective experiences of participation in the
PEEP program and to learn more about the ways services for parents have an impact on their
everyday activities.
PEEP participants (Intervention group):
- Had made a significant improvement in their socio-economic status
- Took significantly more basic skills courses
- Reported significantly greater awareness of their child’s literacy development and of ways to foster it
- Saw PEEP as a source of support and encouragement
- Reported that the social support offered by PEEP was an important factor in their decision to extend their employment related skills and to enhance their parenting techniques.

**Program 4: Chicago Child-Parent Centers**

The Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPCs) provide comprehensive educational support and family support to economically disadvantaged children and their parents. The guiding principle of the program is that by providing a school-based, stable learning environment during preschool and during kindergarten through third grade, in which parents are active and consistent participants in their child's education, scholastic success will follow. The program requires parental participation and emphasises a child-centred, individualised approach to social and cognitive development.

The CPC program was founded in 1967 to serve families in high-poverty neighbourhoods that were not being served by Head Start or similar programs. The centres are part of the Chicago Public Schools system and are traditionally housed in separate buildings (primarily in preschools) or in wings of a parent elementary school. Currently, the Chicago Public Schools operate 23 Federal Title I CPC sites; 18 feature services from preschool through kindergarten, and 5 have services in preschool only. Title I stopped supporting the elementary-school portion of the program about a decade ago. Currently, children may begin the CPC program in preschool only.

Participants:

CPC programming is available to children in preschool through third grade. To be eligible to participate in the CPC program, children must reside in school neighbourhoods that receive Title I funds. In order for children to participate in the program, their parents must commit to dedicating volunteer time to the centre on a weekly basis. The centres conduct outreach activities to recruit families who are in need.

Program Design:

Each centre is directed by a head teacher, who acts as a program coordinator and has overall responsibility for organising and implementing program services. This responsibility primarily involves collaborating with the parent-resources worker, the school-community representative, and the classroom teachers and aides. The head teacher also is responsible for organising teacher training and workshops.

To maximise individual learning opportunities, preschool class sizes are small and each classroom has a teacher's aide, in addition to a regular classroom teacher. Average teacher-to-child ratio is 1 to 8.

In kindergarten and primary grades, the average class size is 25, with a staff-to-child ratio of 1 to 12. Parent volunteers may further reduce the staff-to-child ratio.
The smaller class size in both preschool and primary grades allows for a child-centred, individualised approach to language development, cognitive development, and improving social relations. Each parent is required to dedicate at least one half-day per week to volunteer at the CPC. Parental participation is designed to accommodate parents’ daily schedules and needs.

A full-time staff member provides outreach services to CPC families. This outreach includes: 1) recruiting families from the neighborhood who are most in need of CPC programming; 2) conducting home visits to families upon child enrolment and on a continuing as-needed basis; and 3) referring families to community and social services agencies, such as agencies providing employment training, mental health services, and welfare. The outreach worker provides transportation services to families when needed.

Upon enrolment, all entering children undergo a health screening from a registered nurse. Children’s vision and hearing are tested. All students receive free breakfast and lunch.

Curriculum:
The CPC program has no prescribed curriculum; rather, it emphasises a particular type of learning style. The CPCs focus on a broad spectrum of activities, including individualised and interactive learning, small group activities, and frequent teacher feedback.

Staffing:
The program is staffed by trained, regular classroom teachers and teacher's aides. In addition, each site requires three full-time administrative teachers, a head teacher, a parent-resource coordinator, and a community outreach coordinator. Finally, the centres are supported through the mandatory participation of centre parents.

**Evaluation of the project**

Evaluations of the CPC program use information from the Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS), which followed 1,539 low-income minority students (95 percent of whom are African-American, and 5 of whom are Hispanic) who were scheduled to be in the graduating class of kindergartners in 26 public elementary schools in Chicago in the spring of 1986. All children resided in neighbourhoods eligible for Title I services. Among them were 1,150 children who were enrolled in 20 CPCs that had both preschool and kindergarten programs, and those students served as the 'treatment' group. The comparison group consisted of 389 children who were students at six randomly selected schools participating in a full-day kindergarten program for low-income students. Some of the children in the comparison group may have received CPC services in grades 1 through 3. At the start of the CLS, the two groups were similar in most family and child characteristics (Reynolds, 1997; Reynolds & Temple, 1995; Reynolds, Miedel & Mann, 2000).

These students were followed for a total of 15 years, after which time the typical child was age 20. At the 15-year follow-up, data were available for analysis for 83.2 percent of the original sample (data were available for 84.6 percent of the total CPC program group and 80.7 percent of the total comparison group). A range of outcomes for the CPC program and the comparison children have been compared at many points in time. In addition, the outcomes have been examined for children with varying levels of participation in CPCs. For example, a study by Reynolds (1997) assessed program outcomes through eighth grade for three different groups. The evaluation first examined students who participated in CPCs in
preschool versus all other children who had no preschool (but may have participated in school-aged CPC programming). Next, the impact of any participation in the CPC program, regardless of length, was assessed. Finally, the study looked at the impact of extended participation in the CPC program by comparing children who had participated for a total of five or six years with children who had participated during preschool and kindergarten only.

The sample sizes varied based on year of analysis (third, fifth, or eighth grade, or at the 15-year follow-up), and the outcome measures evaluated; however, in most cases, the total sample size (for both the CPC group and comparison group combined) is more than 1,000. Student outcomes were assessed using a variety of measures including the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) standardised tests; school records regarding grade retention, remedial services, and delinquent behaviour; parental participation in the child's school; teacher ratings of school adjustment; juvenile court records; and children's self-perceptions of competence. Most of the analyses in the evaluations controlled for child, family, and school characteristics when comparing the mean differences between the CPC program children and the comparison group. This overall study design was used in a number of articles including Reynolds (1994), Reynolds and Temple (1995), Reynolds (1997), and others.

Finally, the researchers engaging in the CLS have compared the costs of the CPC program with its outcomes (Reynolds et al., 2000).

Key findings:
Reynolds and Temple (1995) report that upon entering kindergarten children who attended a CPC preschool program as compared with children who did not attend preschool scored higher on ITBS cognitive school readiness tests. Reynolds (1997) found the following at the completion of grade 8:

Children who attended a CPC preschool program as compared with children who did not attend preschool:
- Scored higher on ITBS reading and math tests
- Were less likely to have ever been retained a grade (24.0 percent versus 31.8 percent).
- Spent fewer years on average in special education (0.51 years versus 0.87 years).

Children who had any CPC program participation (in preschool or elementary school) as compared with children who had no CPC exposure:
- Scored higher on ITBS reading tests in grades 3 and 5, but not in grade 8; the difference declined between grades 3 and 5
- Scored higher on ITBS math tests in grades 3, 5, and 8; however, as in the reading test, the effect size shrank over time and the differences were no longer statistically significant
- Were less likely to have ever been retained in a grade (25.3 percent versus 36.5 percent).
- Spent fewer years in special education (0.9 years versus 0.6 years).

Participation in the CPC program for six years (the extended intervention) compared with participation in preschool and kindergarten only was associated with:
- Higher reading and math test scores
- A lower percentage of children who were ever retained in grade (6.9 percent versus 32.1 percent)
- No significant difference in years of special education placement.
Reynolds et al. (2000) found at the 15-year follow-up that:

- Children who attended a CPC preschool program as compared with children who did not attend preschool
- Were more likely to have completed high school (49.7 percent versus 38.5 percent)
- Were less likely to have been retained in a grade by age 15 (23.0 percent versus 38.4 percent)
- Were almost half as likely to have been in special education by age 18 (14.4 percent versus 24.6 percent)
- Had fewer arrests of any type (16.9 percent versus 25.1 percent) and were less likely to have had any violent arrests (9.0 percent versus 15.3 percent).

'School-age' participation (with or without preschool participation) yielded no improvement in educational attainment or juvenile arrests; however, participating in at least one year of the school-age program was associated with lower rates of special education enrolment (15.4 percent versus 21.3 percent) and fewer children ever having been retained a grade (23.8 percent versus 34.3 percent).

Children who had extended CPC program participation as compared with all children who had less CPC program participation:

- Were less likely to have been held back a grade by age 15 (21.9 percent versus 32.3 percent)
- Were less likely to have spent time in special education by age 18 (13.5 percent versus 20.7 percent)
- Had no statistically significant differences in educational attainment or juvenile arrests.

Reynolds and Robertson (2003) found that by the 15-year follow-up Children who attended a CPC preschool program as compared with children who did not attend preschool were 52 percent less likely to be victims of child maltreatment.

**Program 5: The Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool youngsters (HIPPY)**

The Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) was developed by Avima Lombard in Israel in 1969 in an attempt to address the needs of the large number of children from immigrant families who were starting school educationally disadvantaged (see Lombard, 1994). Dr. Lombard designed an intervention aimed at the family, choosing to focus on two major areas: the educational enrichment of the child and strengthening the mother’s belief in herself as her child’s first and most important educator. HIPPY has been implemented in a variety of other countries around the world, where it has adapted to the local communities specific needs and issues.

The target group is families with preschool age children within targeted communities. The curriculum is cognitively based, focusing on language development, problem solving and perceptual discrimination skills. The curriculum is written in a structured format with 30 easy-to-use activity packets for each age of the program. Activities generally take as little as 15-20 minutes a day for the parent and child to complete.
HIPPY is a home based intervention in which a parent, most often the mother, works with her preschool-aged child on a prescribed set of educational activities. These materials are provided in weekly packages by a paraprofessional home visitor, herself a mother and a member of the same community. The home visitor works under the guidance of a professional coordinator whose qualifications include higher education and experience in community work. Home visitor and participating parents meet weekly as a group with their local coordinator to role play materials, discuss and report the previous week’s work. The program operates at the same time as the school year. Parents make a two-year commitment to take part for 30 weeks per year. In her weekly half hour visit to the home, the paraprofessional teaches the mother how to use the instructional materials using role-play. The parent additionally is asked to work with her child on the packet of activities for 10 to 15 minutes every day. HIPPY curriculum focuses around language, problem solving and discriminating skills.

HIPPY evaluation
The program has been repeatedly evaluated since its establishment in Israel in 1969. Since then evaluations have been carried out in Turkey, the US, the Netherlands, South Africa, Mexico and New Zealand. Evaluation designs have ranged from informal observations and interviews (Arkansas), to quasi-experimental designs (the Netherlands), and experimental design involving random allocation (Israel, Turkey) (Lombard 1994). The focus of the evaluations has been primarily on the children, assessing their cognitive ability, teachers’ perceptions of their ability, and improvement in skills such as hand-eye co-ordination.

HIPPY New Zealand: An evaluation overview
HIPPY children scored higher than non-HIPPY children on all of the 11 measures obtained. The difference reached statistical significance on four measures. These were three of the six New Zealand Reading Diagnostic tests, Concepts About Print ($p<0.01$), Word Tests ($p<0.001$) and the Burt ($p<0.05$). On the measure of children’s academic self-esteem (the BASE), the mean of HIPPY children was slightly higher than that of the comparison group and significantly higher than all other children in their class ($p<0.01$).

HIPPY caregivers and tutors also obtained slightly higher scores indicating more positive attitudes, behavioural involvement and self-esteem than comparison caregivers on all eight of the caregivers’ questionnaire sub-sections. This difference reached statistical significance on three sub-sections. HIPPY caregivers and tutors were significantly more likely to be involved in formal educational activities than comparison caregivers ($p<0.001$), performed significantly more educational activities with their child in the previous week ($p<0.05$) and were significantly more likely to have been involved in an adult education class ($p<0.001$).

Thus, children who participated in the HIPPY scored higher on a variety of school achievement and adjustment measures than their same-school peers. It is argued that these results suggest that the HIPPY program is effective in enhancing children’s school readiness skills. Further, the results obtained for the Reading Diagnostic Survey, suggest that HIPPY children are less likely to be found in need of Reading Recovery, a finding which would have significant resource implications.
Program 6: ECLIPSE: Early Childhood Literacy Includes Parents, Staff and Education

The South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) produced the ECLIPSE booklet, literacy information sheets and the accompanying activity cards in 1994. The materials were designed as a resource to support literacy teaching and learning in the early years. The materials were trialled in 16 centres and then disseminated to all preschools in the state.

The materials provide a framework that describes literacy indicators to help early childhood educators identify and describe children’s literacy skills, knowledge and attitudes and to plan for the development and extension of children’s literacy.

The resources were intended to be used by early childhood educators working with children between the ages of 3-5 to develop the links and partnership between parents and the centre. The resources were designed to promote partnerships between early childhood educators and parents by:

- Providing a basis for communication and opening dialogue between the people in children’s lives
- Sharing information about literacy learning between home/centre
- Recognising and acknowledging the literacy learning that children bring to the centre.

Philosophy:
It is stated in the booklet that the document ‘reflects a holistic view of children’s literacy achievements’ and that ‘children coming to early childhood services have a broad range of abilities and experiences.’ (p. 8). The statement that ‘Parents are the child’s first and most influential educators’ (p. 11) underpins the intent for the resource and it was anticipated that by using the framework, parents would be more aware of children’s literacy skills, interests and needs and therefore be better equipped to support their literacy learning.

Evaluation:
The resource was evaluated in 1999 (Gammage & Krieg) and the findings from this research indicated that the resources were useful and provided support for working with parents and families. Ninety per cent of the centres sampled indicated that they had used the resources for parent information sessions, to promote parent involvement in newsletters and for staff development. Over 800 parents attended information ECLIPSE sessions. The data also revealed that most families from disadvantaged areas were more likely to engage with the resources when they are used in conjunction with involvement from early childhood educators in interactive sessions (p. 4).
Summary comparison of six early literacy parent programs

The summary provided in Table 1 (p. 7) compares six programs that were reviewed in detail which were all developed to support young children’s literacy development. The table organises the data from the literature review in terms of the targets and venues, the inputs, activities and where evaluations have been carried out, and includes the initial, intermediate and long term outcomes of the programs.

Common features of successful early intervention programs

Comparison of the findings presented in Table 1 suggests that effects may be more persistent if a program is preventative, intensive, and starts very early in life (Ramey & Ramey, 1998). According to Evangelou and Sylva (2003) the foundations of effective interventions are:

- Two generational: include parents as well as children
- Non-stigmatising: avoid labelling ‘problem families’
- Multifaceted: target a number of factors, not just education, or health or Parenting
- Locally driven: based on consultation and involvement of parents and local communities
- Culturally appropriate and sensitive to the needs of children and parents
- Centre-based programs have reported positive results compared to home based programs.

