Families Learning Together:
Raising parental engagement with literacy
to improve literacy outcomes for children
in the early years of schooling

A report on research conducted with parents in the DECS Western Region of Adelaide to inform the Health In All Policies Health Lens Initiative being conducted jointly by the Department of Education & Children’s Services and the Department of Health South Australia

30 November 2011

Author: Dr Lareen Newman
Southgate Institute for Health Society & Equity
FLINDERS UNIVERSITY
CONTENTS

Executive Summary ................................................................................................................... 1

Main Report ............................................................................................................................. 4

1. THE POLICY CONTEXT ....................................................................................................... 4

2. BACKGROUND TO IMPROVING LITERACY AND HEALTH OUTCOMES .................. 4

3. PURPOSE OF CONDUCTING NEW RESEARCH ............................................................ 5

4. APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH ....................................................................................... 5

   4.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES ............................................................................................ 5

   4.2 RESEARCH METHODS .................................................................................................. 6

5. RESEARCH RESULTS ........................................................................................................... 8

   5.1 PARENTS BACKGROUNDS .......................................................................................... 8

   5.2 PARENTS’ OWN EXPERIENCES OF EARLY LEARNING ........................................... 8

   5.3 SEEING THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPROVING EARLY YEARS LITERACY ........... 9

   5.4 PARENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE IN SUPPORTING LITERACY ........ 10

   5.5 CURRENT LITERACY ENGAGEMENT AT HOME ...................................................... 11

   5.6 FACTORS AFFECTING PARENTS’ ABILITY TO ENGAGE IN LITERACY .......... 12

       5.6.1 Not knowing - what or how much literacy activity to do .................................. 12

       5.6.2 Need for more diversity of activities ................................................................. 14

       5.6.3 Differentiating “Homework” versus “learning at home” ................................. 15

       5.6.4 Finding time to do literacy ............................................................................... 16

       5.6.5 Different abilities to support home learning .................................................... 17

   5.7 USING THE BROADER COMMUNITY AS A RESOURCE ...................................... 18

       5.7.1 Homework Clubs, Breakfast Clubs and Home Tutors ..................................... 20

   5.8 BUILDING (ON) PARTNERSHIPS WITH NGOs ....................................................... 20

   5.9 COMMUNICATING & ENGAGING WITH TEACHERS & SCHOOLS ....................... 22

       5.9.1 Use trusted Go-betweens ................................................................................... 22

       5.9.2 Do things with parents in groups ....................................................................... 23

       5.9.3 Communication formats and methods .............................................................. 24

       5.9.4 Difficulties getting support for speech & learning problems ............................. 28
5.10 TWO STEPS AWAY – BROADER DETERMINANTS OF ENGAGEMENT .......... 30

5.10.1 Transport to/from school ................................................................. 31
5.10.2 Disrupted support when moving to different schools ..................... 32
5.10.3 Inconsistency in DECS facilities and supports ............................... 34
5.10.4 Housing and planning issues ............................................................ 34

6.0 BUILDING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS INTO POLICY ................................ 35

Appendix 1 – Make-up of focus groups ...................................................... 36
Appendix 2 – Original question schedule .................................................... 37
Executive Summary

This document reports on new research undertaken for the Families Learning Together Project. This is part of a Health Lens Initiative under the Health in All Policies (HiAP) program. The HiAP approach is based on departments in South Australia working together to achieve win-win outcomes that enable both improved population health outcomes and the realisation of other sectors’ goals. For this project, the Health Lens Initiative supports education and early life as a priority area for HiAP. Furthermore, through the relevant targets in the South Australian State Plan and DECS “Statement of Directions”, DECS has key responsibility for achievement of SASP Target 6.12: “By 2010, 93% of students in Year 3 to achieve the national benchmarks in reading, writing and numeracy”.

A literature review undertaken by DECS identified considerable body of research showing two aspects critical to children’s learning: parental encouragement and support for learning activities at home, and parental involvement in schooling (eg Cuttance & Stokes 2000; Harris & Goodall 2007). New research was therefore undertaken for the Families Learning Together Project to identify parents’ views about issues and opportunities related to parent encouragement and support for learning at home. This research was conducted with parents in the DECS Western Region of Adelaide whose children attend one of 4 project schools: Allenby Gardens PS, Hendon PS, Kilkenny PS, and Pennington JPS.

The objectives of the new research were to:

1. Establish what parents believe constitutes literacy engagement with children, and what they see as their role in this (if any) as compared with the role of schools and teachers.
2. Identify strategies which parents feel would assist them to develop or increase their skills, resources and capabilities to provide a literacy rich home environment for their children.
3. Identify parents’ views about how easy or difficult it is for them to approach, communicate with and engage with their children’s schools, and whether particular aspects of the school or of DECS and other government structures support or undermine this, or could better support them.

Between the July and September 2011, ten focus group discussions were held with 66 participants (47 mothers, 16 fathers, 3 grandmother carers). Groups represented parent diversity across the 4 schools: 3 mainstream English-speaking groups; 2 Aboriginal English-speaking groups; 5 groups from specific cultural backgrounds with ESL or no English (Indian, Serbian, Somali, Chinese, and a mixed New Arrivals group with parents from Sri Lanka, India/Pakistan, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and West Africa).

The key issues and challenges which parents identified to their engagement with their children’s literacy at home are summarised below:

Not knowing (what or how much to do)

- If teachers say nothing to them, then parents assume they need to do nothing
- Many parents need specific direction on what to do and “how much/often is enough”
- Parents are keen to be just given some small level of activities to start them off
- Activities with specific boundaries of content and time are more useful, especially for busy parents
- For time reasons, parents also want activities that they can do concurrently with daily tasks
- Some parents just want affirmation that they are doing “enough” of the “right” things
- More information from the class teacher about a child’s progress would help parents see how and where home activities fit in
- Literacy support for Kindy to Early Primary years is perceived to be far lower than that received earlier (through playgroups)
More diversity of recommended home activities

- Schools could send home more variety of directed literacy activities
- Some parents felt children rarely bring home any literacy-based activities other than reading
- Parents want home activities that are “fun”, so that they are differentiated from school “work”:
- Parents with physically active children or children with hearing/speech problems might need different types of literacy activities
- Electronic activities are popular and useful: CD-audio based activities give parents a key to improve their own reading (for both English-native speakers with low proficiency and non-English speakers); DVDs can link literacy activities with regular TV viewing
- A significant proportion of parents have no home computer
- For those with the Internet, schools could recommend lists of age-appropriate educational websites

Trusted go-betweens

- Parents with low levels of education often lack confidence to talk to teachers
- Some native English-speakers perceive a large social distance between themselves and teachers
- Providing parents with a trusted go-between to attend parent-teacher interviews and literacy workshops would encourage parents to attend more by making them feel more comfortable.
- Literacy teaching could be built into parents’ existing social and community groups.
- Parent groups at school are better organized by parents or trusted BSSOs/AEWs, run by “people you know”, “who you feel treat you as an equal and make you feel comfortable”
- BSSOs and AEWs should be available full-time for continuity of support and to help parents and children feel confident to engage with schooling and learning
- New-Arrival parents felt cooking classes for parents on the school grounds worked well
- Provision of a free creche is essential for parents to attend school meetings, playgroups.

Doing things in groups

- Parents feel more comfortable talking or learning about school/literacy in existing groups
- Parents prefer talking with schools through their “natural” groups
- Selecting one parent to be a “representative” is not representative of diversity
- Aboriginal Student Support & Parent Awareness Committees were previously effective in facilitating parent input to learning; the Yurrekaityarindi Committee is ineffective, being run by people out of touch with local issues.

It takes a community to raise a child

- Others in the community (particularly volunteers) could be upskilled to help with literacy and fill the gaps which parents have neither time or resources to undertake
- Homework Clubs and Home Tutors were successful in the past
- Volunteers from a particular cultural group could help others, including with language communication
- Groups away from school grounds are important for parents who perceive significant social distance between themselves and teachers/schools
- Piggybacking onto existing groups run by NGOs would provide literacy engagement opportunities through channels parents feel comfortable with (ie trusted go-betweens and trusted venues)
- Formal playgroups and formal parent supports seem rare for ESL parents
- A series of flexible workshops would work well, with ‘bring a friend’ invitations to the next workshop
- Pathways into these groups are mostly word of mouth and through text-based flyers.
Improving communication between parents and teachers

- Written information sent home is too text-dense and with too much information for native English-speakers with low reading proficiency, as well as ESL parents
- Alternate formats could be provided, with the most important points only
- ESL parents may not understand written English instructions for home literacy activities
- Someone in the community can often translate eventually but not necessarily in a timely way.
- A written translated version is useful for parents literate in their native language
- Larger families with an illiterate home-parent often have children reading English well enough
- Teachers could clearly explain activities to the child; they can then verbally inform parents
- Preparing alternate formats could be a role for volunteer parents from each community
- Volunteers could support a network of parents from particular cultural communities
- Teachers need to make themselves approachable so parents feel they can talk to them
- Parents would like the option of more frequent parent-teacher interviews (once per month)
- Communication Books work well for some, never used by others.
- Parents with the technology wanted more contact with teachers via email and phone texting.
- Word of mouth is often a more effective communication method, suggesting the opportunity to build on working through existing social groups, BSSOs/AEWs, and parent volunteers from each community
- Suggestions were to raise teachers’ awareness of cultural communication with Aboriginal parents
- Some parents have great difficulty getting support for children with learning or speech delays.
- Parents felt that teachers and professionals seem more interested to reassure mothers that their child is normal, rather than listening to mothers’ concerns and investigating them
- Parents/children “in the middle” miss out – not bad enough to get help, and not doing well
- An OT and Speech Therapist should be more easily available at all schools
- Parents want ideas for literacy activities to do with their child while they are on long waiting lists

Preliminary research findings were presented formally and informally during a full-day meeting in late September 2011 to teachers and principals at the 4 schools, so that they could start to consider how the findings could inform their site planning for 2012.

This report will be discussed in detail by the DECS Project Officer with the teachers at the project schools to establish how they will be able to use the findings to increase their support for, and engagement with parents from 2012. It will also be discussed with the 4 principals and the DECS regional staff, and with DECS departmental level staff.

DECS and SA Health’s Health In All Policies Unit will then shape up policy recommendations to present to their separate Chief Executives and to the Executive Committee of Cabinet of the South Australian Government.
Main Report

1. THE POLICY BACKGROUND

In 2007 South Australia was challenged to implement the European Union’s Health in All Policies (Stahl et al 2006) approach by Adelaide Thinker in Residence Professor Ilona Kickbusch. She laid out a series of steps to guide the South Australian (SA) government in the development of its own individual approach. In responding to Professor Kickbusch’s challenge, South Australia embarked on a policy learning process to translate the policy into practice and in the process developed an innovative early stage Health in All Policies model which is supported by the Minister for Health and the Executive Committee of Cabinet.

The Health in All Policies (HiAPs) program is an innovative strategy of the SA Government which aims to reduce the negative impacts that policy decisions of non-health sectors have on health and wellbeing. The health and wellbeing of South Australians is largely influenced by the social determinants of health - factors that tend to lie outside the influence of the health system but that are strongly affected by the policy decisions of other government and non government agencies. The HiAP approach is based on working together to achieve win-win outcomes that enable both improved population health outcomes and the realisation of other sectors’ goals.

