The world in which early childhood educators operate daily is changing. New national policies and documents require them to expand their understanding of curriculum content and to increase their repertoire of pedagogical practices to suit young children in the twenty first century. Educators working with children from birth to age five in Children’s Services settings, preschools and kindergartens within schools, are basing programs on the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF); Educators working with five year old children enrolled in full time schooling are referring to the Foundation Stage of the Australian Curriculum. A paper titled *Foundations for Learning*, commissioned by Early Childhood Australia (ECA) and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) aims to inform educators about the relationship between the EYLF and the Australian Curriculum and to reassure educators and families about the kind of everyday practices that best support young children’s learning. To view the paper go to [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au) and search for *Foundations for Learning*.

**Lessons from the field**

It has been my good fortune (as Jane Austen might say) to interact with high quality early childhood educators in varied settings across Australia during the past three years and to document how skilfully they are meeting these challenges.

In 2011 and 2012, ECA contracted me to produce a series of e-newsletters focused on the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS). That project enabled me to enter Family Day Care and Long Day Care environments to record how educators were using the EYLF in their planning and preparing for the accreditation rating system of the NQS which is now underway. The e-newsletters last year were co-authored with acknowledged experts in the early education and care (ECEC) field and based on their considerable first-hand experience. The e-newsletters are available at: [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqplp/e-newsletters](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqplp/e-newsletters).

During 2011 and 2012, I commenced a project with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) which involved documenting quality early childhood practice in relation to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2013). This initial project encompassed four settings in the first years of school:

- A public school in rural NSW (Teacher: Liz)
- A Cooperative school in ACT (Teacher: Leah)
- A primary school in a disadvantaged area in Burnie, Tasmania (Teacher: Alison)
- An Independent school in the city of Launceston, Tasmania (Teacher: Carolyn)

**Purposeful literacy**

Liz teaches her kindergarten class in regional NSW in the context of a detailed Literacy Curriculum with explicit learning outcome goals. Many of her four and five year-old students have no pre-school experience; many are from Indigenous families; and many families face social and financial stresses. Realising that children entering her class find ‘engaging with school’ quite daunting, Liz has decided that she needs to make school more ‘enticing and fun’ so that children are motivated to come every day and confident to ‘have a go’ at school learning. She builds strong relationships with individual children and families and holds high expectations for children’s behaviour and learning, but ‘gives children time to come around to school ways of doing things’ in the transition to formal schooling.
Liz has departed from traditional school practice to institute a ‘guided play-based approach’ where children choose from Work Stations which include puzzles, reading and writing activities, Home Corner and various forms of creative arts.

In this play-based context, a group of children in Home Corner found that caring for their ‘babies’ (dolls) was a problem when they wanted to ‘go shopping’. They had to have prams! Liz saw a literacy opportunity and suggested that the children ‘write a note to the Deputy’. With minimal assistance, these new-schoolers were able to create a message combining cut out pictures of prams and some alphabet letters; they posted their request. The Deputy replied asking ‘what colours and how many?’ After much ‘correspondence’, the prams arrived – in kit form. The children contacted the Grounds person via walkie talkie and he came to assemble the prams, talking children through the features of procedural text; the students ‘wrote’ to thank the Deputy. Liz’s new work stations approach provided the time and task flexibility to seize the teachable literacy moment.

Planning from children’s questions
Leah teaches a group of five year old children in their first year of full time schooling at a government school in the ACT. She designs learning programs based on children’s questions, connecting her curriculum and learning goals to individual and group inquiry pathways. At the beginning of the year, children’s questions ranged from the esoteric: Where do angels live? through the practical: How can I ride down a slope safely? to some that all could investigate: What do plants need? and: How do boats float? Through these investigations, Leah’s class of incredibly self-organised young children examined Pamela Allen stories and non-fiction texts, recorded their observations in pictures, writing and digital forms and explored how visual artists such as Quentin Blake create their images (using fine calligraphy brushes and quality paper). Leah sets challenges to match the literacy capacity of each individual, asking Ava, e.g. ‘Can you write that sentence about your friend using capital letters and full stops?’

Making reading relevant
Alison is an experienced teacher and a school leader at a government primary school in regional Tasmania.