Most of the early literacy interventions in Table 1 meet these requirements and have shown great success. Our review of the successful early intervention programs demonstrates that one of the most important features is that they were long term, some spanning several years and incurring long term funding. Overall assumptions can be drawn that children benefit from high quality interventions, and this has lasting impacts on many facets of their lives. Although often initially expensive these programs pay back to the individual and society in many ways improving educational attainment; improving job prospects; reducing reliance on welfare; reducing criminal activity and improving health outcomes for participants.

Other intervention programs have also shown great success in benefits to participants, these programs have typically had access to extensive support and resources. Even though these programs have been very successful it is not clear how these successes can be transported to other countries and situations. Australian programs need to draw from the successes of international programs, but need to reflect the local context and issues.

All early literacy parent programs are based on the understanding that the quality of parenting and parent involvement in children’s learning are powerful determinants of schooling success. Whilst there are some broad principles that might guide policy and practice, further research is essential if we are to move beyond the inequitable literacy learning outcomes for many groups of children.
Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Methodology

This research explored Effective approaches to promoting parent programs to enhance 4-6 year old children’s literacy development. The research was in three stages:

Stage One was based on research question: What does ‘effective’ mean in terms of approaches and programs designed to support parents to enhance children’s literacy development? This entails a literature review of international and national approaches and programs for parents. The literature review examines what counts as effectiveness in parent programs and compiles a grid of elements found in a range of existing parent programs.

Stage Two was based on the research question: In what ways are educators currently working with parents to support early learning of 4-6 year old children? In this stage focus groups, one with parents and one with educators, were held in six research sites to ascertain in the ways educators are currently working with parents to support early literacy learning. Parents and teachers in two separate focus groups were interviewed about key elements of children’s learning and the approach to involving parents and families.

Stage Three was based on the research question: How may the Abecedarian and the ECLIPSE parent programs relate to diverse early childhood contexts? In stage three the focus groups, one with parents and one with educators, were held in six research sites to explore the Abecedarian and the ECLIPSE parent programs. Materials were distributed to schools and preschools two weeks before the focus groups so there was an opportunity to use the materials in the various sites.

Research Sites

The research sites were selected by DECS based on the demographic data and the literacy outcomes based on running records of children in year one. The sites consist of co-located or combined preschool and school sites and non co-located sites. The inclusions of co-located and not located sites will allow exploration of the research questions, In what ways do various programs sustain links between home and school learning? as this question has to do with sustaining communication between home, preschool and school and proximity of school and preschool may influence communication. Two sites were selected because they had developed or participated in innovative programs for parents. Several sites were selected because the literacy outcomes suggested that the sites might benefit from parent programs. Some sites included Indigenous families and one site had a high proportion of children with English as a Second Language.

An information letter was sent to each preschool/school Director/Principal inviting their sites to forward an expression of interest to participate. Sites were also chosen because DECS believed that the school and preschool had developed approaches to engaging parents in their children’s literacy learning.
Table 2: Research sites, socioeconomic category and co-location of school and preschool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site names</th>
<th>Socioeconomic category and co-location of school and preschool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belmont</td>
<td>Diverse context with high literacy performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armadale</td>
<td>Diverse context with high literacy performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thornlie</td>
<td>Diverse context and low-average performance on literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ascot</td>
<td>Diverse context and low-average performance on literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kings</td>
<td>Diverse context with low performance on literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eldon</td>
<td>Diverse context with low performance on literacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Belmont**

Belmont is a rural primary school, established in 1886, a half an hour drive from Adelaide. The school is located in beautiful, well kept grounds centred around a colonial homestead which now houses the computer suite and administration offices. The principal, teachers and parents speak with pride of the school and its achievements.

Total no of students: 184  
School card holders: 12%  
NEPs 8

Receptions: 10  
Year 1s: 16

Most students, who attend the school live in the township although some travel from neighbouring communities or are bussed in from farms that support potato growing, dairying, wool growing, grape growing etc. Increasing numbers of people are moving from Adelaide to the town due to low priced rental properties. There is some employment in locally but most people travel to Adelaide, the Barossa Valley or other Hills communities for employment.

Belmont is co-located with the local high school, although each is run separately, but closer links are being formed. The nearest preschool (privately owned) is located in the township itself, with another government run preschool ten minutes drive south in a neighbouring town. It is to the government run preschool that most parents prefer to send their children to.

Families are generally very supportive of Belmont with a number of parents helping out in classrooms, in the canteen and during the annual fund raising event. An increasing number of parents volunteer to support classroom programs and provide assistance with LAP programs, the Kangaroo Club co-ordination program, they listen to reading and help in classrooms. The school has a Policy and Planning Committee consisting of both staff and parent representatives. This group oversees the development of policies and helps set school direction through the development of the Site Learning Plan.
The current foci are the areas of literacy, numeracy, science, the new child protection curriculum and student well-being and engagement. Over the last four years the school has seen an improvement in the Year’s 3, 5 and 7 LaN results. For the last three years Belmont have been a Learning-to-Learn School. The school has also been involved in the Data for Schools project for two years. This work has helped them use SACSA data more effectively to guide future direction for student learning programs and the school. All staff use the SACSA Framework to plan, program and assess student learning.

**Armadale**

Housed in a mixture of historic bluestone and new buildings and set among landscaped grounds, this school services the needs of families who live, study and work in the city precinct. Originally established in 1883, the school was closed in 1996 due to declining enrolments but a keen interest group of local residents, including past students, advocated for the reopening of the school and it re-opened in Term 1, 2004, to once again meet the demand for primary education and childcare in the city area. The school began with 15 children and 14 families and now has 207 children and 150 families. Progress has been rapid and there is now full use of all facilities, increasing utilisation of care programs, a waiting list for the education and care of children under the age of two years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrolments</th>
<th>Child Care</th>
<th>Preschool</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Card</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Needs/Learning Difficulties</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic:</td>
<td>50 Postcodes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Births</td>
<td>27 since 1/06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preschool, childcare and primary school learning spaces are located adjacent to each other to ensure children can make a smooth transition to each stage of their learning. The School is positioned at the forefront of policy and practice in the delivery of integrated early childhood education and care, particularly play-based learning. The integrated site has a leadership team representing child care, preschool and schooling sectors. The Principal is the key leader and manager who has responsibility for the school as a whole. The Preschool Director also takes a leadership role with specific responsibility for the education and care programs from birth to five years. There is an Assistant Director for the 0-3 years team and a Director of the Out of School Hours Care program.

**ENROLMENT SPREAD**

| Child Care | 100 |
| Preschool  | 34  |

**School – 5 class groups**

- Reception: 22
- Rec/Year 1: 23
- Year 1/2: 21
- Year 2/3: 24
- Term 4 Reception: 9
The teaching of community languages, including Greek, is an integral part of the school curriculum. After school programs are also offered by the Greek Orthodox Community of South Australia Inc. There is a strong emphasis on engaging parents in their children's learning and a welcome central space is available for use by parents and interaction with their children's teachers. The re-opening of the School has been a partnership between many enthusiastic interest groups. As a result of their involvement, there have been numerous suggestions about services that could be incorporated into the school to support local families.

**Kings**

Many families that live in the areas surrounding Kings have complex needs with high numbers of single parent and low income families. It is a culturally diverse community with Indigenous, Iraqi, Afghani and Sudanese families living within the surrounding suburbs. In 2002 DECS and Children Youth and Women’s Health looked to establish a new model family centre. The Kings Centre incorporates integrated service provision between health, education and the community. The project works holistically with families linking health and education.

Kings Centre has a core group of volunteer parents (CAG) that help to drive the project and who work alongside centre staff and other local service providers. These parents are members of the Governance group. CAG assist in a range of activities including administration, parent support, management decision making, hosting ‘drop ins’ at the centre, creche support, community activities like craft, gardening, etc, evaluation, promotions and much more. These parents have participated in a range of self development training that has been developed specifically to enhance their skills to support centre activities. The Kings Centre has become a community hub with high numbers of families involved in activities or just ‘dropping in’ daily. Many of these families would not normally participate in activities due to their life circumstances, complex issues and isolation. The warm, friendly and engaging environment that has been facilitated at the Kings Centre has not only created learning opportunities but increased community strengths and relationships that goes beyond the centre itself and reaches out to the streets and homes of local families.

**Ascot**

Situated in an outer metropolitan suburb, 30 kilometres from the CBD, Ascot R-7 and Special Schools are co-located on an integrated and inclusive site. The pre-fabricated and 20 year old buildings are spread across a large area that includes ovals, asphalt playgrounds and native gardens. A Head of Campus, Special School, works across both schools. There are 5 curriculum co-ordinators in the areas of Numeracy, Literacy, ICT, The Arts and Environmental Education. All co-ordinators work across both schools. There is a full time School Counsellor.

The pre-school is not co-located on the school site but Learning Together and Early Learning Programs are integral parts of the school and provide families with a range of programs focused on the early years of their child's development. Learning Together also offers parents the opportunity to undertake SACE units on self-directed topics. Students access programs as needed from other agencies such as Smith Family, Primary Southern Health and the nearby Community House.
2007 Site Enrolment Data

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February FTE primary school enrolment</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Card percentage</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NESB Enrolment</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Enrolment</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February FTE enrolment in the Special School</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Card percentage</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NESB Enrolment</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Enrolment</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The site is committed to the increased implementation of Accelerated Literacy. All teachers are involved in intensive training and two teachers have gained accreditation to enable them to support other teachers in using this approach. The student counsellor provides a range of pastoral care programs across the schools. The schools are involved with programs to care for the local railway station, a ‘Brain Food’ program, lunch time activities including sport, computing, lunchtime library activities and a sensory program. Student voice programs are linked to school priorities and contribute to whole school development.

**Thornlie**

Thornlie prides itself on its multicultural population and diverse approach to learning, with 35 different nationalities represented. The largest group is the Aboriginal community. In 2006 a New Arrivals Program was established at the school. All students are supported in gaining an appreciation for each other’s culture whilst ensuring each group maintains their own cultural identity. The population is highly transient with many students regularly changing schools and 60% receiving School Card.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total no of students</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Card:</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NESB Enrolment:</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Enrolment:</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEPs:</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschoolers:</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptions:</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1s:</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thornlie Primary is an Aboriginal Education Leadership school, offering a range of programs for Aboriginal students including Pitjantjatjara (as a LOTE), students as mentors, as well as specific programs for transition, growth and development and social development. Thornlie is also a lighthouse school for the Accelerated Literacy program.

Parents are very supportive of school programs and value the respect for cultural diversity that features in them. There are close connections among the Thornlie families, with many Aboriginal families leaving for periods of time then returning to Thornlie, adding to the transient nature of the school population.

The school is supported in its efforts by a School Counsellor, an NAP Assistant Principal, a Special Education teacher, an ESL teacher, an AET, an AEW and BSSOs. Interpreters and
translators are also utilised by parents and teachers. Greek, Italian and Pitjantjatjara are offered as LOTE throughout the school.

The school is co-located with the Child Parent Centre, Play Group and Children’s Centre. Junior Primary classes and the Child Parent Centre are co-located. Child and Youth Health services are also located on the grounds, as well as a School Dental Clinic and community library close by, providing the community with a concentration of services for health and education. After School Care & Vacation Care are also offered onsite. The Children’s Centre currently hosts a range of programs eg Baby Play Group, ESL lessons, First Aid lessons, access to a representative from the Australian Refugee Association and parenting groups.

Priority areas are Literacy and Numeracy Development, e-learning and Social Education and Wellbeing, Accelerated Literacy, Learning-to-Learn, Success for Boys, ESL Innovative Schools, and Dare to Lead. Learning in the preschool is based on the SACSA learning areas of Self and social development, Arts and creativity, Communication and language, Design and Technology, Diversity, Health and Physical Development and Understanding Our World.

Students identified as requiring a Negotiated Education Plan or as having specific learning needs are supported by the Special Education teacher, School Support Officers and LAP volunteers. Aboriginal students each have Individual Education Plans to outline their learning. Thornlie is also involved in the 'Bright Futures' cluster project which has a focus on Gifted and Talented students and the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program.

Currently most teachers are using Accelerated Literacy as a teaching methodology. This is an explicit teaching strategy that uses functional grammar and aims to scaffold students for success in writing, reading and spelling.

**Eldon**

The suburbs surrounding Eldon are undergoing renewal in partnership with a private developer and the State Government, many of the old style Housing Trust homes have been demolished, land subdivided and new housing currently being built. This is changing the demographic character and bringing in new families to the area. There are many young families from various multicultural backgrounds. Before the urban renewal the area had a high Vietnamese population.

**Enrolment/Attendance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early entry and pre entry programs</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional care program</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Located 7 kilometres from the GPO Eldon is set on co-located grounds with the local primary school. The stand-alone centre was built recently (2000) and is bright and airy with a large space for children and teachers to play and work. The centre looks onto a large pergola covered area and landscaped grounds with trees and plants. The centre has a separate area for staff and an office for the director. The centre has access to bilingual support for 12 hours per week. The centre also provides access for children and staff with disabilities. The key priorities for the centre are:
• Developing understanding of children’s learning and how that impacts in a change environment
• To strengthen working relationships and links with local schools
• To increase community awareness of and involvement with centre.

Eldon utilises the SACSA curriculum framework to support children’s learning and emphasises the following core values:

• Equity
• Inclusivity
• Accessibility
• Respect
• Individuality
• Diversity
• Looking after ourselves and others.

Focus groups in six sites
There were 24 focus groups in 6 diverse sites. There were two focus groups with parents and two focus groups with teachers at each site. Some sites chose to have individual focus groups with the child-parent centre parents and teachers which added to the number of focus groups conducted.

Teacher focus groups
The teachers had one day (2 half-days) of TRT is available for teachers participating in the focus group interviews and examination of materials.

The parent focus groups
The parent focus groups at six diverse sites with six researchers involved 43 parents.

Stage four: Analysis of data gathered in twelve focus groups. The focus groups included separate parent groups and teacher groups. The focus groups were tape recorded and notes made of the meetings. The focus group meetings were structured around a series of focus questions and data were analysed based on the questions, for example

Stage two: Teacher focus group questions
• Describe the ways you work with parents in your site?
• What works well?
• What are some of the issues you face?

Stage three: Teacher focus group questions
• What aspects of these materials are useful?
• What else do you think would be relevant?
• How culturally relevant are they?
• Is there any part that you do not like for working with parents?

Stage two: Parent focus group questions
• Describe how teachers work with you in early literacy?
- What works well?
- What are some of the issues you face?