A key part of the model is applying a Health Lens to South Australia’s Strategic Plan (SASP) targets, plans, policies and proposals in partnership with key lead agencies. The Health Lens assists policy and decision-makers both within and outside the health sector to recognise interconnections and appreciate the important role that non-health policies play in promoting health and wellbeing.

One of the Health Lens Initiatives supports education and early life as a priority area for HiAP and in 2009 the South Australian Government’s Executive Committee of Cabinet Chief Executives Group invited DECS to participate in this HiAP Health Lens Analysis project. There is a strong link between positive education outcomes and long term health outcomes, including increased life expectancy and reduced levels of chronic disease. Through the relevant targets in the South Australian State Plan and current DECS “Statement of Directions”, DECS has key responsibility for achievement of Target 6.12: “By 2010, 93% of students in Year 3 to achieve the national benchmarks in reading, writing and numeracy”.

2. BACKGROUND TO IMPROVING LITERACY AND HEALTH OUTCOMES

A literature review undertaken by DECS identified that a considerable body of research shows two aspects which are critical to children’s learning parental encouragement and support for learning activities at home, and parental involvement in schooling (eg Cuttance & Stokes 2000; Harris & Goodall 2007).

Other key points demonstrated from the reviewed research were:

i) that parental interest in education is four times more important than socio-economic factors in influencing attainment at 16 years of age (Feinstein & Symons 1999) and that parental involvement has a bigger impact on attainment at seven and eleven years of age than school factors, even controlling for social class (Sacker et al 2002),

ii) that academically successful students tend to have higher levels of support for learning at home (Goos et al. 2004),
iii) that the mother’s highest qualification level and the early years home learning environment are still among the strongest predictors of better academic and social-behavioural outcomes at age 10 and 11, in line with findings at younger ages (Sylva et al 2008).

Home literacy support includes how often parents read to a child, teach a child the alphabet, play with letters and numbers, teach songs and nursery rhymes, paint and draw etc. DECS therefore sees that productive partnerships between families and schools are essential for supporting positive academic and social outcomes. Given that the DECS capacity in building effective parental engagement with literacy and the creation of literacy rich environments at home and school is potentially under-developed, the project was intended to provide opportunities for innovatively improving literacy outcomes in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Since December 2008 South Australia has also been a signatory to the National Education Agreement which aims to ensure that all children are engaged in and benefiting from school, that they meet basic literacy and numeracy standards, and that schooling promotes the social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children. Through these aims the national reform is providing a vehicle for the DECS Health Lens Analysis, and particularly for low socio-economic communities. In particular, the implementation plan for the National Partnership for Low Socio-economic School Communities focuses on strategies for improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for children and students from communities where families are more likely to experience low incomes, housing stress, low employment rates, and higher levels of violence and abuse than other areas.

3. PURPOSE OF CONDUCTING NEW RESEARCH

The findings from the research reported in this document will feed into the evidence base on which a series of recommendations will be developed about how parental and carer engagement can best be supported in South Australia. These recommendations will be put to the Chief Executives Groups of DECS and SA Health, as well as the Chief Executives Group of the Executive Committee of Cabinet to support South Australian Government action to support improved parental engagement.

4. APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH

4.1 Research objectives

The research objectives and questions were developed and agreed in collaboration between the researcher, the DECS project officer and regional staff, the Health In All Policies (HiAP) Unit staff at SA Health, and parents and school staff who constituted the project’s Consultation Advisory Group.

1. To establish what parents believe constitutes literacy engagement with children, and what they see as their role is in this (if any) as compared with the role of schools and teachers.

2. To identify strategies which parents feel would assist them to develop or increase their skills, resources and capabilities to provide a literacy rich home environment for their children.

3. To identify parents’ views about how easy or difficult it is for them to approach, communicate with, and engage with their children’s school, and whether particular aspects of the school or of DECS and other government structures support or undermine this, or could better support them.
4.2 Research method

Original field research was designed to elicit the views of parents (and/or the main caregiver eg grandparents) in order to meet the research objectives.

The study design was based on discussions in focus groups with parents (or main caregivers) whose children were in Reception to Year 3 at the four study schools in Western Adelaide, and parents in several community locations in the same geographical area (some had parents from the 4 schools and some had parents of children at other kindergartens/schools in the area). Focus groups allow for an exploration of issues through interactive discussion; they are also particularly valuable for researching with people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005:96-97). Qualitative research also provides insights from the worldview of those likely to be affected by service strategies and policy directions, which can inform improved policy so that it is more likely to be helpful to those affected.

Cultural diversity: The total student population of the four schools in 2011 was 1,280 (individual schools are: Kilkenny PS R-7: 225 children; Allenby Gardens R-7: 410 children; Pennington JP R-2:160 children; Hendon PS R-7: 485 children). The parent population of the four study schools is from diverse cultural backgrounds (which is one factor which the literature shows affects parental engagement with children’s literacy and learning). A Consultation Advisory Group (CAG) was therefore established by the HiAP and DECS policy officers to advise on the diversity of parents which would need to be included in focus groups for the research to be relatively representative. The schools also had, at the time of research the following percentages of Aboriginal students: Kilkenny PS: 5%; Allenby Gardens PS: 1%; Pennington JP: 11%; Hendon PS: 7%.

The Consultation Advisory Group (CAG) comprised the 4 school principals, Governing Council parent representatives, an Aboriginal parent representative, a parent of child with disability, and a parent from each of the main language groups in the 4 schools, and School Counsellors, Chaplains, and SSOs. The Consultation Advisory Group advised on recruitment approaches and representation to ensure the range of parental cultural diversity in the focus group discussions.

Ten focus group discussions were held with 66 participants (47 mothers, 16 fathers, 3 grandmother carers) between the end of July and mid-September 2011. Seven groups were held during the school day, two groups in the evening to accommodate working parents, and one straight after school. At least one group met in each of the 4 schools, with 2 additional discussion groups held at existing community groups in the Western region with the intention of engaging parents who might not feel comfortable going on to school grounds. Groups represented parent diversity across the four schools:

- 3 mainstream English-speaking groups;
- 2 Aboriginal English/Indigenous-speaking groups;
- 5 groups from specific cultural backgrounds where parents had predominantly ESL or no English – with a mix of those who understood and spoke English well, some who understood English well enough but could not speak it much/at all, and others who neither spoke nor understood English (Indian, Serbian, Somali, Chinese, and a mixed group with parents from East and West Africa, Sri Lanka/India/Pakistan, and Vietnam).
Following recommendations of the CAG, focus groups were held for parents from similar backgrounds with the expectation that parents would feel more comfortable in these groups to express their views. Participants attended a group discussion at a venue which they were already attending, were familiar with, or could be transported to (e.g., child’s school, community centre group). The discussions followed both a semi-structured list of research questions, as well as parents’ interest in the subject. Discussions ran for between 1¼ hours and 2½ hours.

The Research Questions were intended to elicit information in response to the research objectives, and covered parents’ attitudes and behaviours, resources and capabilities:

- Parents’ own general experiences of schooling, learning and literacy (of themselves, their children, and their families).
- Parents’ expectations in relation to supporting their children’s learning, including their view of the role of schools and teachers, and the role of parents.
- Parental literacy engagement – current activities which parents undertake, and barriers to engagement with the child (and with the school) e.g., work demands, own lack of literacy or skills, lack of money, other competing resources.
- Access to support – What supports parents think would be useful to support them in supporting their children’s learning, the ease or difficulty of obtaining this support, where they think support would be best delivered for them, the ease/difficulty of engaging with their child/ren’s school.

The semi-structured question schedule is supplied as Appendix 2. Additional questions were added for subsequent focus groups to further explore unanticipated issues raised in previous groups e.g., parents’ own education and literacy levels, number of children in the family, preferred communication format. All discussions were digitally tape-recorded to ensure the accuracy of analysis, and so that the researcher was able to concentrate on the discussion rather than on writing full notes. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed into dominant categories.
5. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

5.1 PARENTS’ BACKGROUNDS

Current family size among the 66 participants ranged from 1 to 5 children in the mainstream English-speaking groups, with 4 to 8 children being a more common family size in the Aboriginal and African groups. Children's ages also varied, with smaller families often having only pre-school and primary aged children, but the larger families having children from pre-school to beyond high school age. Some of the New Arrival parents were not living with all of their children, having some children at school here in Australia as well as other children at school in their home country. Parents also ranged from very young (late teens) to their mid-50s. Most had children in the pre-school and primary school years, while some older parents had children in high school or their early 20s. There was a mix of married/couple and single parents, plus a few grandparents.

Although the four project schools were chosen to be in a region of generally low-socioeconomic status, in fact parents attending the focus groups had achieved a wide range of educational levels. While a few had only finished primary school, at least 5 parents in 3 different groups had a university degree. However, the majority had completed the equivalent of Years 10 to 12, although a few had “dropped out” before this. Despite attending school in Australia to this level, not all of the English native speakers felt that they could read and write English well; this seemed to be particularly an issue for some fathers.

Some grandparents had lower levels of education than did parents, and a few of the Aboriginal grandparents had left school around Year 7 in line with Education Department regulations at the time or because their parents could not afford to send them from the country to high school in the city. A noticeable proportion of the English-speaking parents had been to primary and/or high school in country areas of Australia which was reflected in some of their observations and suggestions for improving support for today’s parents.

Some of the New Arrivals parents had not been through formal schooling or had learned a trade or occupation “on the job” from parents and others. In the New Arrivals Program (NAP) groups it was noticeable that, depending on the cultural background, mothers often had lower levels of literacy in their native language than did their husbands, or had lower levels of English reading and speaking proficiency (although they might understand English relatively well when spoken by others).

5.2 PARENTS’ OWN EXPERIENCES OF EARLY LEARNING

Across and within the groups there was a wide range of experiences of early learning, from those who had had very positive experiences and good support either from their own parents and/or from particularly memorable teachers and community members:

Back when I was at school in primary school there was [in country SA], there was an Aboriginal room. We used to go there all the time – Uncle [X] used to be in it… Aboriginal teacher. We used to go into that room, we used to do dot painting, we used to try and eat witchetty grubs and honey ants and we’d go out to the oval and throw boomerangs… Two or three times a week in our school; that’s what we had to do.

A few whose learning experiences had been very bad had even dropped out of school or had their learning seriously compromised:

I had learning difficulties myself and I slipped through the system, sort of thing, and didn’t get any help.
Many parents talked about remembering their own parents, grandparents or family also being positively involved in their learning, as well as other parents at the school, and particularly about reading and mental maths:

I can remember my dad reading my younger sister and I stories every night, like before bed. I read my kids a story before bed now and I keep getting these memories back to dad reading to us.

I do remember I’ve always had a love for books. We didn’t have many toys, which most children didn’t, but we always had a lot of books... I remember books taking you to places and the pictures and stuff like that.

Mum and dad were ethnic [Croatian and Ukrainian] so their education [was disrupted]… War broke out so they came to Australia... they did teach us a lot at home and dad instilled in us ‘Education is everything’ and he often took interest in what we were doing, same as mum... mum and dad both taught us things about gardening. And it was important – mum and dad taught us our numbers and ABCs and our name and address before we even got to school. For me I get all of the knowledge, most of it from the teachers, not from my parents, because they both so very busy and had no time. So all study from the school.