She and other staff noticed that some children were less-than-enthusiastic about coming to school and that NAPLAN results indicated low levels of understanding about the features and purposes of non-fiction texts. They were also concerned about children playing dangerous games with sticks in the playground. Using the school garden beds, Alison explored the topic of ‘tools’ and their various functions with her class of five-year-olds. Children dug, planted, labelled, measured and noted, cut and sawed; they recorded their findings and made lunches from the radishes, tomatoes, lettuces etc. Utilising graphic organisers and specific comprehension strategies (Stead, 2006), Alison assisted children to comprehend and navigate class-composed and commercial non-fiction texts in highly motivating and world-related ways.

Sustainability
Caroline, at an Independent school in Northern Tasmania, teaches a class of children who were turning five when I visited towards the end of the school year. Caroline believes strongly in the principles of Reggio Emilia, committing to long term projects, parent involvement and valuing ‘100 languages’ through which children can express, conceptualise and communicate. She links her teaching intentions and specific learning goals to children’s interests and spontaneous happenings. Children use digital cameras, a portable video recorder, touch screens, the internet and computers to research, record their ideas and practise literacy skills. When children wondered: ‘What happens to our lunch scraps?’ a visit to a park was organised and children began to investigate different types of worms, their habitats and how they contribute to the web of life. When chickens ate seedlings in the class herb garden and plants died over
that intrigued children. Creative and critical thinking, relevant use of ICT and everyday literacies were seamlessly incorporated as problems were investigated and solved collaboratively.

summer, children realised that plants need protection and regular watering. So, they read and wrote about and designed 'rain catchers'. Caroline’s Big Picture goals around sustainability were achieved through capitalising on ideas
Project 2 – Literacy is everywhere!
In the second project under the ECA/AITSL agreement, I have been able to travel with a filmmaker to capture illustrations of the Standards in early childhood school and non-school settings in Tasmania, NSW, Vic and WA.

We have gathered some inspiring examples of quality literacy practice such as:

- Chris, who uses music and singing games with a group of culturally and linguistically diverse preschoolers to facilitate oral language learning, social skills and children’s ability to listen and join in group activities.
- Kate, who sits in the block construction area of her community-based kindergarten, supporting the young builders to ‘think architecturally’, providing mathematical concepts and terms about space, height, weight, scale and balance and scaffolding children to higher order thinking and creative problem solving. In the garden, children are reading seed packets, talking about plants and watering them and creating labels.
- Jess, in a mobile kindergarten in NSW, who holds a rich, extended conversation with children about whether it is better to pick the poppies under the tank stand, or to let them grow, wondering and talking about why they might grow right there and how plants spring up in different places and seeing opportunities for future literacy, numeracy and science learning.
- Juliet, in an Independent school in Fremantle, WA, who has a ‘letter and sound of the week’, but her lessons are never boring! Her four year old children talk about the sound, they identify familiar words with that sound, such as their own names; they locate less familiar words with that sound in the room; they read interesting stories focusing on the letter; and they paint, draw and scribe about beautiful objects relating to the sound.
- Robyn, in a Prep class in a large Tasmanian school, who creates an authentic ‘cafe’ with menus, order forms, cash register and food signs where children engage in purposeful reading and writing. In another area, children are making greeting cards, paying close attention to the features of everyday and media texts and the relationship between picture and word messages.
- Rebecca, also in Tasmania, who is highly skilled in embedding the terminology of science as her kindergarten class investigates floating and sinking. Children predict, observe, experiment, reflect, record, draw tentative conclusions, test and discuss if it’s a ‘fair test’. They use language in sophisticated ways and engage in scientific thinking and systematic inquiry.

Conclusion
There has been understandable concern among early childhood educators about a ‘push down curriculum’ and pressure from some parents and next-stage educators to ‘prepare children for school learning and high stakes tests’. These examples illustrate that rich literacy learning can be fostered through active, play-based, inquiry-driven learning programs that are highly engaging for young learners and best suited to the ways in which young children naturally develop, grow and learn. These practices are a tribute to the educators showcased and reassuring to those of us who, from long experience, are not convinced that over-formal, direct instruction pedagogies necessarily represent the only or best ways for young children to learn anything – much less, literacy!

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