Stage three: Parent focus group questions
- Would these materials be useful?
- What aspects of these materials are useful?
- What else do you think would be relevant?
- How relevant are they to your family?
- Would you like to do this with your child?
- Are there games or ideas here that fit or suit your child’s interests?
Chapter 4

THE VIEW FROM THE SITES
The View from the sites
There were focus groups held at the six research sites with teachers and parents in two different groups. The six research sites were geographically, culturally and socioeconomically diverse and spread throughout metropolitan and semi rural Adelaide South Australia. The teachers and parents were invited to describe ways the preschool and school involved parents in their children’s literacy learning.

What we do at Belmont
The parents at Belmont had such a positive relationship with the Reception teacher that they chose to have their focus group interviews together. Both teachers and parents spoke with great pride of the school and its position in the community. Parents felt not only valued as regards their child’s education but also through the community support the school gave their small businesses, for example the local cafe.

While there is no preschool onsite, most children come to Belmont from one of two preschools within ten minutes drive. The school makes an effort to follow up on learning, health, safety, and behaviour management strategies that are used in the preschools. This helps make transitions smoother and follows on from what they children already know.

One parent with four of her five children diagnosed with Dyspraxia – a developmental coordination disorder which often involves problems with language and perception – had struggled to find schools that were appropriate for her children and the difficulties they faced. She found Belmont was exactly what they needed. All the parents commented how easy the staff were to approach and how prepared they were to ‘go that extra step’ to solve any learning or behavioural issues. Another parent had recently moved from the Northern Territory and had only been in South Australia for three weeks. She was surprised at how easily the children had settled into the new school and how welcome they had been made especially her youngest son Andrew, since this was his first experience of school. Two other parents had been through several school systems including private and Catholic schools and were impressed how much effort the Belmont staff put into each individual child.

Example 1:
Andrew had only been attending kindergarten for two mornings a week prior to moving to South Australia and was not yet ready to be at school all day. His teacher and parents could clearly see the detrimental effect full days at school were having on him. Andrew’s parents decided the best idea was to remove him from the school and start him next year instead. However, the class teacher was adamant this should not happen that he should not leave with negative feelings about school. The result was the school arranged a separate schedule for him. The school got advice from other schools regarding an appropriate transition program, which they immediately began to implement. This has worked so well that it has gone ahead of schedule and just three weeks later Andrew has begun, by his own choice to spend some full days at school. The teacher recognised that Andrew was in fact ready for school, but just needed extra time to adjust to the routine of it all.

Example 2:
Jack’s needs on the other hand were quite different. Jack has what his mother described as ‘boundary issues’, in other words Jack was an escape artist and often
went wandering off on his own. This had become such an issue at home that Jack needed to be locked in his room during his afternoon nap! Part of Belmont’s solution was to meet with the parents and school counsellors and for the first two weeks of school assign an SSO to specifically keep an eye on Jack. But they also ‘went the extra mile’ and prior to his starting school and even before his transition days from preschool, Belmont’s solution was to paint an orange line around the entire primary school which no child was allowed to cross. Thus when Jack arrived for his first transition day, the whole class went for a walk around the school to find the orange lines. This has been extremely successful for Jack and has become an added safeguard for all the children.

Communication between the home and school is considered extremely important especially if any issues or concerns are raised. Parent information evenings are provided where curriculum goals; behaviour management strategies; and the support services available are all explained. In addition handouts are also provided. The school uses regular newsletters, and for the Reception class, reading bags to share information between home and school. There is also a more formal approach with notes sent home, reading diaries, running records and school reports. Specialist assessments are also provided with speech, hearing, etc. Teachers make themselves available at drop off and pick up times to have informal conversations with parents about their children and their learning, ensuring parents have direct and personal contact with all the classroom teachers.

Three way interviews even with the Reception children are held in Terms 1 and 3 and more often if needed. The school feels children of all ages should be involved in their learning, and thus present at the interviews, but it is not essential and the decision to include such young children is left up to the parents. The parents who had been involved in such interviews had all taken their Reception children with them and considered the three way interview to be very beneficial. These interviews are purposely very positive, with the children made to feel extremely good about themselves and their achievements, although any issues are also addressed with the children present so everyone knows what the goals and expectations are. Teachers provide parents with games/activities to try at home to help children build up the skills that are needed.

Parents are encouraged to come and spend time in the classroom at any time throughout the day, there are parents that help by listening to reading; facilitating the Play and Learning at School (PALS) activities; and running the Kangaroo Club. The Kangaroo Club occurs twice a week and is organised by a parent coordinator. It involves various activities with balls, beanbags, balance beams etc and helps improve children’s coordination skills. PALS is for Reception to Year 2s. PALS occurs four mornings a week with parents encouraged to stay and join in with their children and help to choose activities.

[PALS began because] we had a group of Reception boys who came in Term 4 had no idea of really why they were at school, didn’t have any social skills, couldn’t play with anybody, were you know loners... We looked at the needs of this group of children and children coming into school in general and decided that we would use play as a means to develop learning, and it grew from basically social skills, speech and language and cooperation etc into really a whole project about well being, social, emotional and then we moved it through into across all curriculum areas. So we had play activities that linked to the curriculum and we’ve been doing it for three years now.
The kids understand what they are actually learning when they’re playing and then we’ve used all of their work to explain to them how they are smart in lots of different ways [large scrap books hold children’s work samples, drawings etc] and then we developed the Multiple Intelligences with them as well and also done Habits of Mind, the Thinking Hats with them, a whole range of things. So we’ve kept a record of everything, the different activities and how it relates to learning. Sometimes we’ve just been blown away with what they’ve done and we’ve tried to bring the literacy component into as many of the activities as we can... we tried to develop literacy through play... its worked really well, the kids just love it. (Reception Teacher Interview 5/11/07).

Parents are very involved in the PALS activities, they stay in the mornings and help the children choose an activity to do for the 20 minute sessions. A wall display shows all the different activities available and the ones the children have completed are marked off. The children are encouraged to work through all the activities.

While many Dads come in to pick the children up at the end of the day, it is mainly Mums that help in the classroom, although quite a lot of Dads do reading with the children at night. Last year some Dads would come in and help with PALS, but this year it is all Mums. The majority of Dads work so they are not seen as much in the classroom. Dads are really up front during the School Fair activities though.

The annual School Fair is a big event in the school’s calendar being its only fund raiser for the year. Entire families are encouraged to be involved in whatever way they can with preparations and organisation, as well as running events on the actual day. Special Persons Day, Book Week, open mornings and excursions are other ways parents can be involved in their child’s learning, and all parents are invited to school assembly, which are organised and presented by different classes throughout the year.

Class books are created during the year of different events and excursions and general day to day activities. The books are illustrated using photographs of the children and are taken home to share with families.

If added help is needed regarding literacy or numeracy for instance, the teacher provides different activities/games to play at home, eg alphabet games to improve literacy skills, ball games to improve coordination etc.

Example 3:
One parent shared how her son Darren was struggling to understand how letters and sounds went together and thus was behind in reading and writing. The teacher organised for an SSO to provide extra help to a small group of boys with the same problems. However, it was realised Darren needed even more help. The decision was made for Darren to spend time with the SSO on a one-on-one basis. Within just two weeks (between the initial and final focus group interviews) Darren was suddenly able to name all the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they made and moved from the Tadpoles group in class to the Frogs!
Belmont parent and teachers’ view of materials

Once again the Belmont parents and teacher chose to have their final focus group interview together. Belmont parents really loved the Abecedarian materials and wished they could keep them, commenting that they were ‘excellent’. They thought the activities were ‘just common sense stuff’ that they were already doing with their children at home and that the books just gave them ideas to extend these activities. The parents really like the way you could just glance at the Abecedarian books and immediately understand what to do and why – ‘it was very quick’.

ECLIPSE on the other hand, they thought was more difficult to read and looked like something for teachers. All of the parents commented there was too much reading and none of them read it all the way through. They felt the information was there but you couldn’t access it, or find out why you were doing the activities, as quickly and easily as the Abecedarian books. The ECLIPSE contained much more theory and the Abecedarian books had the practical examples. It wasn’t like one was better than the other. ECLIPSE didn’t have practical examples of the activities, just ideas and suggestions, but there was far too much reading involved. ‘And if its simpler and easier then you tend to do it, too much reading turns me off’ (Parent comment 21/11/07).

The Abecedarian books were easy to use in the home ‘most activities utilised everyday household materials and the instructions were very clear’ (Parent comment 21/11/07). You didn’t need to go and buy anything. The activities were not time consuming, they were quick and easy and many became part of everyday activities. Parents also felt there was a lot of variety and that the games were fun and ‘not like homework’. The Abecedarian books also encouraged the whole family to positively interact with one another and for parents to be positive role models for their children, gently encouraging children to learn and explore. The comment was also made that because the activities encouraged one-on-one time with your child – which all children enjoy – this also meant the activities were very enjoyable. ‘This is good quality time stuff, you can’t beat one on one’ (Parent comment 21/11/07).

One parent did a large number of activities from the Abecedarian books, but she modified them to suit her five and three year old boys and in just two weeks she noticed changes in their interests and approach to learning. All of a sudden something clicked and the older boy wanted to write and the younger one wanted to draw. It also reminded her of the importance of spending quality time with her children and doing simple things together and really noticing things. This mother thought the activities extended parents thinking and ‘made you think more creatively’, it meant she wasn’t just sitting down and reading with them. For instance, preparing dinner became a numeracy exercise with the boys each helping to count out how many vegetables were needed to feed everyone etc. This mother also commented that although they had lots of flip cards at home, it wasn’t until using them like a game, as was suggested in the Abecedarian books, that her boys wanted to play with them, prior to that the flip cards had just sat on the shelf.

Another aspect of the Abecedarian materials was the fact that each activity could be easily modified to suit different situations, individual children, or a child with a disability. They could be adapted to suit older or younger children and the books provided guidelines and alternatives to try if tasks were obviously too difficult.
The games were common sense, full stop, definitely, all common sense... as far as an adult playing a game with a child, I don’t think any adult would have a problem grasping the concept (Parent comment 21/11/07).

The teacher on the other hand said she would not give out either ECLIPSE or the Abecedarian books on their own, that there was far too much information for parents most of whom have little time for reading. She thought instead if you combined the two and made up little packs for parents containing an Information Sheet from ECLIPSE together with some photocopied activities from the Abecedarian books, then these would be a ‘fantastic resource’. An easy to read Information sheet and photocopied activities that were relevant to the learning that was needed, she felt would be very beneficial. All of the parents agreed and thought this was an excellent idea.

As a teacher I found the ECLIPSE one very theoretical ...so to pick that up and have an overall look at it, it was very good. I thought it gave parents a lot of theoretical information as to why you are doing it, focusing on the hearing the seeing etc whereas the books [Abecedarian books] are the practical. You can open that up and it explains each section that the activities belong to, they actually compliment each other.

A lot of it is what you would naturally do with your children, but there could be people out there that don’t think the same as we do... who may need support and in that case, something like this would be really helpful. From a teachers perspective...if you’ve got children entering kindy and you see that there are needs for certain things in certain areas, then that would be a fantastic resource to give to the parents and say, ‘look this is what I’ve noticed, could you do some of these activities at home’, or I’d photocopy them and make a little pack up.

Same for me in reception. I’ve got children who are still developing phonemic awareness, even at this stage at the end of the year and so if I had the four to five year old one [Abecedarian book], at the beginning of the year I could see these things, then I could make a little pack up and say to the parents could you work on these things with your child at home to help support them with their transition into school... (Teacher comment 21/11/07).

Both the teacher and parents went on to suggest that these little made up packs (with an ECLIPSE information sheet and some Abecedarian activities) would be a terrific way of doing ‘homework’ with young children. That it would compliment the Homework Grid that the Year 3s and up are already doing.

Homework Grid
The Homework Grid is a new initiative by the school to encourage a different approach to homework. It was based on a survey conducted with parents. It begins in Year 3 and is sent home in their diaries. The children tick or colour in squares when the activity is completed, but not just school based literacy or numeracy work, for example, going shopping with mum, doing sport, helping someone that you wouldn’t usually help, practicing a musical instrument. The children can choose when they do each activity as long as they all get done in the fortnight, so children learn to schedule and plan their time. Parents particularly like the way the activities involve the whole family and family life and the fact that generosity is a focus. It values all the things children do not just their academic learning.
The literacy quilt in the ECLIPSE pack was also a popular idea with many suggestions on ways to modify it – children could write their own name at the top and add lots of colour and colour the squares in, or use stickers or stamps when activities were completed. It could also be laminated and therefore washable and re-useable, with textas or stickers. The quilt was something that could be used by parents at home or by the teacher in the classroom. The suggestion was made that you could and modify it to suit your own child and go on to make a numeracy quilt or a sport quilt and that the quilt would be another way to lead young children into the idea of homework.

While the parents like the idea of combining the ECLIPSE information sheets with activities from the Abecedarian books, it was the Abecedarian books they particularly enjoyed. They had nothing but praise for them. The parent of five children, four of whom suffer from dyspraxia, begged to be allowed to borrow the 4-5 year old book and use it through the holidays to give her two youngest some extra support before school started again next year. She concluded by saying:

*Well I’d just like to thank you, I wish you did this fifteen years ago earlier, because I got nothing but bad parenting for doing this type of commons sense learning. No, no I did, my son is fifteen now and when he was at school they had the strict homework books, the books were full of the pictures of the shoelaces and all that. He did it for them but not for me, so I had to do these [referring to the activities in the Abecedarian books] at home and I got ‘Why are you doing this?’ ‘Why isn’t his book filled in?’ … so my common sense learning at home… back then ten or fifteen years ago, they were like ‘Well you should be doing this because this is what we’ve told you to do and we’re the teacher and we know best’* (Parent comment 21/11/07).

In summary the parents thought the Abecedarian program for parents was suitable because of the simple format and not too many words. The parents liked the developmental table which shows aspects of development, stages and shows where the particular activities and games fit in a developmental sequence. Several parents said that they could modify the activities to suit different age levels. Other positives included the short not time consuming activities that the whole family could engage, the fact that the instructions were clear, and they involved the use of everyday materials that did not have to be specially purchased. The pictures showed parents engaged in having fun with their children.