Some had had help from the broader community:

[My partner’s] mum was always at the pub and stuff like that, so he didn’t really learn from anybody how to read or write. The things - he just asked the people around the room just questions and stuff and they’d help him with his homework.

There was variety in the level of reading and writing that parents had, even among the native English speakers

Yeah. It’s not my favourite subject [reading and writing] (father).

Yeah I love reading. Never had English as one of my favourite subjects at school but I’m quite happy to write whatever I need to write and read every chance I can (mother).

My dad, he knew how to read. He said writing out forms and things was a bit tricky but he actually could do it. He had to write why we were away from school, send a note to school and he could do that, he managed to do it; it’s amazing.

I’ve never been in a library,,, Been to a school one, only because they forced me. I can read three letter words [but] as soon as they start bringing in silent words and silent letters that’s [it]… I like doing things with my hands, I don’t like to sit there and read and listen to people (father).

Some of the younger Aboriginal parents said that Aboriginal children in the schools they attended in South Australia “did not really get an education” in those days, that teachers did not encourage them to learn because learning “was only about the Nungas [white kids]” and the Aboriginal children were instead sent outside “to help the groundsman water the gardens” or just play.

5.3 SEEING THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPROVING EARLY YEARS LITERACY

Regardless of their own experiences or abilities, parents’ views generally reflected the research literature, that the early years are vitally important for future success at both school and in life. Parents in several groups (particularly those from lower status backgrounds) were highly concerned that, both in
their generation as well as today, children get to Year 11 and 12 and cannot read and write English with proficiency:

I knew kids at high school in Year 12 that couldn’t read that sheet of paper [project information sheet], that like went from Cowandilla and Underdale and stuff. They couldn’t read and I was like ‘You’re kidding, mate, like, how did you get through school without reading?’ I know kids in Year 11 and 12 in Findon High School [now] don’t know how to read.

I’ve got a sixteen year old stepdaughter and I’m shocked at her reading and writing – and she’s not that bad ... Most people can read and write really well, but like you [other parents] were saying, there’s [children in] Years 11 and 12 from homes where English is sixth generation, and they still can’t read and write properly.

In one of the Aboriginal groups a parent linked lack of basic reading and writing ability to broader social problems:

A lot of our kids are slipping through the loops. Going through school without reading or writing, then it all becomes crime, mental health issues in the community. If they haven’t got education and therefore respect from others, they drop out and look for alternatives [such as crime].

Some parents, who had themselves had this experience in school, felt that slipping behind in the first years at primary school meant people would spend their whole lives behind:

Then in life it’s just catch up and you’re always, always catching up, even in work and that. So you have to work twice as hard where the normal person has got a good education. I started with [adult college] when that first opened. I jumped into that and it was just too hard because you were always behind, and then the shame job [public embarrassment] comes into it, you know?

In several groups parents thought schools should hold children back a year level until they had learned “the basics” (of reading and writing), which some parents had experienced personally but felt that schools were often reluctant to do these days. In several groups parents felt that schools should have more focus on developing a more solid literacy foundation in Years One and Two.

5.4 PARENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE IN SUPPORTING CHILDREN’S LITERACY

Parents varied from those who felt parents have a key role or the lead role in their children’s learning or behaviours which support learning, to those who felt it was a shared community role, and those who felt it was solely the role of the teacher or school:

Like they usually come to school, obviously, for however many hours it is… but you need to give them the basics at home first as well, like ABC, 123 and stuff like that.

I think a lot of it is the family though because you’re around your family more than usually anything else and even if there aren’t a lot more children you see how your mum and dad interact together and like if they show each other respect you’re going to do that.

School’s school. Those teachers are getting paid - they get a fairly good money too because I know what they get - and I do not believe that they should be sending school work home for kids to do.

There was some discussion about the Premier’s Reading Challenge which some parents had heard about but one parent felt this was not something parents could or should have to supervise either:
After they’ve read it then that teacher should write [down] the book he just read, it shouldn’t be our… like that should not be our problem to do [as parents], like that’s the school. They made up that Reader Challenge; it wasn’t some parent, it was them.

Cultural expectations also influenced parents’ view of their role. For example, the Serbian parents had strong expectations that they will support their children’s learning, especially with set homework. This was partly due to their home-country context where the old regimented Yugoslavian system when they were in primary school expected all parents to attend monthly parent-teacher group interviews for the announcement of children’s achievement rankings.

Alternatively, while the Chinese parents seemed to have strong expectations of their children doing well, parents in the Chinese school system seemed to have no role because children did all their learning at school (possibly while most parents worked all day):

I believe that the children get most of their knowledge from the school. So after going home I hope not too much homework and they can relax, otherwise too much pressure.

A few parents also implied that they were annoyed when they felt schools actively discouraged a love of learning in the way they used punishment rather than positive approaches for unwanted behaviour. Parents reflected on this from their own childhood or their children’s experiences today:

They start loving school and by the time they get to my [older] daughter’s age, she hates school.

Like when a kid’s naughty and they’re getting in trouble for it, it just builds up rebellion in the kid itself and no matter how much trouble they’re going to get in, they’re going to go out and get in more trouble... Like all of my other mate’s kids, they’ll [teachers] put a chair outside and sit them outside and that is just totally wrong... You can’t just wipe your hands, because that’s what [my school] was doing to all of us kids. Like out of a whole term, me and my mates were at school for two days, out of a whole term... Like down at Le Fevre with all the naughty kids that muck up, they’d have a room for the naughty kids... but that woman [teacher], she was great with the kids. I don’t know how she done it but those kids loved her and then they’d go back to the classroom.

5.5 CURRENT LITERACY ENGAGEMENT AT HOME

A good proportion of parents were already engaged to some degree in supporting their children’s literacy at home through a wide variety of activities, on a daily to intermittent basis:

- Talking while washing up or cooking
- Talking or just doing woodwork together
- Taking while swinging children on the swing
- Talking or singing while in the car; listening to music in the car; singing rhymes
- Counting letter box numbers while walking down the street
- Walking on the beach and talking about shells
- Teaching skills to hunt for bushtucker; finding emu/swan eggs, blowing and carving eggs
- Going camping; fishing, kangaroo hunting and spotlighting, other outdoor activities
- Taking children to religious festival and events in their ethnic community
- Reading their school readers with/to them
- Listening to their children reading
- Buying and using early maths and language books
- Overseeing homework even if they did not understand it or could not read it
Some parents talked about undertaking these activities more than others. In particular, one who was a qualified teacher said:

> We try to do lots of everyday stuff with our children. We’ve got chickens, we have eggs, we go fishing, we go camping, just to try and pull them away from X-Box, TV, DS, this and that.

Some of the other better-educated parents also played quite complicated games:

> Every morning when we drive to school - we’ve got about a 15 minute drive – I play this game with the children where we play ‘Animals’ and one person imagines an animal and the other people have to ask questions - but these have to be clever questions - so they ask ‘Is it a mammal? Is it a reptile? Is it a bird?’ and I get them to learn things like that. (Serbs)

Parents were also indirectly involved in their children’s learning by simply supervising them or ensuring they were doing ‘worthwhile’ things:

> My husband starts to introduce our kids with computer and games and everything when my daughter was 4 years old. Of course now boys just crazy about computers and everything … I made a rule that there was a certain amount of time [son] could spend on the computer but the things you were allowed to do on the computer were your spelling, your Mathletics and all of that. So he loved that aspect of it because that was a game for him, but he’s also learning so I didn’t have an issue with him doing it.

This suggests the possibility that DVDs/CD-Roms with literacy activities could be seen by children as ‘fun’ learning while by parents it would be valued as something ‘worthwhile’ to do:

> When I was a kid my parents, they never helped me do homework, I always did it by myself, but I find that if I sit there and help [son] and just change it or do things differently – like he’s doing division so making him do the numbers, I’ll like do dots, 10 dots, and he has to work out how many groups of three are in them dots… like at school if he’s doing division he might not learn that and if I’m just sitting there and like breaking it down and showing him the bits and pieces then he learns it.

Nevertheless, despite feeling that literacy is important and finding some activities to do at home with their children, parents experienced a range of barriers to support their children’s literacy at home.

### 5.6 FACTORS AFFECTING PARENTS’ ABILITY TO ENGAGE IN HOME LITERACY

#### 5.6.1 Not knowing - what or how much literacy activity to do

A good proportion of parents across all groups felt that they did not get enough information or insight from the school about what their child learned in class or what level they were working at, so they did not know the best way to help with their children’s learning at home or what they could actually be doing. There was a sense among parents (especially those who did not feel comfortable or who were not able to speak frequently to class teachers), that if teachers said nothing to them or implied children were doing all right, then parents needed to do nothing:

> I don’t know what I could be doing to help [child] do better in Kindy if he needed extra help. I have no idea what they need me to do, because he’s just been tested and he’s fine.
The parents don’t know what to do. The parents, they [teachers] give them nothing so they [parents] worry… We want to help them and want to teach them but I don’t know the best way to help them.

One perspective was that literacy support for Kindy to Early Primary years was far lower than that received earlier (through playgroups for example):

I found going up to [age] three there’s heaps of support. I remember someone saying that when kids are little you read them lots of books but when they actually start to learn we forget to read them books…. I want to do something to help with [child’s] learning at Kindy but I don’t know what to do.

Some parents just wanted affirmation that they were doing ‘enough’ of the ‘right’ things and their child was progressing sufficiently.

Just knowing you’re doing it right is a reassurance, like ‘That’s right’… I don’t think there’s problems with [my child] but I would like feedback to know that there’s not. You assume you’d find out if there’s not, but, you know, you worry.

Teachers and other professionals were perceived to often be concerned to reassure parents that their child was progressing well enough, which led parents to believe that there was nothing extra they needed to do at home. However, many parents in the groups were keen to do something if it would help their child, but need specific direction on what this should be and “how much and how often is enough” to help their child progress:

If I’ve got any time, should I be reading this or…? Because I mean she’s my oldest child, so the first one at school, so I wouldn’t have a clue what – and I don’t even know what – to the point of at what level they should be at the end of reception… I’d like to know where we’re supposed to be, a ballpark of where we’re supposed to be.

It’s the same with the older kids, they have Lexile books. What level are they supposed to be at?

I do what I can but the biggest problem we have is ‘Are we doing enough?’ Like, I try and take my daughter outside and swing her on the swings but by the time she get up, spends an hour to eat her food… By the time she needs to go back to bed there’s not that big a time.

Others felt that directed support for parents was better in the pre-school years and dwindled later:

I found going up to [age] three there’s heaps of support. I remember someone saying that when kids are little you read them lots of books, but when they actually start to learn we forget to read them books… I want to do something to help with [child’s] learning at Kindy but I don’t know what to do.