**What we do at Ascot**

The Ascot parents spoke very highly of the relationship they had with the school. They specifically mentioned the relationships they have with staff, starting with the people at the front desk, teachers and the school leadership team. One parent stated that:

*They get to know you, they know your name and your children’s names…they are interested in your child.*

The parents said they felt welcomed, that their voice and opinions are sought and valued and that although they often felt like they lived in a community that was a ‘dumping ground’ for negatives, they wanted to be proud of it, and the school’s focus on the future had created a sense of pride. They described the school as a ‘good school’ with teachers who welcomed their participation in classrooms to hear reading, go on excursions and had individual parent interviews with them.
As the parents talked, they gave examples drawn from their own experience of how the school had dealt with issues such as the integration of their children with special educational needs. As one parent said:

I rang them and they were just so friendly, and I don’t know if there was a spot or not and they interviewed me and you know what it’s like, you pour your heart out, and they just said, he can start tomorrow...

The parents talked about how the Early Learning, Learning Together and Smith Family programs supported them as parents. They expressed concern that many people in the community did not know about these services or were not accessing them.

However, the speakers raised concerns about the lack of continuity between the (off-site) preschools that fed into the school and talked about how difficult the transition from pre-school to school had been, how they needed to ‘find’ information themselves and make arrangements for visits from the pre-school to school.

The parents expressed that the interview had provided the opportunity to talk with each other and they liked hearing from other parents.

When the Ascot teachers talked about how the links between the home and school are developed, they identified how the school uses the phone, email and the school website as ways of communicating with families. The teachers agreed with the parents that the front office staff and the leadership team played important roles in maintaining effective links. When discussing the ways that parents can be involved at the school, the teachers named similar activities to the parents and identified involvement in classes, the informal chats before and after school, hearing reading, going on excursions, participating in sports days and special days. The teachers described how many of the parents ‘joined in’ at assemblies, getting up on the stage and performing with children and they felt that this was because many of these parents had ‘missed out’ on their childhood.

The Ascot teachers identified the greatest challenge for them is working out how to involve more parents and ‘get more people in’ and they think that ongoing conversations, sharing special days, sharing food and celebrations were the key.

**Ascot parents’ view of materials**

The Ascot parents spoke about the ECLIPSE materials and particularly liked the sheets that outlined early literacy experiences organised under heading such as speaking and listening. They said that the headings made it easy for them to ‘pick out the type of activity’ they were considering. The parents liked the way the text was organised using dot points and that the illustrations included children’s drawings and reflected children’s worlds. The parents did not engage at the same level with the ECLIPSE book which was written for educators.

The parents commented on the Abecedarian materials and whilst they liked a lot of the ideas and the tables at the front of each book, because they were ‘to the point’ they said that the books were too large ‘like a novel’ and had too many words:

The writing is a bit... it’s put in a way that there is words that you would not use normally, it is worded very unusually and it goes sort of around, it doesn’t go straight
to the point and there’s too many words...So if you did want to do an activity with your child, you wouldn’t want to sit there reading the book.

This group of four parents thought the way the activities were written, it was too hard to get the main idea and the books would just sit on the shelf. They pointed out the use of unusual words like ‘poked’ and ‘jello’ and said they would not use such words for numerous reasons. As one parent said:

*Look at this rhyme, it says ‘1,2,3,4,5, once I caught a fox alive’... That isn’t what we would say in Australia*

The parents re-iterated that the photographs in the Abecedarian books looked ‘posed’ and looked set up and fake, or to use one parent’s words ‘they look like advertisements’. They said that age related activities lead to anxiety that their own child was not doing what she/he should be doing for her age or was ‘behind’.

The one JP parent who talked about the materials liked the activities because they suggested using things that she had around the house and she did not have to buy ‘stuff’.

The researcher commented that the parents had very sophisticated skills in critical text analysis and analysed the photographs, layout and the message in the materials to judge the usefulness of both programs

**Ascot teachers’ view of materials**

The teachers thought the Abecedarian materials provided too much information for parents and cards may work better. They were critical of the layout and were disappointed that the picture illustrating the game or activity was on one side and the text describing it was on the other side. Two teachers thought the pictures were fine and showed great examples of children ‘doing things’ whilst one shared the parent perceptions that the pictures were ‘fake’ and did not have any sense of ownership with the pictures.

The teachers commented that they would not ever give out a whole pack to parents and could perhaps workshop materials with parents. The principal made the comment that the books presented a very ‘leafy green’ picture of parenting and indicated that the pictures did not reflect the realities of the families in the Ascot community. Many parents at the school and preschool have had negative experiences with schools and giving out a whole book on what to do with your child with literacy would be overwhelming.

In the teachers’ view of the ECLIPSE program they noted that it was published in 1998 so it is nearly ten years old. This was developed for preschools and they said that it suits a preschool audience. The sheets explaining literacy development were useful and the cards are not available, possibly because they are so popular that they have disappeared and are in use. The researcher reported that both parents and the teachers thought that the ECLIPSE materials would be useful.

**What we do at Armadale**

The Armadale parents identified many positive aspects of their relationship with the early learning centre and school. One parent said that the staff ‘have time to talk with me’ and the others agreed that the caring, welcoming and supportive atmosphere was very positive and
family oriented and that the communication was ‘two-way’. When asked how this relationship had been developed, one parent talked about the negotiated curriculum plans that had been established for her child with special needs as he transferred in from another preschool.

*There was a lot of collaboration, and they were well aware of Simon’s needs before he started.*

Another parent talked about the ‘morning’ chats with the teacher, and said that she never felt ‘rushed’. One parent cited her own experience as a refugee, and that ‘she had been through a rough time’ but that

*When I look at the teachers working with my little one, I think it is amazing what he achieves*

Several parents cited the parent-teacher interviews, the written information the school provides and workshops run for parents on reading as valuable ways of maintaining home/school links.

These parents felt encouraged to be involved in their children’s learning in many ways such as reading in classrooms, going on excursions, cooking with the class and dancing. One parent talked about how she is contributing expertise in cultural activities, making clothes for the puppets the children have made. She also mentioned the clothes and costumes she has made for special days or weeks. Parents cited many ways that they are involved at the school, volunteering to work in the library, on the fundraising committee and parents said they liked the ways their specific skills were used. For example a dentist said she had provided talks on dental health to children in the school.

Parents cited the continuity of care between kindy, child care and school as the best feature of the current centre/school/home relationship. They also identified the ‘term overview’ that each class provides to parents outlining the ‘overview of expectations’ for the term as significant. However, the parents also cited this overview as one of the things that could be improved because they said it used ‘education speak’ and they wanted some of the language to be explained. One parent gave the example of ‘integrated studies’ and said that it was only when she worked in her child’s class that she got some idea of what this term actually meant.

The teachers’ responses to the question about how the links between home/school are developed were very congruent with the ideas raised by the parents. The teachers thought that the links are developed through formal processes such as meetings with the family on enrolment, communication between the early learning centre and the school and between Out of Hours Care and the family. They also mentioned acquaintance nights, transition visits, workshop sessions for parents, parent/teacher interviews, fortnightly newsletters and Negotiated Curriculum planning as examples of formal processes.

When talking about informal ways the home/school relationship is sustained, the teachers named the ‘morning chats’ with families and said how important it was to have the classroom open 20 minutes before the formal start to the day. One teacher said:

*I personally prefer to talk to parents, rather than writing, so I will often ring them during the day or in the evening*
They also raised the importance of their ‘communication books’ that went home regularly and, similarly to the parents, the teachers thought that the term overviews were one of the ways effective links between home and school were developed. The booklets and pamphlets on ‘helping your child to read’ were also cited by the teachers as an important way for developing links with families.

When asked about the ways parents can be involved in the programs and curriculum at the centre/school, teachers repeated and also added to what the parents had said. They identified the governing council and the community breakfasts as particularly important in a school where many parents are in the paid workforce. The shared breakfasts are held before school. The teachers also mentioned the school assemblies that are purposefully held at the end of the school day so that parents can participate and ‘pop’ in when they can. Many community groups use the school facilities in the evenings and on weekends.

Similarly to the Armadale parents, the teachers saw the continuity between the early learning centre, pre-school, school and OSHC as the best feature in the current centre/school/home relationship and as one teacher says:

Having the early learning centre, the pre-school and OSHC on site is a really positive feature and a lot of parents feel really comfortable, it does make the continuity for their children better...even going down the stairs this morning, I recognised some of the new receptions just starting...they know us. We have assemblies together, you see little children being wheeled in, in their pushers...

The teachers identified the number of working families as one of the challenges for the school and one teacher said ‘we never see them’.

I have found at this school there is not as much help during the day, but probably more help with the administration and council decision-making...

The different cultural expectations that families have particularly in relation to behaviour was also cited as a challenge and the teachers identified forward planning (including the appointment of a ‘well-being’ co-ordinator next year) as particularly important in working with the families who are part of the Indigenous housing project across the road.

**Armadale parents’ view of materials**

Armadale parents appear confident about parenting and thought that the Abecedarian materials affirmed what they already were doing at home. They used words such as ‘validated’ and ‘reinforced’ when they described how the materials provided ideas for activities that they were already doing. However, they said that the book would be a good resource and it is important to have parent materials to give to other family members to inform them.

The parents were not keen on receiving a book of games and activities without some form of workshop. If there was not an accompanying workshop then they felt the books would just sit on the shelf or they would only use the ideas for the activities that were familiar. Some parents suggested that the books could be placed in a ring-back folder and added to as time went on.
The parents liked the ECLIPSE materials as they provided a framework and were not as prescriptive. They also wanted to have an accompanying workshop with the ECLIPSE materials.

Researchers noted: Parents valued the opportunity to take part in the focus groups and enjoyed sitting with other parents sharing ideas. The telling of stories about their children was important as it built relationships and broke down barriers. When parents use humour and share comments like ‘I’ve done that too’ they do not feel as isolated. As one parent stated, ‘you only have your own experiences’ and parents want to interact with other parents.

**What we do at Kings**

Parents have a very positive response to their involvement at Kings. They commented on the smiling faces of staff who greet them by name, the everyday discussions (face to face and telephone), the staff and parent involvement in working bees and formal and informal meetings (e.g. Management committee). They enjoyed the attendance at special events such as an art exhibition, 2nd birthday celebration and the Kings disco. The parents appreciated being involved in research and commented that research like this is a positive.

The parents commented on the importance of communication via newsletters with invitations to special functions, personal approaches from staff at drop off or pick up times, involvement in Management Committee. One parent in the focus group was the Chairperson and another was a committee member.

A parent commented:

> I like seeing activities that my child is doing when I pick up or drop off – invited to participate by staff on many occasions. I always feel welcome to stay if I have time

Another said:

> My son’s enthusiasm for the centre is spontaneous and wonderful to see. When I picked up Sam yesterday he greeted me with, ‘Mum, I’ve done my times tables today’. He was so excited and couldn’t stop talking about his day the whole way home.

The parents in the focus group found the centre’s newsletter with suggestions of things to try at home were useful. Others commented on the importance of ‘seeing activities that my child is doing when I pick up or drop off and his enthusiasm for continuing at home activities like cooking, stories, puppets, storytelling, puzzles, sandpit, craft and talking’. The staff at the centre emphasise the importance of reading to children.

At home the parents commented:

> I read daily to Sam. He developed language skills earlier than normal and I put this down to me reading to him from an early age.

> Both my husband and I read to our child on a regular basis.

> I sing and dance with my child.

> We make sure he views age appropriate T.V. shows.
Parents described the importance of the open door policy of staff, respecting and accepting cultural and socio-economic diversity, the staff’s genuine interest in children’s learning, development and overall well being. We like the newness and cleanliness of centre and the staff and children are proud of their centre. The staff build on existing strengths and address children’s weaknesses/difficulties. They focus on the social and emotional development as well as the educational aspects.

The staff confirmed that they have an open door policy for parents who can stay as long as they can and there is a policy of providing informal conversations constantly with parents / carers. There is a Learning Story folder with digital photographs and comments about what has happened which goes home regularly. When the child begins at the centre the parents provide information in a ‘Tell us about your child survey’ – the centre in this way values them as the child’s first educators. The Director said:

*I encourage staff to constantly question and think about what they do to deepen the relationships. We also have many photographs on display. Non-English speaking parents are drawn to these and some conversations can take place, even if it’s only smiles and laughter.*

There are many informal interactions with parents which involves spending time with parents at any ‘odd’ moment around pick up and drop off times. Sometimes the staff need to tune in to their moods and have a sixth sense about parents’ needs. The director sated that it is really important to really listen to what parents are saying as finding out from parents what’s been happening at home gives you an indication of what type of day the child might have had already. This can also lead to programming needs. There are daily photographic displays and through newsletters and notes that go home. The staff work to educate the parents about child development at these times. The director tries to provide a higher staff/child ratio to allow ‘space and time’ for staff to engage with parents in a meaningful way – having conversations about the learning that’s occurred during the day.

The centre has developed literacy packs to take home. An example of a literacy pack is *The two tough teddies* by Kimberley Niland, about two teddies who don’t get on with each other. The centre has two large (child size) that go home on a regular basis to families. It is a large literacy pack and parents are invited to write in a journal about how their child taught the two teddies to get on with each other. Photos are taken and put in the journal and then it is returned to the centre to be shared with the other children. The centre has developed prop boxes for storytelling sessions so they can be more interactive for children, staff and parents. They believe it is not as scary for parents if they have an object to use and children are more easily engaged. Teachers said:

*We have to cultivate an environment where books were valued initially. Children with very little experience of books and stories had to be ‘penned in’ for story times and engaged with interactive props to get their attention. Now parents come in and ask what story was read yesterday because their child has used new vocabulary from the book.*
As well as the literacy packs for parents and carers there is story reading for book week with the whole school staff and parents/carers reading stories to multi age groupings and staff moving to different areas to read. Apparently some school staff were terrified of reading to the two year olds! The staff ‘show off’ their pedagogy to parents through ‘play together mornings’ with integration of Playgroup parents and younger children. This provides another opportunity to educate parents about the value of rhymes and songs for young children. They are developing a library and have visits from the community librarian.

Some parents whom are studying on site for their Certificate in Community Service Work, come in as students as well, and are involved in a range of areas in a role other than as a parent. There is a strong sense of ownership in the community. These parents know they are making a difference not only with their child but with a range of children.

The teachers said that it was important not being judgmental or seeing themselves as experts. Listening to what parents have to say and gauging when they are ready to hear more about their child’s education. They try to see good in every situation, rather than what I can fix. They try to have empathy with parents and encourage other parents to be empathetic and not judgmental. For example:

We need to remind ourselves of the extreme backgrounds some of the children come from, for example parents with jail terms and children visiting parents there – this can transfer to violent play and we need to make sure that other children are safe. Last week a child was pretending to use handcuffs and chains and ‘spread eagled’ another child to do a body search after visiting their father in jail. They needed to act out what had been a frightening experience for them but there is a fine line for staff members in these situations to try to make sure all children have their needs met.