On the other hand, some parents looked for literacy activities if they wanted to extend their child or start ‘doing something’. In this sense, parents were keen to be just given some small level of activities to start them off:

A lot of parents work so the last thing you want to be doing is like ‘Damn it I have to cook dinner, I have to get the uniform ready, I have to get the sandwiches ready’. I don’t have 2 hours a day to take my son to the park and let him smell the flowers and all that inquisitive stuff.
Since time-poverty was a major issue for many parents, especially those who had paid work or large families, so that many parents want activities that they can do concurrently with daily tasks such as driving, washing up, eating etc, and activities with specific boundaries of content and time so that they know when they have ‘done enough’. Vague instructions or providing too much scope left parents not knowing exactly what to do, or when they or their children had done enough:

I find myself that the homework is repetitive. It’s “Reading, do some writing and learn your times tables”. There’s no goal, no structured objective. If it was ‘Read page 1 to 10: it’d be [I’d think] ‘Right, you have to sit down and read page 1 to 10 because I’m going to get into trouble’.

We have a box in our class, a Maths Monster box… but I think there’s too much in them and the kids get overwhelmed by it and just want to do specific things. Like we’ve got a timer in there, we’ve got rulers, we’ve got counters, we’ve Uno. My daughter had it over the holidays and the only thing she wanted to do out of the whole box was Uno, nothing else, it was just too much.

Some parents also wanted more information from the class teacher about their child’s progress in various areas, so they could clearly see how their home activities would fit in to help their child progress, and some also wanted to know specifically what children were doing in class so that they did not do things in a different way and confuse their child, which then undermined their capacity to support them:

See we don’t know what is the syllabus… In our country we have particular books, maths books, grammar books, everything, so they can bring at home… and I check what they can do so we know that what they are learning, you know, and we understand. My strategy [of teaching division] is different and their [school] strategy is different… So if I tell to [children] ‘You have to do this’ then they say ‘No, mum’.

5.6.2 Need for more diversity of activities

Some parents felt their children rarely brought home any activities other than reading and there was too much focus on just readers:

They have only one thing [here in Australia], always same storybook ‘Mum I have a storybook to read; mum, I have a storybook’. Nothing else to do, you know? … [In our country] maths books, grammar books, everything, so they can bring at home… Here they just bring the reader.

Some parents felt that school rules about literacy activities (especially reading) required greater flexibility or alternative approaches. For example, some English-as-a-Second Language parents felt they needed a child’s reader or library book for more than one day, or they had either no time to read it or no time to work out the English and consolidate it with the child.

Some also felt that if schools could send home more variety of directed literacy activities, then this would help them have something concrete to do with their child, as well as something to alleviate their child’s boredom on weekends and holidays. Parents with physically active children might need different types of literacy activities, as would parents whose children have a health condition such as a hearing impairment:

My boys are all active… they’ve got that much energy, trying to sit them down, they don’t want to sit there, just want to go off and run around and kick the ball around or ride a bike. It’s just too hard to sit down with them and then you sit there for half an hour, fight with them to sit still… not that it’s not worth it, but it’s too much trouble when you’ve got other kids to try to hassle around too.
CD-audio based activities seemed popular with those who had them, with one native English-speaker parent who had never learned to read properly being able to see their own reading improve with the phonics CD because it was giving him the key to reading at the same time as his child learned. Some ESL and native-English parents also thought this would be useful to help them improve their English at the same time as knowing the literacy activity they needed to support for their children (eg “listen to a CD story”). One ESL parent also noted that Phonics was a new concept to him, as in his country the school system focused on learning the names of alphabet letters, not their sounds. Using DVDs could also give parents the opportunity to link literacy activities with regular TV viewing:

I give her one hour, two hours, ‘Okay, you can watch TV and then later tell me what you learn from it’.

However, a significant proportion of the parents had no home computer, so that DVDs (for TV) and audio-CDs were seen as the easiest format for most to use (Note: ABS data 2008-09 shows that more than 10% of households with children under 15 have no computer access, and almost 25% have no Broadband Internet access at home):

There’s lots of people that don’t have Internet access and had to print out lots of paperwork if you don’t have a printer. My daughter was in a panic.

Nevertheless, for those with home computers, this may encourage dads to participate more in computer-based literacy activities as they seemed more likely to play with their children with technology. While some parents would welcome schools sending home lists of age-appropriate educational websites for them to support literacy at home, they would also want cybersafety training to go with this:

[Interpreter] What they’re saying is that they appreciate the idea for the websites but they would rather prefer … like if the school could also like initiate some web, which restricts the access…. so they want information about net safety for kids before initiating them… so that’s why they wanted the parents to be invited and given a – like a support group, and giving them a pamphlet or the name of the site.

5.6.3 Differentiating “home-work” from “learning at home”

Across the groups two contrasting themes emerged of “Learning as Work” and “Learning as Fun”. Parents felt tension and difference between “homework” – set work directed by a teacher which is supervised at home by the parents- and “learning at home” – incidental or intentional support by parents, which parents often preferred to be “fun” so children would not notice it as school-related learning.

There were also some cultural differences in expectation related to homework and home literacy. The Chinese, Serbian and Indian parents in particular had experienced what they expressed as “more structured work-based” schooling in their home countries, with the Indians starting formal schooling around age 3 and focusing on things which were “not just all play”. Some parents felt that their children get insufficient homework sent from school in Australia, and wanted more of a balance, although they felt that parents had to find this themselves because schools are reluctant to send home directed activities:

Grade two I’m expecting there’s going to be a bit more [homework] now… Every time I’d ask his teacher ‘How’s he doing?’ [she says] ‘Yeah he’s doing lovely, doing lovely’. There’s no bloody homework. I’m thinking ‘Give me something to do with him [at home]’. So I would be setting him homework [myself] because I expected him to.
I buy [books] from that shop [newsagent], you know, for her. But not from the school; not from the school. I have plenty [of workbooks] but not from the school here. Even I got the books for addition and subtraction also from shop. But not from the school, nothing.

In particular there was a feeling that some children were often bored in the evenings and weekends and so to have some “homework” from school to do would be useful:

I used to get heaps of homework. I used to come home with a backpack I couldn’t even carry and it was full of homework and my mum and that used to try and make me do it and I’d go to sleep. Now there’s nothing, they don’t even get homework, they get nothing. They get a couple of readers. (Mainstream English parent)

In China the kids [at 8 years old] get more homework to do, they feel the pressure so after dinnertime they have to have three hours to do their homework]… Maybe [they could have] more homework [in Australia], a little bit more. If they don’t have homework when they go home they just play… they feel bored, nothing to do. Watching TV is all right, playing on computer is all right, but they just keep asking to play games.

Some of the overseas ESL parents particularly thought that some additional work to do at home would also help their children catch up with their English:

A little bit more homework, that’s better for her. After this she can do some practice and then she will remember more words because she just – now she just start learning… It’d be easier and pick up quickly and she will - maybe half year or one year later - she [will be] the same as Australian child, she can talk, she can read.

In China children cannot borrow from the school library until middle primary, so that Chinese parents may not fully understand the potential use of school libraries by children in Australia for taking additional reading materials or literacy-based activities to use at home.

Factors influencing the degree to which parents felt able to engage with their child/ren’s literacy outside of school were various, and to some extent differed by whether parents were working, the number of other children in the family and their ages (as well as whether stepchildren or nephews/nieces were visiting),

5.6.4 Finding time to do literacy

Many parents were affected by time-poverty, due to the demands of their paid work, the demands of other children in the family (with or without special needs), the need to care for other children eg nieces/nephews/stepchildren, whether the parent had a spouse/partner, and whether extended family lived nearby and could offer support:

You know, when I ask about the homework, me and my husband, we are working, we are very busy and my husband’s English is very bad, only can talk some [a little]. Sometimes I can teach my daughter… I’m working afternoon, so normally this time I’m working, so in the morning we get up… so I’ve no time to teach her.

He asks me ‘Mum, what’s this?’ [I say] ‘I don’t know, I can’t show you right now but – oh hang on, get the computer out and we’ll have a look’. It’s sad but it’s the way of the world that we’re going.
Sometimes I’m busy so I cannot give times to do these things and he has to struggle with his homework because we have to work. We have to work, otherwise how can we survive here?

Some children were also in OSCH doing other activities which limited their time with parents:

My daughter used to do OSH and she did the after school sports programs that OSH offered, she did quite a few of them – basketball program and a bowling program and a few of those.

Parents might also have good intentions to support learning but not be able to carry them out consistently:

i just think when I’ve got time – maybe sometimes when I’m shopping and I see something I will teach her but sometimes no, not teach. When I remember ‘Oh yeah this one’ I will teach her but sometimes I forget.

[My partner is] on dayshift, he won’t see [daughter] at night when she goes to bed but he will have breakfast with her, help her get dressed, get her school bag packed and stuff in the morning and then drop her off at school, or he’ll walk her up. They’ll count letterboxes, they’ll look at the chickens up the road and that’s their time in the morning. It’s very challenging to do… but he makes the time… They lay on the floor together and they colour in together.

ESL parents who were studying were also time-restricted in helping their children:

[Intpreter] He said his son is a student, also himself is a student. He say ‘When I come home I have my own homework’ and he doesn’t have time to help, and then [the child’s] mum is not literate to help him, she doesn’t have ability to help him. So he doesn’t have time to help his son.

One mother had four children each with learning or speech problems, which meant she had great difficulty helping all of them each night, let alone trying to do literacy-based activities.

My six and my seven year old both have speech problems. But see, my seven year old is partially deaf in one ear and has short and long sight so she has a lot of problems due to her ear with her speech. As for my son, they’ve been working with him since he was probably about 19 or 20 months old… it got picked up very, very early [but] I’m supposed to sit there with these little blue cards and there is not enough time in the day to have four kids – like your eldest, you’ve got to spend at least an hour with her to try and get her to turn off the rest of the hearing in her ear to learn her to hear in the other ear… And then on top of that she’d got to learn how to slow down, stop stuttering and so forth. Then with the six year old…

5.6.5 Different abilities to support home learning

All but one discussion group had at least one father participating. It seemed from the discussion by both mums and dads, and reports from partners, that dads were often less inclined or available to do formal literacy activities at home (eg reading) and more likely to do “fun”, outdoor or technology-based activities with children:

My husband is definitely more – like he’s a tradesman and he loves – like every night he’s in the garage with the boys working on something... and he can read. Like if I’m putting [son] to sleep and reading him things or whatever and he can see that [other son] is ready to go to bed he’ll jump in and read the story. [Son] always has a couple of books ready for before bed – but more than not [husband] will leave it for me to do. It’s not that he won’t do it, he doesn’t want to do it.
Maybe I’m old fashioned and everything and handwriting and – but usually if it’s something with technology, Internet, iPad, whatever, I leave it to my husband so he’s dealing with that…. What he does is computer, television/computer, television and I always – you know, when I have things to do – I said to him ‘Go with the kids outside, go to the beach, go somewhere if I am busy’ but no, he prefers to stay in the house.

Two fathers (ESL and EFL) made it clear that even if they did not have the English language proficiency to listen to children read, or to read with their children, they could still make sure the children sat down and did these activities or other learning-based activities:

I don’t see my kids very much. By the time I finish work, come home, I see them for two hours and that, but I make sure I work to give my kids everything that I never had when I was growing up. So when they go to school it’s because of her [wife] and I just make sure that when they come home they do their little homework and they read. Like I don’t even know what the hell they’re reading but I just have them sit there and read. I think most of it’s all right, you know?

I read and write pretty well. My husband, on the other hand, not so well. He has trouble with literacy so I do all the reading and that for the family and just explain [to him] in basic terms what’s going on.

Several parents felt that if EFL or ESL parents were to support children’s work at home, despite not being able to read teacher’s written English instructions, then teachers needed to ensure that children with such parents clearly understood the task so that they could in turn convey this to their parents, and parents would just need to ensure/supervise dedicated time for children to do the task at home:

I used to lots and I do a bit now, but like [daughter] suffers because I don’t sit there and read enough to her because I can’t keep up to her so it’s like ‘Go to your nanna’ or ‘Go to grandma’ and they’ll sit there for hours and read books and I can’t do it. I’ll do two stories or something or a few poems and I’ve had enough (father).

Alternatively, ESL parents with low English proficiency suggested that someone at the school could write homework instructions in the native language so that parents could then either read it themselves or ask a friend/neighbour from their language group to read it to them (eg a parent with a child in another class). This might be a role for some better educated ESL parents who cannot, or do not want to, find paid work in Australia. One of the BSSOs mentioned that teachers prepared resources for parents to take home, but did not explain whether these instructions were available in different LOTEs, and whether attempts would be made to get them to parents who could not (did not) attend:

We’re going to have another open morning and there will be, for each of the parents attending, a special bag with resources, maths resources, with some maths games, with little instructions about how to play this game, so how to practice counting or simple addition, memory games with numbers.

5.7 USING THE BROADER COMMUNITY AS A RESOURCE

While many parents were consciously or unconsciously doing activities to varying extents which supported their children’s literacy at home, some faced barriers to this but found help beyond their nuclear family. Some for example had their own parents around to give them ideas:
I probably wasn’t aware of what I should have been teaching at what time but I noticed my mum was singing him the ABCs and getting him to count sugars or whatever and he was picking it up. So from there I kind of followed it on.

My mum’s amazing with giving me advice on how to handle certain situations with my children. Also if I can’t get through to my son somehow I’ll get on the phone to my mum and she’ll suggest things.

But finding family support was a problem for both Australian-born parents without helpful extended family nearby, and new arrivals who had migrated without parents, so that in this situation parents need support from elsewhere:

I had postnatal depression after both children so I came to the PND group, and for me they were probably my biggest support. My mum lives the other side of Adelaide and my mother-in-law still works and [husband] was working still, so this was my support, come here [community group] a couple of times a week.

To address issues of limited resources and capabilities in individual families, one group suggested upskilling other people (particularly volunteers) to help eg other parents, people in the community:

Send children] to other people in the community who aren’t going to be as busy, send [child] down to a nice old lady down the street who’s really good at maths to help with her maths homework.

Some parents mentioned grandparents or older siblings who helped sometimes eg with listening to reading. However, in the Serbian group (where parents were relatively better educated than most groups), some parents suggested that other parents might help with literacy at school and home, to lift children’s literacy levels:

All this comes down to a really hard thing, and that’s the parents who do have the time and the parents who don’t have the time. You end up in a situation where there’s the two groups, it’s the Haves and the Don’t Haves, and that doesn’t matter whether it’s clothes, computers or time, yeah. And do you get to a situation where you try and sort of group the children whose parents don’t have time with the parents who do have time? We’d gladly take out children whose parents don’t have time but would the parents actually want them to do that because they’d almost feel.

However, one mother in another group said that despite having difficulties finding time to do learning activities with her several children, she was used to struggling alone and would find it hard to accept outside help. Nevertheless, it is possible that institutional options such as Homework Clubs might not be seen as such a personal criticism of not coping alone.

ESL parents particularly suggested that people from their cultural group could help provide support to parents, which could build on an individuals’ skills which they may have but which they are not be able to use in Australia in employment. This would upskill them in a volunteer capacity and give them a community purpose:

I did the aged care but I can’t work [here]. And I did child care as well but no job. I didn’t get the job because my speaking not very well. (Indian parent).

In China my education is the highest. Here my English is the lowest so I can’t – it’s hard to find work... My spoken English is not good so that's why.
Some such parents were already running social groups at the school and in the community onto which literacy programs could piggyback. One mother like this was already building on her overseas experience working with children to run the HIPPY program for her ethnic community, and one ESL father had been a maths teacher in his home country.

One of the Aboriginal groups also suggested encouraging more support from the grandparent generations:

*The indigenous people would come and teach indigenous kids for nothing… Just to teach the next generation.*

Running some **groups outside the school grounds** may be important for parents who perceive significant social distance between themselves and teachers/schools as this is a barrier to on-site engagement (and this offers opportunities to work more in partnerships with NGOs at community sites, as outlined below).

### 5.7.1 Homework Clubs, Breakfast Clubs and Home Tutors

The **past success of Homework Clubs, Breakfast Clubs and Home Tutors** was mentioned in some of the Australian-born groups as ways to provide additional supports when parents found it hard to support their children:

*Some kids do their homework at the breakfast club.*

However, parents were not always sure that these were still operating at present. One of the Aboriginal grandmothers referred to DECS funding in earlier decades for Homework Clubs at schools and Home Tutors to visit homes to ensure children did not fall behind. An existing Homework Centre was also mentioned by EFL parents in another group, while one person had seen what they thought was a successful program of this type being de-funded:

*We don’t even get our tutoring anymore. We used to get home tutoring, which was fantastic. I had a tutor used to come in twice a week ... Primary school and high school.... To help with their homework or if they’re having problems with this subject this week and… to help them out.... that was through the school [but then] they cut it on us [stopped funding the program].*

Nevertheless, these types of approaches appear to be **possible gap-fillers for parents who find it difficult to engage in home literacy themselves** because they have work demands, several other children to supervise, and/or other children with learning delays who demand high levels of time and energy input.

### 5.8 BUILDING (ON) PARTNERSHIPS WITH NGOs

**Piggybacking into existing groups** already being run by local NGOs would be useful for many English-speakers as they already feel comfortable attending. There was also a suggestion to work with CYWHS so a list of local parent support/playgroups and literacy workshops would go in every baby’s Blue Book. However, such **formal playgroups do not appear to exist** for many of the cultural subgroups of ESL parents, nor can everyone in these groups read written advertisements. The Chinese parents for example had **no concept of a formal playgroup**, and the mainstream playgroups run for
English-speakers may be hard to break into for such parents with no/low English (hence the concept to build on their existing social networks in order to introduce parents to ideas for supporting literacy, or to find a parent volunteer from their group to do this eg to run HIPPY):

> Sometimes it's really hard to look after [my] six kids and to support but that - I have also support from my kids, of course my kids get support from the school because they learn how to cook and how to do a lot of things, but I teach them how to cook [and] I have someone to teach me, Hip… yeah Hippy Program, how to teach kids, how to grow up, how to teach them… [The] lady, she teach me and I teach my kids. (NAP group)

> This program [HIPPY] very nice program, especially for the new arrival family, that they teach the parents how to communicate with their child…. they teach them how the parent can play with the children or how they can help them children and then this will be – the parent, the more relation [have a better relationship] with their children. (Somali group)

If literacy workshops are run, some groups felt it would be important to advertise both at local venues such as supermarkets, and by word-of-mouth (in both ESL and native English groups) and to offer variety of times and places with flexibility:

> Some would go and some wouldn’t bother…. I’m a single mum so anything that was run at night time would be out… because I’d have to take my children along.

> [In our culture] we have it informal, we don’t have a club like a club. If I want I go to [Name’s house]. I don’t tell him I’m coming… If you say ‘OK, at this time you come there’, oh no-one will come. If you have it at 8 o’clock or something, one will come at 8 o’clock, one will come at 7 o’clock and.. informal, it is easy for us.

Another group suggested a series of flexible workshops where people attending one workshop could ‘bring a friend’ to the next workshop a week or two later, thereby extending the workshop’s reach through word-of-mouth in existing social networks, but this might require some flexibility on the age of children allowed, rather than specifically being eg “for parents with children aged 5-7”, otherwise some mothers were missing out going to groups with a friend just because their children were one year different in age:

> HIPPY groups here really teach me a lot of things [but friend cannot come] I think she don’t have four years [old] boy. I teach my son and it’s really good. [The lady] bring for him book and he draw and now he know which is blue and green and he’s four years and he learn a lot of things from that.

The ESL parents generally felt that such groups to support parents or provide literacy learning could be mixed for both mums and dads. One ESL father said he thought the process of learning to work with a child also had the knock-on benefit of increasing the amount of quality time parents spent with their children which strengthened their relationship.

Many parents at each discussion learned during the discussion of new parent supports that others were using, which they were previously unaware of and now thought they might use, eg:

- PACE workshop for Aboriginal parents
- Phonics CD
- HIPPY groups (could be run as a group; could be “bring a friend” basis not age-based)

- Community groups/locations eg Seaton Central, The Parks, Seaton North, the Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Port Adelaide, Incredible Years Program by CAMHS.

Parents in the community-based groups reported being already linked into a range of community-based parenting support groups where they found out more about how to parent in general, and how to support children’s learning and literacy. Pathways into these groups included word of mouth and text-based flyers.

5.9 COMMUNICATING & ENGAGING WITH TEACHERS & SCHOOLS

Communication methods, formats, and pathways between parents and school were particular areas identified for improvement, in terms of more frequent communication, different forms of communication, and mediated communication. These issues were raised both by native-English and ESL parents.

5.9.1 Using trusted Go-betweens

Several factors prevented parents from directly engaging with the school or approaching teachers, which in turn prevented them finding out what they could be doing at home to support their child’s learning. In particular, the question of equality with teachers was raised by parents in several groups, particularly that parents with low levels of education often lack confidence to talk to teachers because they know they are people who are better educated than themselves. Some native English-speakers with negative school experiences and/or low levels of education perceived a social distance between themselves and teachers who were obviously much better educated, and which undermined parents’ confidence to talk to teachers: (“Teachers are up here and we are down here, they talk down to you”).

In the Aboriginal groups a particular need was identified to explore ways to improve cultural communication awareness, such as teachers needing to know that not looking people in the eye when talking is an Aboriginal sign of respect, whereas teachers from a white/Western culture were perceived to take this as a sign of the parent being disinterested in what the teacher was saying.

In light of these issues parents with less confidence or who were new to the school (both ESL and native English speakers) would feel more comfortable attending parent-teacher interviews if someone they trusted could accompany them. A trusting and helpful relationship was seen as important to encourage parental engagement:

It’s like anywhere you go, if you’ve got good staff that are helpful you keep coming back. If there’s someone that you don’t like, you don’t go.

Some parents said if they were to feel comfortable attending literacy workshops or events at the school or in the community, then they also need a trusted person to accompany them or personally invite them eg AEW, BSSO, parent volunteer from their group/community (and perhaps school chaplain/counsellor etc):

Actually if you know even English you need someone who has experience [talking with teachers]. Even the way the teachers – when they ask questions, the way we ask questions - the same question you ask in English but when I ask it in [my language] I’m asking my way, not the way you talk, you know?
Parents also felt that building literacy teaching into parents’ existing social groups (eg community playgroups, community parent supports) worked well as it overcame issues of confidence and feeling comfortable:

Parent groups held at the school organized by parents or trusted BSSOs/AEWs or others were also felt to be a useful way for parents to connect with others in their situation, to find out more about the school in general and to provide input to the school and teachers. This seemed to be a possible first step into a greater level of communication in future. However, people wanted facilitators to be “people you know”, “who you feel treat you as an equal and make you feel comfortable”, and the group also needed to be people you felt comfortable with. In one group, parents said they never used to the school before they got to know their particular AEW. The AEW role was also seen as a key “Go Between”, asking about families and “feeding information through to parents”.