They try not to be ‘too precious’ about equipment when siblings pick up little cars or animals. We need to be aware that things have to be replaced on a regular basis. There is a high amount of transient families. The energy that is used in building relationships often don’t last very long. Complex help is often needed on a daily basis. ‘We are constantly giving!’

To work in this complex environment the teachers take a lunch break away from the centre, regularly stop to take stock and congratulate themselves on a job well done and try to set reasonable and consistent boundaries for parents without taking away from the flexibility that staff also value.

**Kings parents’ view of materials**

The Kings parents thought there were some good tips in both the Abecedarian and the ECLIPSE materials. However did not really engage with the materials and possibly needed additional workshop support.

Yes, they were very easy to just pick up and open to any page. Just from a quick glance I was able to do something which was both fun and developmentally appropriate to my child’s age.

We did the ‘Build a person’, ‘Rhyming’, ‘Cutting new lines’, Mailing a letter’, ‘I’ll get it myself’ and ‘Little by little’.

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I liked all the activities because they were so easy to do – just by looking at the picture and then being able to read further about how it helps their various skills develop.

I have just finished the ‘Incredible years parenting’ classes and they say to play (interact) with your child one on one for ten minutes every day and these were the perfect experiences for us. I found them really rewarding.

When we were alone and had no distractions, I gave him the book and he was really enthusiastic about looking through and choosing something to do.

When asked do the materials improve the centre home relationship the parent commented:

No – I feel I already have a good relationship but if these were available to borrow for parents it could be a good thing to secure the bond between carers and parents.

Kings teachers’ view of materials
The Kings teachers reviewed the ECLIPSE and Abecedarian programs materials and thought they are very easy to use and follow. The Abecedarian Program is simpler in many ways. The photographs are self-explanatory. The two programs could work side by side. They thought the pages could be photocopied and laminated to give out to parents when they asked about particular skills for their children (e.g. tying up shoe laces). The staff could also give out a certain page to parents if they thought the parents could use some information – it’s not as overwhelming as a book, particularly for parents with limited literacy skills themselves. ECLIPSE is very useful for unqualified staff to reaffirm messages about how things relate to SACSA that we constantly give out verbally.

The teachers thought the experiences are very simple, yet focus on ‘what’s in it for the child and family’ for example playing with mirror, family circle, sharing needs, building blocks, labelling.

Most of the experiences are ones they already use on a regular basis, but they thought it was great to have some reaffirmation of what they believe in, but they needed more time to really review the materials.

They commented that the activities use resources that we already have in the Centre. Children are always interested in these activities and time at home provides longer periods to focus on their well-being. They thought the materials explained to parents what specific learning is going on during the play based experiences. Then parents could hopefully see the links to literacy and numeracy and therefore not constantly ask ‘when are you going to start teaching my child to read and write?’ for example the scribbling activity in 12 -24 month book shows painting with water, which is exactly what they do at the centre They thought the activities explain literacy in parent friendly terms.

The teachers have used the ECLIPSE materials before and said:

We have used the ECLIPSE materials in the past to make poster displays for parents on ‘what is literacy?’ We use photos of their children playing in the home corner, at the painting easel, in the sandpit, etc to explain what literacy (and numeracy) concepts are developing. I find I need to focus on these more than the social learning
that once was more important to me, in order to stop parents asking about it all the time.

The teachers had limited feedback about the materials from the parents because the parents forgetting to bring back materials and/or one went on holidays before final focus group. An on the run comment from one parent ‘I like the Abecedarian books and think they would be useful for working at home with my child.’

Suggestions about how to use the materials were provided. One teacher said that she would like to have more digital cameras to send them home with the materials. Parents could take photos of their children to send back to us with the Learning Story that took place at home. With the number of transient parents in our Centre, it’s the photos that they love the most and want to keep. For many it’s the only record of their child’s time in a place as they are never there for ‘school photographs’.

Another said:

_I’d like to have a working bee with the parents to involve them in organising the materials. (e.g. ‘How about you?’ ‘What do you know about yourself?’ ‘This is me’ all link with the theme, Identity.) You could decide with parents how to classify the various activities, thereby also helping to explain SACSA learning areas, developmental learning outcomes, and Essential Learnings._

Anything that gets people telling their story to others makes for a very rich experience. The dynamics of the changed relationship between educators and parents/carers through this shared storytelling can be amazing.

The teachers liked the structure of the books into various age groups because it would allow the parents of different aged children to meet and possibly discuss developmental milestones. Parents tend to think their child is either an angel or a monster. At a parent/staff storytelling session, they would be able to put their child in the context of other children.

When asked ‘Did you feel the materials were a success? Would you continue to use them in the future?’ the teachers responded ‘Yes, definitely’. They were not sure about the developmental checklists in the front of each book. Parents may be being competitive and/or negative about what their child could achieve. They wanted to see milestones in there. They said they would be careful about which parents they would share the whole book with and sending individual pages home with a specific purpose in mind would work better. They thought the materials could be used as another resource in the parent library. It’s also possible to tie particular experiences in with the program with a note in the newsletter, ‘try this at home’.

They thought they could link them in with Learning Stories. Kings is always trying to involve parents in these as a two way thing, not just coming from the centre viewpoint. Parents could be encouraged to try some of the experiences at home and write it up as a Learning Story. One idea was to:

_Try to organise a relaxed parent evening about literacy (and numeracy) where we set out play experiences for the adults. We could share stories with each other in an informal, relaxed way (not as a parent teacher interview) and then fill out the literacy_
quil together. Parents get very excited when they see things that can be marked off on this.

You could have an ‘Activity of the Week/Month’ and leave the photocopied sheets out the front for parents to collect if they choose. Alternatively, you could put them in children’s communication pockets.

When asked ‘what changes, if any, would you make to the materials if working with them again?’ the teachers responded:

In the ‘Why’ section, if it mentions a learning area, disposition or competency, then it would highlight more the importance of the activities to parents/carers.

You could use the dispositions on the Learning Together website to add, rather than the developmental checklists. Parents seem to understand these easily – it’s written in language they can identify with – they want their child to be curious and show courage and so on.

I would keep a master copy to reproduce as laminated sheets. This would also avoid parents losing the materials. You could sort them into various topics or themes with coloured dots according to need.

Is there a progression that could be shown like the ‘Literacy Quilt’ in the ECLIPSE materials? Even though they probably need updating, the literacy quilt allows for a joint ownership between home and the primary caregiver at the Centre.

What we do at Eldon

At Eldon many types of activities and techniques were used to involve parents and children in the pre-school experiences of children. The parents of Eldon reflected this and said they were very happy with the staff, they were very approachable. They held great respect for the teachers. All parents thought that their children had benefited from attending the pre-school and could see the development of their children. There is a large group of Asian (Vietnamese) parents and children in the pre-school and there are a few issues that relate specifically to this group and the cultural expectations of this group. The issue of English as a second language is prominent for a lot of parents at Eldon, some parent have very little understanding of English requiring a translator for all interactions with teachers.

Another barrier to involving parents is the view of the teacher as the ‘expert’, this leads to parents being hesitant or underestimating their role as educators of their children. The teacher at Eldon tries to explain to parents that they are sharing the role of education that they are in partnership. This view of the ‘expert teacher’ effects many areas of interactions between the pre-school and parents. A good example of this is the attempts to encourage parents to sit on the governing committee, the Director commented:

It is almost impossible to get them to see any reason why they should participate in making decisions about policy or finances as they see this as the teacher’s role, ‘You are trained and therefore the expert, we are not able to contribute’.
Eldon have found culturally appropriate ways to overcome some of these issues such as formally (individually) inviting parents to attend and participate in events and have had great results with this ‘they love to come along and do things, help out, especially cooking, when they have been invited’. Other parents feel comfortable participating without formal invitation and do so regularly. The Director commented that they do not have any problems with parents attending pre-school functions as parents are very interested in children’s learning. Parents, especially Asian parents, valued the teacher and the work they did with the children.

*When we have a shared family lunch or tea I can guarantee you that we will have 50 to 70 people here, they will all bring some food to share and come along, we have no problems with parents attending pre-school events.*

Eldon has a bilingual worker who spends three days per week with the teachers and students. All correspondence, all discussions with parents and reports are translated for parents and teachers. If there is a child who speaks another language other than the one that the bilingual worker speaks (she speaks four Asian languages) the director tries to get a support person who speaks the language.

*Even if it is just for a few hours then I can get some idea of what the parents are thinking and where the child is at (developmentally), if they are okay in their first language and their levels of questions are okay then it’s fine, they will be fine they will progress.*

Classes are conducted in English but supported to accommodate the language barrier:

*English is the language of power, we would be doing the children and families a great injustice to not give the children a really rich English experience, sometimes you can come to work and there is a session with no one speaking English, apart from yourself and your Bilingual [Teacher], so we have adapted our curriculum to be a very visual curriculum so that the children are not always just talked at, they have visual props to help them. We do lots of deconstructing, say of stories, we have lots and lots of activities around that story so that the children as some point that child will recognise in their own way, not only language but understand the story. We also concentrate on one story for a whole week and break up into smaller age related groups to enable interaction based on different levels of development of children.*

The pre-school education program is designed around themes which are used to help involve parents. One such successful method was to utilise the materials from the ECLIPSE pack (literacy quilt) as a basis for involving parents in the pre-school program. Each fortnight the child takes a square home and has to work with their family.

*They have a topic which ties in with the program or current theme and need to work through the problem with their families, when they complete the square and return this they get a stamp and their picture put up on a board*

The parents and teachers both commented on the usefulness of the ‘squares’ and how they enjoyed these activities with their children. One parent commented that this had led to other activities with their child, ‘we had a square about animals, different types of animals that
were on coins and this led to me showing my child how to do a coin rubbing’. Other methods used to assist teacher and parent communication are described:

We also pick one story per term and we use this to do some assessment [of the children]. We do this once a term for the four terms a child is here and we record what it was like for them at each point and we also do a drawing it gives us a really good idea of how they have understood the story, their comprehension, their pencil grip, so you have four assessment points, and these are very visual, so when it comes to assessment time you can show the parent and say look how your child has improved/developed. For example you can show them that we asked them to write their name and at first they could not and now they can. This also helps as it avoids the jargon.

Parents enjoy the reports on the progress of their child and the use of their child’s work samples assist in the understanding of children’s development. There are also groups that are run out of the centre; occasional care; playgroup and recently there was a six week parenting program run by Mission Australia. The program employed a parent educator to support parents learning about issues related to child development and parenting practices. According to the director of Eldon the parents who attended really enjoyed this course and want more courses like this. The pre-school also acts as a referral point for children who have difficulties or need extra support.

_Eldon parents’ view of materials_

The Abecedarian materials were for most parent participants at Eldon not accessible as they were in English and these parents comprehension of English was very limited. A translator was required for the focus group interview. When asked if they would like the Abecedarian resources translated, all agreed they would like some type of resource to help with supporting their children’s learning. Four parents commented that there were not many resources available to them on the topic of supporting children’s development in their native language. Two examples from the Abecedarian books were worked through with the parents and translated on the spot in an effort to gain an understanding of whether these parents would use this resource or not.

Parents liked the information at the front of the book and said they enjoyed reading information about child development. When the activities were discussed with the parents some of the parents said they already did this type of activity (learning games) and gave the example of filling up glasses with water of differing temperatures for their child to feel and explore and talk about. Parents also said they had used paints to show how they showed their children that if they mix certain colours together they get other colours. One parent suggested that they would like a more academic approach to their child’s learning, they did not feel that playing games with their child was productive. All parents from Eldon said they would use the books but would also like some support around the books such as delivered in workshop situations. Parents expressed a preference for the use of oral techniques for delivery of information.

Generally parents from Eldon liked that the books were grouped into age specific books, all of the parents had other children and so said they would like to use the Abecedarian books to play age appropriate games with their other children as well. The parents liked the simplicity of the books the pictures and explanations of why to do this activity with children. Eldon parents mostly felt confident that they could teach their child what they needed to know for
the first five years. One parent recently had one of her other children diagnosed with a developmental issue and found it difficult to find suitable learning materials to support her child at home. This parent found it difficult to access information about the condition as the regular class teacher was on long service leave and they had a substitute teacher for the term. This highlights the issue of appropriate materials for parents and children and resulted in the comment that they would like somewhere to go with resources related more to learning rather than the focusing on health.

Generally parents felt that they were already playing ‘learning games’ with their children but did not necessarily recognise these are learning. This feeds into the perception of some parents that teachers are the ‘experts’ and it is their role to teach children not parents. Despite this perception parents agreed they thought the Abecedarian resources would be useful to assist them in supporting their children’s learning.

**Eldon teachers’ view of materials**

The teacher found the books to be useful and enjoyed the pictures; she thought the use of simple props was great. There was a good cultural mix of families in the photos and the teacher thought this was also a positive aspect of the books. The examples of learning games and the explanation of why you would play the game as well as what the children will learn was thought to be very useful; ‘it gives parents the opportunity to say I am already doing this and extend the activities they are already doing a little bit more so that when we do unpack the oranges lets count them.’ The teacher felt that the materials would potentially validate or empower parents as ‘these are things that you would do anyway.’ The information about development and early literacy was viewed as very useful and the teacher thought the information was beneficial for both parents, carers and teachers; ‘Talk all the time, reinforcing the benefits of talking, its really useful information’.

The main aspect that the teacher liked about the Abecedarian resources was the simplicity of the activities that were described in the books ‘The books shows a great use of easy to find items (around the house) to use to play with children. This is great as this shows that playing is learning and I struggle with some parents as they do not see this. I think these books encourage parents to have fun, simple fun and delight with their children.’ This was a useful representation of playing as learning as some parents tended to focus on learning and wanted their child to be more academic in focus.

The teacher felt that other parents would not read the Abecedarian books; they would just sit on the shelf and gather dust. The teacher felt that to be useful for families at Eldon the materials would need to be delivered in a supported way to assist parents, in a workshop type of setting or some other way of passing over the information to parents. The teacher picked out several activities that she liked from the books, one showing painting with water and commented that these were such easy and fun things parents could do with their children at home. It is also encourages parents to make a creative mess and that this is okay in the process of playing and learning and this was really important. It breaks down a child’s learning and says this is how your child learns. If the teacher was to use this type of material to support parents education she would demonstrate the activity and explain the learning activity.

The teacher said she felt the Abecedarian resources would be useful for teachers as they could be used in combination with other resources and techniques. They could be adjusted to suit the requirements of the children at Eldon, just as we do now with the ECLIPSE materials.
The only criticism that the teacher had of the Abecedarian materials was that the activities were very wordy and she felt that this would put parents off using them, also this detracted from the simplicity of the learning games. Overall the teacher found the resources useful and would utilise them if given them, but would like some support around them, due to the special requirements of parents and children at Eldon.