Parents also felt ongoing worker visibility gave parents and children confidence with schooling and learning:

“The kids know [worker]’s here. They wait at the gate till she comes. She has that relationship with the kids, and she’s built that with the parents”

Where BSSOs were only employed part-time, parents had to wait 2-3 days for the worker’s next “day in”, so that some parents kept children off school until an issue could be sorted with this worker. Parents suggested that BSSOs and AEWs should be available full-time for continuity of support since parents and children have issues at all times of the day and week. For one parent who had been an ESL migrant as a child, such a lack of timely support had negatively affected their lifetime ability to engage with schooling:

My husband… he’s got a Ukrainian background and he went to school [in Australia] only speaking Ukrainian, so just different things like asking to go to the toilet, they [teachers] didn’t know what he was talking about and he’d end up wetting himself or whatever… He doesn’t want to know about school [now], that’s all for me. Like he’s just got a really bad opinion of school, which I can understand from that.

New arrival parents felt cooking classes for parents on the school grounds worked well as a pathway into a trusting relationship with the school (as well as to learn to cook Australian food that their children bring home or want to eat, and to provide an opportunity to share something positive from their culture with others). Many parents said that provision of a free creche was essential if they were to attend literacy workshops, school meetings, playgroups, and that even the $5 charge for creche at The Parks put them off attending.

5.9.2 Do things with parents in groups

Building on the desire for support from “people we know”, parents from non-Anglo cultural backgrounds said they felt more comfortable talking or learning about school or literacy activities in groups with parents or facilitators they knew and trusted:

I think it’s a better idea that we sit together because we’ve got some more views and more suggestions for you. For us it’s a really good idea to sit together.

I tell a lot of people [about our group] but people, they don’t know. The first time they’re scared [to come]. Like when they see other Somalian people like going or doing that, they start [to come]… From my experience of community… if they can get a group of families together, like if
they - two or three or four families together - to show together, they can push them with an incentive for that… but when you see only one by one [do it individually] it is very hard.

One ESL/no-English father had been turned off after having attended his first school event to find no-one there who could speak his language. Most groups felt that selecting just one parent to be a “representative” on a group of parents from different backgrounds was not representative of diversity within their group (eg their very different education backgrounds, gender issues, etc) and did not support individual parent confidence. It was better to talk to parents in their “natural” groups:

If certain cultures - they come different, you know? If one is Hindi and one is Punjabi, that’s okay because they know their culture. Because if you send one Greek and one Chinese and one Indian, oh they just clash with each other. We clash with each other because we are different. They say ‘My thing is okay’, [then the others] say ‘No, my thing is okay’ so it’s better you can talk with them separate.

Building on this concept, the Aboriginal parents and grandparents talked very positively about the ASSPA Committees (Aboriginal Student Support & Parent Awareness) which they thought had been in every SA school in the past; these had been discontinued but no-one knew why. Parents felt the ASSPA committees had been very effective way to facilitate parent input to learning and school and solving issues because the committees were under local control, all the children were at the same school, everyone knew the local issues, and local parents could come together to work as a team to solve problems. In contrast, they criticised the Yurrekaiyarni Committee which they said is “supposedly” a community voice organized by DECS through schools for Aboriginal parents to talk about getting involved with their children’s learning, but

“No-one goes. No-one [there] wants to listen to what they [parents] want to talk about. When you hit them [the committee organisers] with the home truth they don’t like it”.

The Aboriginal parents felt that this group was run by Aboriginal people in management positions who are out of touch with their local issues ie run by “blackfellas in charge from the district office whose kids don’t have the issues our kids do”. When asked what processes schools might use to elicit parent feedback, one parent said “groups like these” (ie like the research focus groups, where parents from similar backgrounds come together with a facilitator).

5.9.3 Communication formats and methods

While some parents said they frequently come to the school, feel comfortable talking with teachers, and have good English reading and speaking proficiency to support their engagement, there were also many parents with some barrier to communication and engagement. In all groups parents were encouraged to give ideas about how communication processes could be improved.

Text-density and amount of information

Native English-speaker parents who do not read well would appreciate written information being offered in an alternative format which keeps to the most important points only, and for less text-dense information to be given:

I don’t normally read the newsletters too much. I just put them on the cupboard and ‘I’ll read that later’. It’s probably because I never used to read them at school when I was a kid and they used to just sit in the back or get thrown on the cupboard… [Reading’s] not my favourite subject.
I read and write pretty well. My husband, on the other hand, not so well. He has trouble with literacy so I do all the reading and that for the family and just explain in basic terms what’s going on.

I can’t even read or write. How’s that! I just don’t like school… I like doing things with my hands, I don’t like to sit there and read and listen to people, it just gets boring. People just say things and I remember what they say… I just tell them I don’t know how to fill out forms and then they fill it out for me and I just sign my name. (Mainstream English father)

Keeping information to the main points, and using less text would also be useful for ESL parents with low English or LOTE literacy.

**LOTE information**

Parents from non-Anglo cultural backgrounds had a range of proficiency in reading, writing and speaking English. The NAP group pointed out that often only the main migrant is entitled to English classes so that other adults accompanying them miss out. This meant that in some families the father could speak English or was learning, but their wife was either non-proficient in English or illiterate in both their native language as well as English:

*My wife not better in English…. I do the reading.*

*[Wife] can write and read in Somali, only English can’t do it.*

For ESL parents with high school education in their native language but low English proficiency, there is room to provide written materials in their native language (eg Parenting SA flyers on parenting topics, which were available at some schools but had never been heard of in others). For those learning English and for native English speakers with low reading ability, provision in **alternative formats with less text-density** may be more useful. This would be particularly useful in couple households where the person who reads English well has been able to get paid work outside the home (because of this proficiency) leaving the person with poor English at home with the children. Short written material in their own language (and in plain low-density text for native English speakers) would enable such parents to read school information themselves, rather than waiting till the other parent was home. Preparing school information in this way could be a regular or ad-hoc role for volunteer parents from each community.

ESL parents may have problems understanding written English instructions for home literacy activities or related supports if they cannot read English themselves:

- A translated version is useful for parents literate in their native language, especially where their English-speaking spouse may be working til late (parents would like both the English and the translation so that they can upskill their English).

- Larger families with an illiterate home-parent may have children who have learnt sufficient English to translate written materials into the home language (eg activity instructions or school notices) or can find someone in the community eventually but not necessarily in a timely way.

- Some parents recommended that teachers clearly and simply explain activities to the child so they can verbally inform their parents in the native language.
One group pointed out that parents could feel embarrassed asking for language assistance and would not always ask friends to translate for this reason, leaving them without understanding but having given the other person the impression they did understand:

> She’s saying most of the people, they – they ignore it and they don’t show that they are ignorant and just pretend that they understand English.

ESL parents with low English proficiency suggested that if someone could write instructions/information in their native language, this was less embarrassing. Then parents could then either read it themselves or ask a friend/neighbour from their language group to verbalise it to them. This might be a role for some better educated ESL parents who cannot find paid work in Australia to act as **volunteers to support a network of parents from their cultural community**:

> In Melbourne my kids were studying… and there is plenty of Chinese people and they cannot speak English properly, so the one lady [mother], same community, and she always tell to non-speak English people what the teacher did.

ESL children were also instrumental as cultural brokers by using their new English skills to actually support their parents to learn about Australia:

> The first thing, we’d like to thank this school. They’ve taught them a lot of things and they’ve taught me as well. Like my daughter started to teach me anything new about cooking and when we go to the supermarket she would show me exactly what they did here in the cooking lessons by showing it on the shelves.

For those languages where a school does not have a BSSO, or the BSSO is not available, one mother suggested their school children could be used more as interpreters so their parents could come to the school during the day, rather than miss out on parent-based activities just because of the language barrier:

> The issue is that most of the time we understand what the others are saying but we cannot express ourselves. Sometimes we feel that we are kind of isolated because of the language. We would come [to the school quite happily] but because of the language we couldn’t understand everything. Apart from the kids who are speaking some Arabic, there isn’t any… have never met anyone who can do anything with the Arabic. No-one is liaising with us.

**Communication Books**

Some parents said they never wrote in their child’s communication book, but others found they worked well as a form of communication between class and home. Some ESL parents felt it would be useful if someone could write a translation of the content (which they said was done by at least one BSSO occasionally). Alternatively, some parents recommended the teacher clearly tell the child what the content was so that they could verbalise this to parents with no/low English reading proficiency.

Another parent recommended that schools post information directly to their home, otherwise children often lost things when they were supposed to be the messenger:

> Even like letters getting sent home. Like actually sent to your address, like not given to the child.
Electronic communication

Parents who have the relevant technology said they would like increased opportunity to contact teachers via email and phone texting. Some had already found this useful:

*Just they sent a text with… a teacher does it. What [child] is doing and what I have to learn at home. So I can understand what he is doing at school.*

*No, she [wife] won’t come to the school [doesn’t speak English]. Sometimes I can’t pick up the phone because I have no phone at work [factory]. Even they [teachers] can do that email, that’s all right. Don’t worry, don’t bother about that, they can send me the email.*

This option was especially wanted by some parents who cannot get into school, whose work means they cannot make landline phone calls during the working day, or where parents could not wait around to see teachers:

*Sometimes I find it hard, especially afternoons, there might be a line up of people who want to speak to the teachers. I really like our teachers, when you have them one-on-one they’re giving me really good feedback. I’d like a different option of being able to contact them because if I forget something... I’ve got a little four year old who could be running riot somewhere else. I’d like to be able to – even like an email, emailing things.*

Some of the ESL parents with Internet access also felt that electronic communication could help overcome the language barrier:

*It can be better if we could send by email because ...at the moment no [they don’t do it] but I recommend we should do it… because when we do email if we don’t understand we can do the Google and translate to my language so we can understand what they’re saying.*

Communicating face-to-face and by word of mouth

To find out more about their child’s progress and what they could be supporting at home, several groups said they would like the option of more frequent parent-teacher contact (several groups suggested holding short 15 minute parent-teacher interviews once or twice per term), especially if parents were unable to get into school daily. Some of the overseas parents had been used to much more frequent parent-teacher contact in their home country, including daily written notes home from the teacher for each child in India about what the child had done that day, or informal feedback when they bumped into teachers out in the community (note also that parents said children start formal schooling there at 2½ years).

Building on the concept of trusted relationships and social networks, some parents felt they rarely saw written information from the school, despite it being sent, so that they felt word-of-mouth could be a more effective communication method:

*They’ll normally say. Like if they’ve got Sports Day or are going here [excursion] or whatever, the teachers tell you. Most of the time the newsletter is stuff that’s happened three months ago so you’re reading what the school’s done, not what’s coming up, which is silly. At kindy... they’d put little calendars up for you.*
This builds on the idea earlier about working through existing social groups, BSSOs/AEWs, and parent volunteers from each community group. **Teachers also need to ensure that they make themselves approachable** so parents feel they can talk to them, and to offer information:

*There’s some teachers that do speak out and tell you what’s going on and whether [your children] need help, and others do not say.*

*It would be really nice to hear from his teacher ‘Oh yeah he did really well in this today’, ‘Oh he might need a little bit of help in that’ but you never hear… Where my daughter’s teachers, one of them is really good, she welcomes you coming into the class and asking what they’ve been up to and telling us what she needs to work on… Some [teachers] want to talk to parents and some do not…. There’s a certain teacher that just doesn’t want to talk to parents and I have no idea what [to do].*

Another opportunity which could be built upon in some ESL communities is the traditional “drop-in” culture, which could mean parents would be more willing to drop by for casual contact with schools and teachers, as long as they can physically get to the school and as long as someone is there to speak their language.