What we do at Thornlie
Child Parent Centre Teacher Interview
The Thornlie Child Parent Centre provides numerous opportunities for parents to become involved in their child’s learning. Parent Questionnaires provide a greater insight into the child’s interests and concerns. Through the questionnaires teachers are able to include the child’s interests into the curriculum, and really engage that child in learning. Learning Agreements are written up after Parent-Teacher Meetings are held. These contain the responsibilities and actions the teachers, parents and children will take to further develop a certain skill. Literacy and numeracy kits with instructions are provided for parents to take home.

Lots of photographs are displayed throughout the room. Teachers have found that if a child’s photograph is displayed then the parents are more likely to look at it or the children themselves will take the parents over to show them. Books are also made throughout the year using photographs. These help to show parents what their children are doing, with numeracy for instance (eg measuring, weighing etc), or to show special events or visits (eg fire fighters and the flying doctor visits).

Relevant articles are displayed on the parent board. Often the type of articles on display come from concerns parents may have eg children not eating, not going to bed. However these are generally read by parents who are already engaged in their child’s education. The issue is how to get other parents involved, those with complex lives, with many other issues going on. Staff constantly try to find new and simple ways to get these parents involved and engaged in their child’s learning. Even building up relationships is difficult for these are also the parents that tend to ‘drop and run’ in the mornings, they are not staying to spend time with their child, talk to the teachers and find out about their child’s learning needs.

The teacher being interviewed had previously taught in a high socioeconomic area where parental support was ‘amazing they were very involved and wanted to really help their children move forward, but here it is not like that at all’. Parents at the previous school provided lots of positive feedback and support, ‘parents here do not give any feedback, even if they want to, they may not have the skills or feel comfortable enough to say anything’.

One strategy to get the parents more involved was to have 20 minute Parent Workshops on different aspects of the curriculum. These would occur at the end of a session when the children were outside with a relief teacher. These have proved to be very successful with one parent commenting ‘I never realised how important I was and I’ve felt really valued’. The workshops may contain some theory of literacy and why it is so important to read to children and then parents are provided with literacy activities they can do at home. They also looked at all the ways literacy occurred at home, how they could use puppets and games, and how learning occurred through play.
Very few Dads are involved, although last year there was one Dad who was always there and was very involved. Many Dads are reluctant even just to read a story, although staff try to encourage this to show a male reading, something many children do not see. This one Dad however decided he would try it, but was afraid the children would not listen to him. The teachers provided him with a giant stop sign to stop the children from talking and he loved using it and then would read.

One teacher attended a workshop by Mem Fox on reading to children and about the connections that are made in a young child’s brain. She then displayed articles about this, put information in the Centre newsletter and encouraged parents to read a story every day to their children or borrow a tape and listen to that. This also led to teaching children about the brain and healthy food for the brain, which extended to taking the children shopping, making breakfast and having a teddy bears picnic. This involved a number of parent volunteers who came in and helped prepare the food. This was further extended to another activity where parents and children were shown how much sugar there was in soft drinks. The children all helped count out the spoons of sugar into a glass and everyone was amazed to see how much there was. Teachers also discussed with children how bad plastic bags were for the environment. This led to the children making their own cloth shopping bags. These were then shown to older classes in the school. Such activities are reported in the Centre newsletter which comes out twice a Term.

Special days are held throughout the year to bring family members into the Centre, such as Graduation Day, Special Friends Day, and Thank You days for volunteers. They also have cultural arts and music days with African drummers and Indian henna painting etc. whilst parents are always made to feel welcome and invited they are also made aware that this is a learning time and place for their children. It is not a place to be disruptive and stand at the back of the room and talk and allow younger siblings to run around. Teachers have had to ask parents to wait outside if that’s what they want to do and make it really clear that the centre is a place of learning and that their children’s education comes first.

There has to be a balance between finding time to talk to parents, but also remembering we are here for the children, it is not a time [for staff] to talk to each other or to parents, other than just for a short time about their child. We are here for the children.

Reception Teacher Interview
Thornlie is a very diverse community with many different nationalities represented. Therefore different approaches are needed with each parent. Teachers need to use their intuition to devise strategies that will work with each family. They have information sheets and transition visits for children which the parents come to as well. That way the teachers can see the level of English skills the parents have, their understanding of how the school works, as well as their comfort level in coming into the school/classroom. For some parents who need extra support, an informal chat is arranged with the class teacher, or the Principal and interpreters are arranged if needed. In some cases teachers will even visit the child’s home to introduce themselves to the family and explain certain issues. This is particularly important for some of the refugee families since this may be their first experience of school.

It’s almost like you need to develop a parent transition to school... It’s almost like you’ve got to train the parents to get a head set about school... and with the kindy sessions here, not all children would have a full day, so being at school and having
a full day, parents need to prepare them differently for school, especially in terms of
a snack for recess, talking about appropriate food for lunch, appropriate [dress],
you know even though we have a uniform, you can’t wear thongs to school and
things like that. And they need to be here at a particular time in the morning and
collected at a particular time

Relationships with parents are maintained through a communication pack. Each child has a
reader bag in which they take home their school reader, and a student diary, in which teachers
and parents can share information, concerns, issues as well as achievements. There is a
fortnightly newsletter sent out by the school to keep parents informed of upcoming events
etc. At the beginning of the year each class creates their own newspaper as an induction,
containing class expectations etc. For example children are asked to bring water to school and
not soft drinks. A software program is used which involves a lot of visuals/visual descriptions
for families from non-English speaking backgrounds.

ESL parent nights are held twice a term where school/classroom events and activities are
explained by the leadership team established within the school. Interpreters are present for
each nationality and there is time for questions and answers afterwards. This face to face
approach has proved to be very beneficial. In addition parent/teacher interviews are held once
a term with interpreters if needed.

With parents of the younger children in particular teachers have found they need to be very
visible at pick up and drop off times, so informal chats can occur with parents in the school
yard. Such conversations are needed in order to build up relationships/bonds with parents, to
build up trust and are also used as a way of sharing information.

Parents are encouraged to be involved in their child’s learning through various activities
including Literacy Open Days. Here parents are invited into the classroom to observe the
teacher and see the Accelerated Literacy Program in action and discuss the strategies they
could use with their children at home. For example, the parents might be given guidance
about the types of questions to ask their children. These might be very specific, not open
ended questions, but to keep questions very tight and specific so you are drawing the
learner’s attention to a particular detail and to the point you want to make.

An example of that would be, rather than saying ‘What do you think if happening in
this particular story?’ or ‘Why do you think the character’s sad?’, you would say
‘There’s a word in the sentence that’s told us the character’s feeling sad, but there’s
another word in the sentence that’s telling us what has made the character feel sad’.
‘What is the word that’s used to tell us the character is feeling sad?’

Learning Agreements (until the reporting format changed at the beginning of 2007) were
used extremely successfully. Learning Agreements were reviewed/updated each term. They
are still used with students who need extra help and are very specific regarding certain
aspects of learning, for example, improving handwriting. Strategies are provided for both
parents to use at home and strategies for teachers to use in the classroom. The Learning
Agreements stemmed from three way interviews conducted at the end of Term 1. They are
also used in conjunction with various assessments from the School Counsellor and other
specialists. The three way interviews in Term 1 focus on what parents want for their children.
At the end of Term 2 the focus is on what the teacher wants the child to achieve and then in
Term 3 very specific strategies are provided for both home and school. Children with specific
learning needs are also well supported through Negotiated Education Plans and speech and psychological assessments.

In the classroom parents are also rostered on to listen to children read or to read with the children one-on-one. Classroom teachers have a list to ensure all children are involved, which has proved to be very successful in the early years, but parents tend to lose interest by the time their children reach Year 2. Parents are keen to volunteer in Reception and Year 1 but not so much after Year 2. There are also parent volunteers to support younger children who are gifted in numeracy for instance. Learning Assisted Program’s are also in place, but that is hard to keep going as parents who are involved tend to be unemployed at first, then when they gain employment, they move on.

Parent support comes 99% from the mothers. Even though many Dads do have the time to be involved, they tend to not see their role as helping out with literacy etc in the classroom. Their involvement with the school tends to be in volunteering to help with gardening and landscaping and also helping out with equipment and technology.

Cultural diversity is celebrated and Indigenous families are heavily involved with Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC week. Aboriginal parents run Elective Sessions which are usually arts based eg music, painting, weaving, sharing Dreaming stories etc. Other cultures are also celebrated and the school tries hard to establish and maintain links with the wider community through activities surrounding different cultural events for example, Chinese New Year, Greek Independence Day, Italian Carnivale, Ramadan for the Moslem community, there are also many Bahai at the school. The school grounds are also used by the Australian/Japanese Community for their annual festival in May ‘when the school grounds are transformed into something amazing’. The school is also involved with the Come Out festival and many different multicultural performances. During Term 3 there is a school-wide focus on Asian Studies.

The school has established strong networks between the school and the different nationalities and community members, especially now there is a New Arrivals Program (NAP) at the school, which promotes multicultural education and an understanding of different cultures in the community. The NAP program has many refugee children that come to the school from Africa (e.g. Sudan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Sierra Leone), also Afghanistan and Pakistan. The local Council provide liaison officers/trainers for teachers to help them work with and understand the different cultures especially for refugee families.

Over the years the school has worked very hard to establish and maintain these links with other cultural groups in the community. Parents need help with being comfortable enough to come to the school. Building relationships between parents and teachers is a focus throughout the school, especially with new parents/children. Teachers constantly work at building relationships with each family to ensure they feel they are welcomed and involved in their child’s learning.

The School Vision Statement is developed with the input of parents through information nights which parents are encouraged to attend. This Vision Statement reflects the schools aims and directions and encourages a safe and secure environment, and promotes an interest in health and physical well being.
A unique feature of the school is the fact that most of its teachers, over the many years the school has been running, actually live within the community. This makes for a very different home/school relationship. Teachers are therefore well aware of local issues and are seen by families outside the school environment, at the local shops for example. This gives the school a more country school feel to it with strong community spirit. By living in the area there are lots of direct links with the community. Relationships are built up outside the school grounds, many informal conversations occur and connections are made.

*What you do in the school is personalised because the school is part of where you live and that does help a lot and I think parents seeing teachers out and about locally and there’s once again those informal conversations and things you have with parents that actually build a lot of good relationships. I think it’s almost like the pastoral care sort of stuff you get in the high schools, the stuff that teachers do before school in the morning and after school and stuff like that.*

One very challenging issue the school faces is that a number of parents have mental health issues. This puts a strain on what the school and its staff are trying to achieve. Poverty is an issue in the area, but more so is the issue of mental health often as a result of substance abuse. Such issues affect the relationship the parents have with their children and the children’s behaviour. The role of the teacher and school is not understood and the school is seen as a threat, as constantly judging the parents, and as an authoritarian figure. Expectations may be extremely high and unrealistic from parents, where the teachers are seen as the sole educators and no additional support is offered in the home. This is also the case for parents who have had bad experiences themselves with school in the past. This often makes it difficult to build up positive relationships with the teachers/school which also affects the children. Teachers need to maintain an open door policy where parents and their opinions and ideas are valued.

A school counsellor provides support for children, but if parents are not willing to support different strategies or follow them up at home, they are often not successful. Students with disabilities are well supported by the education system, but mental health issues are not fully addressed. Teachers’ knowledge is simply not adequate to deal with the issues that arise and interactions with parents can be very scary. Schools are simply left to invent their own solutions. CAMHS is supportive, but needs parent involvement. A serious side effect of substance abuse and/or mental health issues is that they may lead to neglect of abuse of the children.

**Thornlie parents’ view of materials**

**Thornlie CPC parent interview**

Parents at Thornlie were drawn to the Child Parent Centre for many reasons, but most importantly for the care and concern the staff have for each individual child. The teachers are very involved in each child’s learning – ‘they go out of their way to help’. Parents described the staff as being very open and friendly, and easily approachable, always available for informal chats at drop off and pick up times, to discuss the children’s achievements as well as any issues or concerns.

In addition to the informal chats that occur in the mornings and afternoons there are also more formal discussions held each Term with Parent-Teacher Meetings. When children first come to the Centre parents are given a simple questionnaire to help staff find out the child’s interests and any concerns.
**Parent questionnaire**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to see how we can best work together to maximise your child’s learning. (This information is confidential.)

1. Please describe your child’s personality
2. What are your child’s strengths?
3. What are your child’s interests?
4. What things are most important to your child?
5. Is there any other thing you think is important for us to know?
6. Do you have any concerns/issues that you would like to discuss at the interview?

The Centre itself is large and open with many notice boards and children’s work samples displayed. On either side of the entrance are display boards, one showing upcoming events, and the other containing communication pockets for each child, where notices, handouts and messages are sent home.

In one corner is a rack where up to 50 or 60 clear plastic packs are displayed. These contain literacy and numeracy packs that parents are welcome to take home each night. The literacy packs contain and picture book to read together with an activity that relates to the story eg puppets, recipes, and drawing activities. The numeracy packs contain sorting and counting activities. Each pack contains a clear set of instructions as well.

In another corner, near where bags are kept is another notice board where teachers display simple articles and information regarding children’s health and well being etc. For instance, there may be an article on the large amounts of sugar found in soft drinks, on bedwetting, sibling rivalry, or the benefits of reading to young children. These displays are changed regularly and are read by parents waiting to pick up their children.

Parents are encouraged to join in all activities and are welcome to come at anytime throughout the day. Parents are also encouraged to share their own skills with the children, for example, cooking, gardening, storytelling, art and music. One parent, who has a large number of animals at home, brings a different one in each week for the children to see and touch and learn about.

Thornlie has large numbers of different nationalities attending the school and supports many different community groups. During special festivals such as Chinese New Year or NAIDOC week parents organise different cultural activities to share with all the children.

The Centre makes a big deal out of going to school. They have a Graduation Ceremony which many parents attend. The children wear cardboard mortar boards, they walk down a red carpet and they receive a certificate. This is a very popular event with Mums and Dads encouraging other parents to come along. Throughout the year staff collect children’s work and present it to parents in a folder at the Graduation Ceremony. These also contain teacher comments about where the child is at and where they are going with their learning. There are photos of the children and staff make sure all aspects of the curriculum are covered.

Staff are continually working on building up stronger relationships with the families of children in their care. Strong relationships build greater trust, parents become more willing to share problems and concerns that may affect the child’s learning or behaviour and helps relief...
any anxieties the parents may have as well. Two of the three parents interviewed were keen to further their daughters learning, both of whom were asking how to write and spell things and were keen to learn to read. The staff at the Centre offered different activities and strategies they could use at home, made suggestions for library books and school readers they could borrow, and went out of their way to help.

Parent 1
I asked her [teacher] about how Briony seems to be really wanting to read and she’s always asking me you know how to spell things and what not. I’m wondering how you get them started in that aspect, you know like the name of the letter is A and the sound is ‘u’ so that sort of helped me to try and help her along...

Parent 2
[The teachers are] very proactive in helping with your child’s learning... Sasha’s starting to read as well so I’m taking home one book a week for her and then the teacher’s been sitting down and letting her read it back to her... and that’s probably something that’s not really on their curriculum to do, but they just go out of their way to help...

Parent 1
They’re wanting to learn. Like you know when they’re asking you to spell every street sign or asking what’s that word and they’re spelling them and asking what does it say, but it’s hard to say well it says ‘bird’ but to explain why it says ‘bird’ you know. Do you say B I R D or you know the sounds b, ir, d you know

Parent 2
Actually that’s something that I find as a parent teaching my daughter, you’re really in the dark as to...I’m having to do it all on the seat of my pants. I’ve designed my own things on the computer for her to start writing and doing, things like that, but there’s really, as far as I know, there’s no kind of materials if your kids are starting to read and write early, there’s really nothing out there unless, I do refer back to [the teacher] with things like that but really, I don’t want to stunt my own child’s development, that’s my greatest concern really.

Parent 1
Exactly, that’s mine too.

Parent 2
Reading to her, I mean I’ve read thousands of books to her since she was born, but reading is, once they get to this level, it’s not enough, so that’s when it’s hard as a parent which step do you take. I mean I’ve made the mistake of teaching her the capital letters first which, and the others are harder, so then you know there’s a lot of things like that, if there were earlier interventions for parents, they’d be able to...

Parent 1
Steer them in the right direction rather than them having to correct it later. Briony writes her name in upper and lower case, but now she’s writing it all in lower case and she seems to understand that concept better now... the only other resource thing I’ve accessed outside of the school, is those activity books you can buy from
newsagents and again I don’t know, I mean are they Americanised, you know what I mean?

Parent 2
You’ve got to be careful of merchandising...

Parent 1
Exactly, merchandising, I mean is it appropriate to be giving them that?

The Thornlie parents are actively involved at the centre and at the school and share ideas about their children’s learning with each other. They want to support their children and help them learn to read and write, but are unsure about how to do this. They want to know more about how letters and sounds are taught so they know they are teaching their children in the right way because ‘I don’t want to stunt my child’s development’.

Thornlie Reception parent interview
Carol, the mother of five year old Fatima, was extremely pleased with the relationship the school had with parents and families. Fatima’s class teacher was involved and committed to the children and was always available to answer any questions or concerns Carol may have. He was very open to discussion and treated both the children and parents with respect and any concerns were dealt with immediately. This open dialogue with the school was one aspect of Thornlie that Carol spoke very highly of. She described it as being ‘very transparent’. That she was made to feel very comfortable and not awkward in anyway, even though she might be asking ‘silly questions’ about whether Fatima was ‘heading in the right direction’.

The first point of contact was informal chats in the morning when the teacher always asked how Carol and Fatima both were and always used their names. However, for the last half of the year contact between the home and school had become increasingly more important to Carol since she was now left at home with a new baby. Previously Carol had been very active in the classroom and had gone in each morning to listen to children read. Now she relied on other forms of communication. These included the children’s Reader Bag, school newsletters, and at this time of year the final report card. Carol had noticed many of the comments on the report cards were rather general, but that Fatima’s teacher was happy to provide more detail if needed and she had rung and spoken to him and asked many questions.

Since Fatima was her first child Carol was worried as to whether she was developing at an appropriate rate and whether she should be doing more with her at home. However the teacher had reassured her that everything was fine and had recommended she look through a number of books in the library. He had also made suggestions for parents to borrow or purchase certain software for children as well as books about phonics to help them learn to spell. These books the family had purchased and Fatima sometimes got these out for herself and would do the activities with the help of her parents. Fatima’s father also has a computer with children’s software on it and Fatima can use this occasionally as well as play games from websites such as ABC Kids and others her parents feel are appropriate.

Carol commented that apart from reading with the children in the mornings there were many opportunities for parents to volunteer at the school and they were made to feel very welcome in the classroom at any time. Parents could help out in the classrooms, as well as in the
canteen, and also in the library. There was the Parent Teacher Committee, a Fund Raising Committee and the Annual General Meeting at the school was open to all parents.

Carol remains involved with Fatima’s learning by listening to her read each night and makes comments in the booklet provided. This she felt was a good idea as you could look back through and see Fatima’s progress. The family also help Fatima learn her high frequency word lists by tracing, saying, writing and reading them. In addition Fatima’s father reads picture books to her in bed each night as part of their bedtime ritual.

In the focus group after the parents reviewed the Abecedarian and ECLIPSE materials the parents were asked if they would use the materials. When asked whether they would use the Abecedarian books at home, they answered ‘yes definitely’ and ‘absolutely’. When asked what they thought of them they said:

**Brilliant**

*I like the way it’s presented...overall I think it’s a great idea, to have this available for parents*

*Women are always looking for more activities to do with their kids*

*It made you feel good? [talking to another parent] It made me feel good too, knowing at least I’m on the right track... going in the right direction*

*I wish I had these when I was a Playgroup coordinator. This would be fantastic as a resource for them too*

*Being an older parent when I had my kids, I was looking for, you know what’s the right thing, what’s not the right thing to do, and there was nothing, that would have been a handbook you could USE... I could use the practical things in this... they had some good ideas*

*I think it’s marvellous, very short and too the point. I think ECLIPSE is far more reading, and to be honest I wasn’t quite sure what we were meant to be getting out of this [ECLIPSE] it was written more from a teachers or early childhood development perspective*

The visuals were very clear, and appealing, that there was no issue culturally, that they were appropriate for Australian parents, even though they came from America, there were ‘no activities that we wouldn’t do here with or own kids’. The multicultural images they thought were extremely important. The parents thought the Abecedarian books should be available for Playgroup, Child Care Centres, and Libraries. Time was an issue for all parents and the simplicity and ease of activities in the Abecedarian books appealed far more than the large amounts of text to read in the ECLIPSE book.

*As a parent you don’t have the time, you want something you can up and run with – that’s what this is [referring to the Abecedarian book], that is NOT what this is [referring to the ECLIPSE book]*
Although the parents liked the Abecedarian books, time was constantly a factor. ‘When it comes to parenting you want something practical and instant’. Although they were quick and easy to read and the pictures made it very simple, finding the time to actually sit down and do a craft activity at a table was very difficult ‘out of reality’. On the whole though, the activities were easy to implement at home, using materials that everyone had in their own homes.

Another criticism from one parent was that the activities were perhaps a bit too young (this parent had a four year old who was very school ready in many ways), she felt that most things were not furthering her literacy development that it was more like revision. Another comment on the Abecedarian books was that they didn’t have enough numeracy activities, that there was nothing about time and they felt that was extremely important as well.

The parents felt the ECLIPSE pack was too educator focused and had far too much reading, although the literacy quilt was something parents did enjoy looking at. It confirmed for them that everything they naturally did with their children was ‘right’. But that it was ‘not child friendly’. The colours and layout were not child friendly, that you don’t talk to or about your children like that e.g. engages in pretend play. ‘You could re-write in kids language’. That instead their children would turn it over and draw a picture on the back!

One parent’s comment showed how differently parents think when it comes to educating their children.

> As my sister said, I shouldn’t spend more time with Sasha practising her writing, she said ‘You’re not meant to teach her to read and write, that’s the schools job’, and I said ‘No, it’s what we do at home’.

The parents were all shocked by this opinion and all began talking at once of the importance of the early years, how it sets them up for success, how it supported what the teachers were doing at childcare, preschool, as well as school. All three parents interviewed said how they read to their children from when they were babies.

> I’ve read to Briony since she was a baby, I found it relaxing for me as well. I used to sit in her room quite often and she was in the cot and I would just sit in the corner and read out loud, whatever I was reading – sometimes, not always, but it was quiet, I could keep an eye on her, a magazine, the newspaper... I was always talking to her, as if I was having conversations

However all the parents, while they were very supportive of the Abecedarian books and to a much lesser extent the ECLIPSE pack (which they could see the benefit of, but felt it was too teacher orientated), still felt the materials did not have what they needed. That their children were at a point where they were keen to learn to read, write and spell. The parents wanted information and activities to help further this stage of their children’s development. ‘I’m at a stumbling place myself because I don’t want to teach her bad habits’. The children knew all the names of the letters and could recognise some simple common words. They could write the letters when told which ones to write, but they couldn’t yet work out how the letters and sounds go together to spell out the words.
Thornlie teachers’ view of materials

The teachers at Thornlie thought both literacy packs were very good and extremely useful to share with parents. However they thought they were perhaps too much to give to parents on their own, especially to ESL parents.

One teacher thought that while the visuals in the Abecedarian books were very good especially for those with low literacy skills, that they could use the images to look at instead. However they still felt that for ESL parents there needed to be more. Perhaps some step by step procedure type photographs so that those who couldn’t read English could get all they needed from the pictures. This teacher went on to talk about Program Achieve which now has a very simple PowerPoint presentation to be used with parents. She felt that perhaps something like this could be offered.

One teacher felt that workshops would be useful to present to some parents to further explain the activities and why they were important, but that if DECS were going to suggest workshops that the materials had to be prepared in advance, so that teachers could just pick them up and run with them. Teachers simply did not have time to organise their own workshops, but were happy to implement ones already created.

One teacher commented she would photocopy sections of the ECLIPSE book to give to parents and present them with some activities they could do as well. This was much like the feedback from Belmont, where the teachers suggested combining materials from the two programs and making up little literacy packs. The only other suggestion made was that they felt the games and activities should be grouped into fine and gross motor skills, language and social development. This would further enable parents to see the benefits and was the reason she felt photocopying specific pages would be useful.

Overall the teachers were very positive in their responses and thought the Abecedarian books were particularly good for parents. They thought the materials were very easy for most parents to implement in their own homes, the photographs were very helpful, and the explanations were easy to follow. And when asked whether they thought the materials were a success and whether they would use them in the future, the answer was a resounding ‘yes, definitely’.

The Reception teacher, Julian, had spent a lot of time looking through both parent resources and spoke with a number of parents getting their opinions as well. On the whole he received very positive feedback especially in regard to the Abecedarian books. Parents felt very reassured, because they were already doing similar activities at home, so were pleased to see they ‘were on the right track’. That many parents just did these things naturally without really knowing the educational benefits behind them. The parents also told him that the activities gave them many ideas as well and were adapting and modifying them to suit their own lifestyles and individual children.

Julian thought the Abecedarian books were easily accessible for parents, even those whose English was limited, because he thought the photographs were very clear and helped describe the activities. He also felt the overall layout and presentation was very appealing showing a good range of different nationalities. Although he thought that photographs showing the ‘multicultural feel of Adelaide’ might include Aboriginal, Asian, and African faces as well. He commented that the books were not too wordy and were easy to read with a very clear
presentation and layout. He very much wanted a resource that he could use with a wide range of parents – those who were very articulate, as well as those without a formal education, those from non-English speaking backgrounds, and refugees. He wanted the language used in such a resource to be simple enough that all parents walked away understanding the same thing.

Julian, however voiced the same opinion that many teachers had, that he would be reluctant to give many parents the whole book, feeling they may be overwhelmed. He suggested photocopying relevant activities and giving them out as handouts to parents to focus on specific needs. Parents from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) he thought may benefit from more explanation before sending the sheets home.

Another aspect of the Abecedarian books that Julian felt was very important was the social and emotional focus many of the activities had. He commented that when working in a school like Thornlie in a low socioeconomic area, where there are many problems – poverty, substance abuse, poor or no prior experience of school, many non-English speaking refugees and new arrivals – social and emotional skills were important. That for children to have any success at school, firstly their social and emotional needs must be met. Children often came to school unable to relate to other children (or adults) and as a result often felt very isolated, which was also a reflection of their home life. The fact that the Abecedarian books focused a lot on the social and emotional needs and ‘not just the IQ’ was a definite plus.

For Julian, the ECLIPSE manual on the other hand was not something he would give to parents at all. Instead he thought he would use the manual himself for planning and programming, getting direction and as a guide when collecting data. He thought it would also be useful when reporting to parents, pointing out that ‘This is what you child can do now, and this is what you can do at home to support them’. Julian also thought the ECLIPSE manual would work well with the Student Early Assessment (SEA) documents the school were already implementing. This is an ongoing assessment booklet Thornlie are using with the Reception, Year1 and Year 2 students. SEA focuses on literacy and numeracy and he thought ECLIPSE would really compliment what they are trying to do.

Julian saw the ECLIPSE pack as being very teacher orientated, that the layout and presentation with the columns and the dot points were exactly how many teachers’ manuals and handouts were presented. However he thought that the dot points were far too vague and general for parents. That the dot points gave no direction for parents and could easily be misinterpreted and misunderstood. Teachers he thought would naturally understand the ECLIPSE book because it used ‘teacher type language’ that educators already use, but it was not something he would give to parents. Even the information sheets he felt were too vague, that the dot points presented could be interpreted in different ways by different people depending on their experiences. For parents with little English, or for those who were refugees and thus had no prior experience of school, Julian felt they needed very specific guidelines, that each statement must be very clear. This was something the teachers at Thornlie had become very aware of over the years, that these parents really needed clear statements and the language teachers used needed to be very basic.

Julian also made a number of suggestions that he felt would improve the Abecedarian materials, or an Australian version of those materials. He thought that rather than presenting the activities in a book, that they would be more useful and more user friendly if it came in a ring bound folder, with removable pages. Julian’s other suggestion for improving the
Abecedarian parent materials, especially targeting NESB parents, was to produce a DVD to compliment the books. The DVD could introduce the books and their aims and then provide footage of some of the activities as demonstrations, to model the interactions with children and show how the activities could be approached, but again the language used would need to be very basic. He also thought a checklist might be useful for many parents, to tick off the things their child could do.

Julian felt that if the activities were presented in a folder that he would sequence the activities into an order, grouping them together, bringing the social skills to the forefront. Julian felt that for many parents, activities that focused on body language and how to read a child’s body language were also needed. Many parents needed help in becoming more aware of ‘reading, acknowledging, and responding appropriately’ to their child’s body language.