### 5.9.4 Difficulties getting support for speech & learning problems

A final communication issue which was a strong theme in some groups was the difficulty parents felt they had supporting their children’s literacy at home when they could not get support from school and other professionals when they (usually mothers) suspected their children had learning, speech or hearing difficulties, or learning delays. This was relevant in the 5+ age group as well as the 0-4 age group. This support problem was discussed by those with children who had eventually had a learning difficulty diagnosed, and some who had themselves been in this boat as children, eg one mother had her own dyslexia only diagnosed in Year 6, while another had been disruptive at school and then had ADHD diagnosed in adulthood after years of therapy.

Mothers were also worried that professionals (teachers, GPs, paediatricians, CYWHS) seemed **more interested to reassure mothers that their child is normal, than listening to mothers’ concerns about learning difficulties and investigating them.** This was especially the case when the mother had observed their child having learning delays by comparison with older children in her family or other people’s children the same age. As a result, there was a feeling that **the system often leaves parents to muddle through on their own without support,** or certainly leaves them for too long, if their child has developmental or learning problems. This means parents feel they have to fight to get even the minimal assistance, when they felt this should be offered proactively by all schools in order for children’s learning not to fall behind.

Some parents felt that if their child had a more obvious or worse condition then they would at least get attention and help, so that there could be a lot of **parents/children in the middle who miss out – not bad enough to get help, and not doing well either** so that then parents would have a hard time trying to support these children’s literacy learning at home:

*My biggest concern about how things are structured is like, seriously, there’s not enough funding. If there’s a child that’s borderline they still need assistance but on the scale they’re not as important as the one that’s at the top of the scale. See that’s going to be me in terms of [my son] once he starts school because he’s progressed so well. He’s still got speech and language issues but he won’t be severe enough to attract funding once he starts school, but they know that he’s...*
got a problem and then it’s on the school from their own resources to provide that assistance, whereas if he was a little bit more severe he would attract funding.

Considering that the focus groups were held in a region already known to have a significant proportion of parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds, it is important to note that some parents were particularly concerned for other parents who might be less proactive or less able and confident than themselves to push for action, so that children of less able parents would get left behind completely, or not get help as early as they could have:

> My concern is I’m really proactive for [son]. I went to the Women’s and Children’s for his six month check up and I said ‘There’s something, he’s still not right’. [They said] ‘No, no, he’s fine’ and I said ‘No, he’s not’ … If I was a parent that was just ‘Oh yeah, they know best, they’re the experts’ I wouldn’t get any help] ... I’m exhausted from it… It’s just like, we know he’s got a problem but it’s like we can’t find anyone to help.

Some parents felt that occasionally teachers just happened to be good at picking up problems but weren’t trained to do this:

> Yeah there’s some teachers that do speak out and tell you what’s going on and whether [your children] need help and others do not say. I had a teacher say to me last year - my daughter has an intellectual disability and she needs to be taught in a different way… But the teacher last year did not help her at all.

[Eventually] we got put through to Autism SA and we’re on the early childhood program and for school, but I mean before that it was through DECS and they did nothing. They sent us around in circles. They pretty much told me I was crazy because I thought there was something wrong with her, but there clearly was something wrong.

Parents in 4 different groups whose children had speech/development issues thought that an OT and Speech Therapist to be more easily available at all schools. Parents were also aware of some services and schools having regular and proactive screening or special speech groups, and thought this should be available to all parents/children:

Parent 1: Speech should be part of the DECS stuff... A lot of the schools don’t tend to do that, pull out a few of the children out of class to have extra tuition. I know my friend from Port Lincoln… the local school used to always take out a group of kids and have extra tuition so I don’t know why they don’t do it here.

Parent 2: I’m concerned a bit about that because [son’s] in a special school and he can only go to Year 2 and then he has to change to another school, and to me he’s going to go backwards in all his learning and it’ll take a whole year to catch up and learn the new school, new everything. So it’s just annoying for me as a parent… I can’t understand why DECS can’t have a special unit from Reception to Grade Seven... The Woodville one over here does, but because it’s not in my area I can’t go there.

Some parents were also concerned about some services, such as the Parks Community Centre, being known for having all the facilities but being zoned so they could not attend, or being a referral-only service. Otherwise, parents were making excessive efforts on their own and making financial commitments that they felt they really couldn’t afford (Yeah we’re just middle of the road, we’re not up here and we’re not down there… Working poor I call it… We’re working but we’re just scraping by, and if we don’t have a pay cheque next week then we’re not scraping by at all).
Parents in several groups had eventually got the help their children required, but were concerned that this had put their children a year or two behind:

*Just as a parent that’s been through the whole rollercoaster of paediatricians, speech therapists, this and that, it’s so hard. I finally got funding for private speech…. It’s just been a really long round… We were on the waiting list at the Port Adelaide Health Centre on Dale Street. They were fantastic, that’s what got all this happening for me… but by the time it was his turn - because once they turn 4 they’re not eligible for services there, so we missed that.*

Some of the Aboriginal parents had children with learning delays due to hearing loss after ear infections, which the grandmother said was common in Aboriginal children. Parents also wanted to be given ideas for supportive literacy/learning activities to do with their child while they were on long waiting lists to see these professionals;

*[Son] was diagnosed with developmental delay not long ago but I was just sent away with no strategies or with no help or anything. My GP put his name down on the waiting list and we waited 9 months but, yeah, they didn’t give us any strategies to cope with his behaviour or anything [while we waited].*

### 5.10 TWO STEPS AWAY - BROADER DETERMINANTS OF LITERACY ENGAGEMENT

Within a social determinants of health approach, it is important to acknowledge that it is not only the direct issue of parental engagement with literacy that merits attention, but that parents may perceive their ability to support children’s learning and literacy to in turn be influenced by the broader context of schooling and access to schools. At this level DECS could arguably have more influence than an individual school or individual teacher.

#### 5.10.1 Transport to/from school

Some parents mentioned that difficulties with transport to school undermined children’s literacy if they were late for the early morning literacy block, and wondered if this could be scheduled slightly later in the morning. Difficulties included the cost of transport, unreliability of local public bus timetables, lack of a personal private car, and trying to get several children to different schools on time (eg one to Kindy, one to primary and one to high school). There was a suggestion for school buses to be provided for any child that needed it on a regular or ad-hoc basis.

*You know what they should have at this school? They should have a bus run… and drop off. The same as Alberton - like no-one wants to send your kid to Alberton school because that’s just where all the ferals live – but Alberton school have got a bus run. The parents who work, who have to get up early and go to work – see like me, I was supposed to be at work but I’ve got to come here, drop the kids off and then fly to work – and I’m always late – but that’s why Alberton have the bus run.*

**Increased provision of school buses** was something parents felt would not only help working parents get their children to school on time, but also parents who had health conditions which limited their mobility, and mothers with newborns that they didn’t want to wake after having been up all night. The Aboriginal groups particularly picked up on this issue:
The government whinges all the time about indigenous kids not going to school. One, half the indigenous parents can’t get their kids to school… Because of work… or it’s too far away. [or] because most indigenous people do have – like they don’t have one kid, they’ve got like a tribe of them – so it is hard for single parents to get their kids [to school]…. Aboriginal children and that can get funding for stuff like that … We’ve got some other parents who are struggling to get their kids to school… and then they might say ‘Well, you’re going to have to lift the fees up’. I’d pay extra fees.

On the other hand, when children used the school bus this could prevent parents from opportunities to engage with the school:

[Intpreter] she used to pick and drop here [at school], she used to meet Somali people and talk to the teacher but… now he has started using the school bus so the interaction is very limited. It’s only once [she has been] to school and sees the teacher regarding a problem with the kid; that’s all.

A good proportion of the ESL parents said they could only come to school events or meetings if transport was provided for them (and indeed, a good proportion in some groups had only been able to attend the research focus group because a school bus had been arranged to transport them in).

5.10.1 Disrupted support when moving to different schools

Some of the NAP parents felt that the immigration and settlement housing rules should come into line with the Education Department’s NAP program, so that NAP children would have less disruption to their schooling, and parents would not have to keep adjusting to dealing with different schools. Parents said that New Arrivals were given temporary housing for 6 months and then had to move to find their own rental housing, whereas the NAP programs run for 12 months at the same school. This meant children could have to move NAP schools after the first 6 months to a different NAP school in the catchment where their parents had found rental housing, and then when the NAP program ended 6 months later they had to move yet again to their local school.

The potentially negative impact of discontinuity of schooling was also identified by some Australian-born parents who had themselves had to move between schools as children:

I loved school but the most negative thing I think was swapping schools between – in Year 3 I went to a new school and that’s just where mum and dad wanted me to go… I wonder if I would be different if I’d stayed at – well, you know, just think differently about things and be more confident. I was overwhelmed – I was pretty shy – and yeah this big school… I do wonder if I’d continued to Year 7 at the primary school and then swapped over, whether I would feel differently about different things and about how it has affected me long-term.

We shifted from [regional centre] to Adelaide when we were kids and there’s a big difference between city schools and – you know, coming from the country everything was completely different. The way teachers teach are different… you learn more real life stuff in a country school.

One parent was currently facing a structurally enforced move for her own child which was creating problems with lack of continuity of support:

I’m just having a week of freaking out. When I put [son] in [certain Kindy] I was told that he would be able to attend Kidman Park Primary. Now they’ve zoned it and they rang me on Monday to say that their classes are too full and [he] can’t go there. It has taken him nearly six terms at preschool to make any friends and now I have to send him to a school where he doesn’t know
anyone and there’s nothing I can do about it…. [He] needs all his speech and language support, all that transferred to a new school and I have to start that in the next few weeks.

NAP parents also suggested potential benefits that could result from **diversifying NAP into 2 different programs for older children**: one for those who had a background of schooling, and one for children who had come to Australia with no previous schooling so that they could adjust to the basics of the Australian system:

> Another thing they teach them to do in Australia, much different than what we had back in our countries, is that everyone here has a responsibility to look after his or her stuff. Like back in our countries we had servant who would do anything and everything for us. Here they told them how to deal and take care of their own stuff step by step.

Having 2 different NAP programs based not on age or English language proficiency alone, but rather on prior experience of formal schooling systems and educational level, was particularly seen as a problem for older children (age 10+) who might be at least 5 years educationally behind other 10-year old children, regardless of differences in English proficiency. This was also a personal negative experience of one of the young mothers who had arrived in Australia at age 12.

### 5.10.2 Inconsistency in DECS facilities and supports

Several groups raised concerns about what they perceived as **wide differences in the facilities and supports available to parents to support their children’s learning and literacy** depending on which area they live in and which particular kindy/primary school/support centre they attend or are zoned for:

> I hear rave reports about Lockleys North. They even have an OT there. I think she’s an OT that’s a teacher and her students are doing exceptionally well. I heard a report from an OT that I use who said “You want to send your kids into Lockleys”.