Julian reads the body language of the children in his class constantly and while he didn’t expect children to make eye contact (knowing this is impolite in other cultures e.g. Indigenous cultures), he did say to the children ‘Your face has to point to my face’ or ‘your body has to face my body that way I know you’re listening to me’. He can then go on to talk about how that was polite and courteous and made people feel good to know they were being listened to. Reading body language was something he felt many parents needed help with, so the interactions with their children were positive, knowing when to try things and when not to – ‘I can see you don’t want to do this now by how you are sitting’.

As the interview continued Julian went on to discuss the latest plans for the school, which were to provide a ‘one stop support spot’ for families living in the area. Already the school was co-located with the Child Parent Centre and Preschool but that the plan was to build a Children’s Centre, with a CAMHS office on site, with doctors, nurses, dentists, psychologists, as well as parenting support classes etc. Such a site would support families with children from birth to aged 8. Julian thought the Abecedarian materials would really compliment all that Children’s Centre and related services were trying to achieve.

It is a great document and the concept behind it is fantastic. It is something that could be used across the board.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION, FINDINGS
AND RECOMMENDATIONS
What is working well for parents now?

This research reports on the effectiveness of the Abecedarian and ECLIPSE parent support materials.

Looking back across the data from the six sites it becomes evident that the work being done by early childhood educators is valued by the groups of parents who talked about home/school links. Parents in all focus groups gave very positive responses to the question regarding their relationship with the centre/school. They commented on the staff who greet them by name, who show interest in their individual children, the everyday discussions (face to face and telephone), the staff and parent involvement in formal and informal processes and meetings (e.g. Management committee and parent/teacher interviews). The parents in the focus groups enjoyed attending and participating at special events such as cultural days, special celebrations, discos, assemblies, shared meals and activity days etc. These parents appreciated being involved in research and commented that ‘research like this’ is a positive.

The parents in all of the focus groups commented on the importance of communication via newsletters with invitations to special functions, personal approaches from staff at drop off or pick up times, involvement in Management Committees and decision making groups. There are many examples in the data of centres and schools involving parents in programs to support their children’s literacy development. Teachers talked about workshops, discussions with teachers, program overviews, literacy open days, literacy and numeracy packs and communication books. The particular issues associated with parents who speak languages other than English was raised in the discussions and the importance of bilingual support was seen as a crucial aspect of developing and maintaining effective links between home and centre/school in order to support children’s literacy learning.

The research team discussed the difficulties associated with reaching a wider sample of parents from each site rather than relying solely on parents chosen by the staff. This issue needs to be addressed in any future research into home/school links for, as the teachers from each site talked about the ways they establish and maintain links with families, they expressed concern that there were some families they did not ever see or talk to. The researchers felt that it is the parents who are not involved with the centre/school who would be in the best position to contribute to our understanding about what might need to change in order for them to access support for their parenting, particularly to enhance their children’s literacy outcomes.

The Abecedarian materials

One of the common themes that emerged in the several focus group discussions with parents was that many parents said they would not read the Abecedarian books; they would just sit on the shelf and gather dust unless there was some interaction with qualified early childhood educators, and preferably with other parents, about how best to use them. However in one site the parents responded favourably and borrowed the materials from the school to use. This demonstrates a great need for some form of support materials.

At all sites, the teachers felt that to be useful for families the materials would need to be delivered in a supported way, in a workshop type setting or some other way of communicating the information to parents. Teachers stated that if they were to use this type of material to support parents’ education they would demonstrate and explain the activities.
In summary, teachers in all six sites said the Abecedarian resources would be useful as they could be used in combination with other resources and techniques and adjusted to suit the requirements of the children and families in their contexts.

The Abecedarian materials were not accessible to some parents as they were written in English and these parents comprehension of English was very limited. When this group were asked if they would like the Abecedarian resources translated, all agreed they would like some type of resource to help with supporting their children’s learning and commented that there were not many resources available to them on the topic of supporting children’s development in their native language. All parents in this group said they would use the books but would also like some support around the books such as delivered in workshop situations. Parents with English as a second language expressed a preference for the use of oral techniques for delivery of information.

Teachers and parents commented positively on the ideas in the Abecedarian books and the table at the front of the books. They thought the activities used things that were easily available and that the table provided useful information about why particular activities were important and helped break down a child’s learning in a way that developed an understanding of how children learn. There were mixed reactions to the pictures in the books, some saw these as posed and unnatural whilst the majority of parents thought they looked fun and interesting. Both teachers and parents made comments about how to improve the layout and format of the books and thought that laminated cards and ring-back folders would make the materials easier to use.

Several sites reported that the Abecedarian materials was that the activities were very wordy and teachers and some parents felt that this would put parents off using them and that this wordiness detracted from the simplicity of the learning games. In one site the parents read the books and one parent comment that she read it twice, again demonstrating great need for parent support for early literacy development.

**The ECLIPSE materials**

Some sites indicated that they use the ECLIPSE materials and are able to adapt them effectively to the contexts in which they are working. Teachers working in Reception classes said that they had not seen the materials but thought they would like to use them with their parents in workshop sessions.

The parent responses to the ECLIPSE materials were mixed. One group thought the ECLIPSE pictures were much more realistic and natural than those in the Abecedarian books. Whilst at some sites parents liked the less prescriptive and less specific approach taken in the ECLIPSE materials, particularly in comparison to the Abecedarian books, others expressed the view that the materials were too wordy. Some parents said they liked the fact that ECLIPSE provided information about ‘why’ the activities were important, and that the booklet provided a framework for them to understand children’s literacy, but others thought that this was more suited to educators than parents.

In all sites the responses to the ECLIPSE Literacy Quilt was very positive and something that both parents and teachers would use.
Overall, parents found both the Abecedarian and ECLIPSE resources useful and would utilise them if given them, but would like support from qualified early childhood educators in order to use them with their children. Two sites wanted to combine the Abecedarian and ECLIPSE materials together because they thought that the different approaches would complement each other.

**Limitations of the study**
The research was conducted in very diverse community groups and the ethics approval from the University of South Australian required additional information about the materials that were to be trialled and evaluated by parents. The need for additional materials caused some delay in gaining access to the sites.

The research was conducted at the busy end of year period and parents were committed to many different activities. Some sites would have liked more time to carefully evaluate the materials. The teachers were given teacher-release to speak with the researchers and in some sites which were not co-located the researcher had to meet face-to-face with several different groups of parents one at the school and one at the preschool.

**Findings**
From the researcher’s meeting and the data collected at the six sites it appears that preschools and schools would greatly value support for parents to help their children learn to read and write.

The Abecedarian and ECLIPSE parent programs had several features in common. Both programs generated positive one-to-one interactions between parents and children. In both there was a focus on the development of cheerful and confident relationships between parents and children. The activities suggested were those that created affirming feedback for the child because activities were easily achieved and enjoyable for both parent and child. In both programs there was a dedicated focus on the role of parent in children’s learning. Along with the strong emphasis on the importance of the parent’s role was the parents’ reciprocated fascination in what and how children were learning. So in both programs families were inducted into the guiding role of educators with opportunities for increased parent understanding about their individual child’s literacy learning.

In all sites it was suggested that more than a book of ideas was needed for parents. Family or parent workshops were suggested because of the need to communicate the importance of building strong relationships and attitudes to learning. Just doing the cognitively oriented activities shown in the photographs does not, in itself, communicate the positive affect and constructive emotional interactions which underpin both programs.

In all sites parents commented on the grid in the Abecedarian program that showed the age appropriate suggestions for activities. Parents required targeted of specifically focussed materials that could be matched to children’s needs. For example, one site wanted to break the Abecedarian material up into packs and another wanted sets of laminated pages of activities that could be matched to children’s learning needs. Two sites suggested combining aspects of ECLIPSE and the Abecedarian materials as the programs have different goals and philosophies.
The teachers commented that the existing materials that were trialled appeared were dated and suggested that an up to date set of materials that would support parents in developing children’s literacy at home. One parent focus group in a low income area (category 2) was highly critical of the Abecedarian materials saying that the photographs were ‘fake and dated’. The researcher commented that this group had very sophisticated critical text analysis skills possibly because they had been involved in the Learning Together which was developed for 0-3 year old children. Most sites wanted to combine aspects of the programs with digital cameras and pedagogies that actively engage parents in participating in and recording their children’s literacy (and numeracy) learning at home.

The research in six diverse socioeconomic sites revealed a pattern of home-like-school families appreciating the program with games and activities and the less home-like-school families saying the materials don’t match children’s world and look ‘set up’. Perhaps the photographs in both set of parent materials focus on parents interacting with children in school-like-activities which may better fit families who already engage in home-like-school activities.

**Recommendations**
In the six research sites in South Australia there was an urgent need for coherent parent support materials and associated workshops for parents to support 4-6 year old children’s early literacy development. We recommend that future development of parent support programs for children’s early literacy take into account the following factors:

- Parent programs be developed that take into account the very diverse experiences of Australian children and families including changes in family structure, working patterns, levels of parental education, life expectancy, mobility and other demographic patterns that affect parental needs and expectations.

- Highly qualified early childhood educators are involved in the development of parent support program for children’s early literacy and also in the implementation and evaluation of these parent support programs.

- Programs developed for families include both print based and other materials plus positive interactive workshop processes that enable groups of parents to share information and work together.

- The programs are all locally driven, culturally appropriate and sensitive and actively involve parents in the development design, implementation and systematic evaluation of programs.

- Programs for parents to enhance 4-6 year old children’s literacy development are based on a coherent set of principles and developed over a long term

- The programs for parents to enhance 4-6 year old children’s literacy development clear outcomes that guide both formative and summative evaluation.
A final recommendation is that resources are developed to support face-to-face teacher and parent conversations about their child's literacy development as well as a range of suggested take home activities.
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INITIAL FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS/CARERS

The effectiveness of early childhood programs in your home

- Do you have a positive relationship with your child’s centre/school?
- How have these relationships been developed?
- Do you feel valued and supported by the centre/school?
- How are you encouraged to be involved in your child’s learning at the school?
- How are you encouraged to be involved in your child’s learning at home?
- What activities do you do at home to support your child’s learning?
- Do you have a role at the centre/school? e.g. as a volunteer, running activities etc
- What do you think are the best features of the current centre/school–home relationship?
- Is there room for improvement? What changes would you make?
- How confident did you feel in supporting your child’s learning and development in the first five years?
- Could you give some examples of things/activities that helped you or that you would have liked?
INITIAL FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

The effectiveness of early childhood programs in diverse context

- How are links between the centre/school and the home developed?
- How do you maintain such links?
- How do you encourage parent/carer involvement in their child’s learning?
- Have you specific programs/activities in place to encourage parent/carer involvement in their child’s literacy learning?
- What roles can parents/carers have at your setting? e.g. volunteer staff, administration services, organising activities
- Do parents/carers have input into the curriculum you offer?
- What do you think are the best features of the current centre/school–home relationship?
- What are the challenges of the current centre/school–home relationship?
- How would you go about addressing those challenges?
FINAL FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Exploring the Abecedarian Program parent component

- Did you feel the Abecedarian/ECLIPSE materials were easy to understand and implement?

- Did you feel the parents/carers understood the materials and could implement them successfully at home?

- Which specific activities did you encourage parents/carers to participate in?

- Why did you choose those specific activities?

- What kind of feedback have you had from parents/carers?

- Have you noticed any changes in the children’s learning/approach to learning?

- Have the materials improved the centre/school-home relationship?

- Did you feel the materials were a success? Would you continue to use them in the future?

- What changes, if any, would you make to the materials if working with them again?
FINAL FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS/CARERS

Exploring the Abecedarian Program parent component

- Did you feel the Abecedarian/ECLIPSE materials were easy to understand and use in your home?
- Which specific activities did you participate in?
- What did you like/dislike about these activities?
- Did you enjoy the interactions with your child?
- Did you notice any changes in your child’s learning/approach to learning?
- Did the materials improve the centre/school–home relationship?
- Did you feel the materials were a success? Would you continue to use them in the future?
- What changes would you make if working with them again?
Would like to invite you to participate in a research project

**Exploring the Abecedarian Program parent component**

The Abecedarian (pronounced ABC-dare-ian) project is a program for young children aimed at improving their literacy/learning skills.

The Abecedarian program provides ideas for helping parents and carers extend their everyday activities and conversations into teaching and learning events. The program has been very successful in the United States and now the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) would like the parent component of this program to be trialed here in South Australia to determine its effectiveness in an Australian setting. As part of this project we would like to have feedback from both the teachers and parents/carers.

The project will take place from September to December 2007 and be in three phases:

**Phase 1:** Initial focus group interviews with both parents and teachers (conducted separately) to determine the current relationships between the centre/school and the children’s homes and the learning activities parents/carers participate in.

**Phase 2:** The centre/school will be provided with the Abecedarian parent component materials and the support needed to implement them. The activities are designed for parents/carers to work together with their children without any prior training and use everyday materials found in people’s homes. Parent/carers will be able to choose their own activities from a wide selection (two examples have been provided).

**Phase 3:** The research team will conduct final focus group interviews to determine the value of the program and its effectiveness in Australian settings.

The interview sessions will be recorded and transcribed, but no participant will be named and all data collected will remain anonymous. Participants will remain un-named in any reports/articles produced by researchers as a result of this project.

The University of South Australia’s Human Research Ethics Committee has reviewed this study. Should you wish to discuss the project with someone not directly involved, in particular in relation to matters concerning policies, information about the conduct of the study, or your rights as a participant, please contact the UniSA Ethics Officer, Ms Vicki Allen on 8302 3118; fax 8302 3921; email: Vicki.allen@unisa.edu.au

For further information about the project, please contact:

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CONSENT FORM for FOCUS GROUPS

Project title: Exploring the Abecedarian Program parent component

Researcher’s names: Susan Hill and Susan Krieg

• I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained. I understand my involvement in it and agree to take part.

• I understand that I can withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.

• I confirm that I am over 18 years of age.

• I understand that I will be audiotaped during the focus group interview.

• I agree to maintain confidentiality of focus group discussions and preserve the identification of focus group participants.

• I understand that the tape will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the University of South Australia Magill Campus.

• I understand that a copy of the transcripts of this interview will be provided on my request at which time I have the right to amend any statements occurring within it.

• I understand that statements that I make in this interview may be reproduced in documents for publication.

• I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified in any publications.

Name of participant……………………………………………………………….

Signed……………………………………………………..Date……………………

I have provided information about the research to the research participant and believe that he/she understands what is involved

Researcher’s signature and date……………………………………………. 