Parents also perceived that having good facilities and services depended upon an active parent group with good social connections and fundraising abilities:

> In lower socioeconomic areas like Davoren Park and places like that, those children wouldn’t have those opportunities because the parents are struggling themselves just to do the daily needs of their family without volunteering at kindy and making phone calls and sending emails. They may not even have the access to that sort of technology and stuff.

> I’m on governing council [at the Kindy] so we’ve raised enough money now to put solar panels on the kindy and we’ve installed rainwater tanks and a veggie garden with mulch... solar lights.... It’s amazing… we’ve had lots of support from Bunnings and places like that, but it all takes time and it’s a lot of work. Unless you’ve got the parents on board that are happy to make the phone calls and send the letters, you know, DECS aren’t going to run and do it for you.... The workload on directors and teachers is absolutely ridiculous and I just think that’s something DECS needs to consider more, is supporting them. Everything’s become about accountability. The director, he’s constantly in his office filling in forms, collecting data for DECS. It’s just ongoing and not very often you see much come out of it.

Some parents also felt that the quality of the public kindergartens in their area was quite variable, in terms of physical space, and what this in turn did or did not provide to support children’s broader literacy learning:
Some of the kindies around here are just a room now, they’ve got no playrooms, nothing. I sent the kids over to Woodville West Kindy, they’ve got an outdoor play area and everything over there. It’s still an old style kindy which is so much better than all these new little lock-in rooms”.

One of the things that I really liked about Lockleys Kindy... was because the outdoor area wasn’t a plastic – it was just natural, it was all gumtrees and everything’s wooden and it’s like an adventure playground for them and there’s birds in the trees and it’s all natural.

Returning to the issues about support for speech and learning difficulties, parents also felt that there was again wide variation, with the area you live in determining whether you could get access to support or not:

They do it for the north[ern regions].... that’s sort of why I’m going to go with them because in Year One any student that’s not up to the average level, they have a reading group and so that at the end of year one every child is at the average level and then in year two they do it for that... So by the time they finish their junior primary, their early years, they’re at least at the average level to do the rest of their schooling. [Question from another parent: Do you have to be in the zone for that now?] No. not if they’re reception. I snuck in by a bee’s whisker. [Other parent: I know I would have liked [son] to go there because they’ve got a special unit]. At Kidman Park they have, yeah.

The Aboriginal parents also felt that they would like a greater active focus on Aboriginal culture inside schools, or alternatively a Multicultural Room where all the cultures in a school could share and learn. They compared with the more obvious focus at present on other cultures or languages, including the physical presence inside the school of the Serbian Learning Room at Hendon:

You know one Aboriginal thing, one Taiwanese ...the Sudanese could come in and ...one Japanese thing... You don’t even hear black [Aboriginal] people talk in their own language anymore because they’ve forgot it because we’re being taught White, Chinese ... I used to sit with the full bloods too so I can talk their language, but I’ve got to be sitting there too... They’d have an elder come in. An elder would come in and do things... The old dreamtime stories and that...A lot of elders would offer to come in here and do it for nothing... My boys don’t know how to play the didgeridoo. I would like them to learn how to play that but they’re learning Japanese. What are they going to use Japanese for?

Another issue raised by the Aboriginal groups was in relation to transparency of what DECS funds were spent on:

Each school is allotted X amount of money for the Nunga [Aboriginal] side and – HPI money it’s called. Every school gets and I don’t see – in all the years I’ve been coming here – I never seen anyone walking in or out doing a special class for the Aboriginal kids... See we used to use that money for teaching the kids different things... Every school gets like – they get money for white kids and they get money for black kids, it’s easy. But it’s just this money, for some reason, that doesn’t get used on the black kids... until someone kicks up, no-one knows what goes on and all our money disappears... If they asked for suggestions at the beginning of the year, like a little petition or something, well not say how much they’re getting but like ‘What would you like us to use the money for?’ and we could say ‘The bus run or the Room or...’
5.10.3 Housing and planning issues

Several parents in different groups raised issues which can relate to broader level housing and planning issues. For example, in terms of finding appropriate activities at home to support literacy beyond reading and writing, one mother compared her own housing situation in childhood with that of her children, suggesting that modern house block sizes were indirectly undermining parents’ ability to do a broader range of literacy activities at home, particularly outdoors:

We’ve got chickens, we have eggs... [but] I think we’re losing that. Just the humble backyard is getting more and more rare all the time, everyone’s got courtyard homes. I remember our backyard [in my childhood] was huge. The backyard at the house now we’ve got is huge and it’s just – I don’t know, things like that are disappearing I feel.

At a higher level, one father saw a connection between planning and housing development (which affected the number of children in a zoned school catchment), which in turn he felt affected the facilities a school could provide:

Parent 1: I think the schools do a fantastic job with what they get... [but] I was looking at Fulham Gardens and it’s a small school and comparing what they’ve got in terms of facilities to like your Kidman Park or your Lockleys North, they just can’t compare. They’ve got 100 students versus 4-500 students and how staffing is set – like term three each school sends in their projected enrolments and from that they’ll get their staffing for next year. Now if 50 new families move into the zone they have to take them and that’s why the class sizes get bigger and this and that. They don’t do it term by term they do it..

Parent 2: See that’s where the stupid government don’t think of – like along this road down here there used to be 50 houses... now there’s 300 because they’ve all been subdivided and got units on them. Then you’ve got every other street around here that’s got extra houses on it. I mean around here there’s a few kids going here [to this school] but most of them go to, like, the private school up here and all that, all the rest of them haven’t had kids yet. Suddenly if all the young ones that have got all these houses have kids – like this school was going to be shut down a few years ago but suddenly there’s more kids. Like most of the schools, all the ones to threes, they’re going to have a – I mean there’s so much work... and they can’t get the funding because there’s not enough kids there... They should make the developers of these housing estates...

Parent 1: Look at the infrastructure.

Parent 2: They give them permission to subdivide all these houses up. They should get made to put in money to help develop the schools and stuff as well.

DECS might therefore consider working more closely with planners and housing developers to consider how future housing developments will affect school population sizes and, in turn, facilities which equally affect the amounts and types of supports which can be given to parents for literacy.

Both ESL and EFL parents also felt that parents were better able to engage with children’s schools and learning where schools were a more integrated part of a local community:

I’ve taught in country preschools and then when we moved back to Adelaide I did relief teaching and it is, it’s so community-orientated there than what it is in the city. It’s sort of, you drop the kids off and off you go, whereas there [in the country] the parents have – like the kindy visits their workplaces and it’s just really – it’s completely different because it’s smaller there.
You enjoy it more. I think that’s where all the kids get along. Like, in a country town the kids sort of all go to kindy together then they might have two schools, a Catholic school and that, and yet you sort of all live next door to each other anyway and everyone knows what you’re doing.

This was also seen to overcome the problem of parents having to physically visit school grounds in order to engage:

Even in high school – I went to [Regional SA Area School] - I remember playing netball with my year 12 teachers and stuff like that. They’re part of the community, they’re not just ‘Oh they’re the teacher’. You get to know them outside of that role of being in the classroom.

The rapport that you had with the [other] parents and the teachers, it was very easy, so you knew that they lived in the town and you’d meet each other, whether it’d be at the shops or whatever. Having a parent/teacher interview didn’t always involve coming to the school, you could have it anywhere really. Do you know what I mean? (Serbian group)

6.0 BUILDING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS INTO POLICY AND PRACTICE

Preliminary findings from this research were presented by the researcher formally and informally during a full-day meeting later in the same week that the final focus group was conducted (September 2011). This timing was requested in order that the teachers and principals at the four project schools could start to consider how the findings could inform their site planning for end of Term 3 and start of Term 4, 2011. The meeting was attended by principals from the four project schools, a range of teaching staff, the DECS project officer and the Health In All Policies Unit staff.

This report will now be discussed further by the DECS Project Officer with the teachers at the project schools to establish how they will be able to use the findings to increase their support for, and partnerships with parents; with the 4 principals and the DECS regional staff; and with DECS departmental level staff. DECS and SA Health’s Health In All Policies Unit will then also shape up policy recommendations which can be presented to their separate Chief Executives and to the Executive Committee of Cabinet of the South Australian Government.
APPENDIX 1 – MAKE-UP OF FOCUS GROUPS

1. A General English-speaking group (5 participants)
   An English-native speakers group with 4 mums and 1 dad, aged mostly in their mid-30s and 40s; several were children of 1st generation migrants from Europe. They had 2 to 3 children, ranging from age 1 to 7, with some others under 4 and one older. Two parents had children with special needs (autism), speech and development issues. Discussion held at a community centre.

2. An English-speaking Young/teen Mums group (9 participants)
   An English-native speakers group with 8 mums and 1 dad, aged mostly in their 20s but a few in their late 30s/early 40s with from 1 to 3 children aged 1 to 18; 2 had had teen pregnancies which interrupted their schooling. Several had children with special needs (autism, speech and development issues). Included at least one parent of Aboriginal background. Discussion was held at a community centre.

3. A General English-speaking group (8 participants).
   An English-native speakers group with 8 mums, aged in their mid-20s to early 40s, with 2 to 5 children aged 2 to 14. Some parents were children of European migrants. Discussion at school.

4&5. Two Aboriginal groups (13 participants)
   A mixture of English-speaking and native-language speaking parents. 8 mums, 3 dads, 2 grandmothers in two groups - either themselves of Aboriginal background, or have an Aboriginal partner with Aboriginal children/grandchildren. Parents aged mostly in their 20s to early 30s, with 3 to 7 children aged 3 to 18; some children with hearing problems. Discussions held onsite at 2 schools.

6. A Serbian-speakers group (5 participants)
   1 dad, 4 mums, aged in their late 30s and 40s, with 1-2 children of primary age. Some parents born in Serbia or Bosnia (of which one arrived since 2000), some born in Australia of parents who migrated in previous decades. Parents from 2 schools met for discussion at one school on one evening (more would have attended but for an unexpected funeral at short notice the day of the discussion).

7. A Somali-speakers group (5 participants??)
   4 dads, 1 mum, aged from early 20s to early 40s, with 1 to 8 children aged 1 to 21 (some children still living in Africa). All parents born in Africa, some had not come direct to Australia. Mix of proficiency in understanding and talking English, mix of education levels. Discussion at school with BSSOs.

8. An Indian group (Hindi/Punjabi speakers) (5 participants)
   1 dad, 4 mums, aged in their late 20s/30s, with 1-2 children of primary age (some children still living in Africa). All born in India, all spoke and understood English so did not need an interpreter. Mix of high school and higher education. Discussion held onsite at school immediately after school.

9. A Chinese-speakers group (5 participants)
   1 dad, 4 mums (1 grandpa visiting), aged in their 20s and early 30s, with mostly only 1 or 2 children of primary age; a mix of education levels (from primary-only to university). Parents who spoke both Chinese and ESL. Discussion at school one evening, with BSSO translating as needed.

10. New Arrivals group (11 participants)
    1 dad, 10 mums, a range of parent ages, with 1 to 6 children aged 1 to 16. A mixed group from 7 different backgrounds: Ethiopian, Sinhalese, Punjabi/Hindi, Arabic, Vietnamese & West African, with interpreters for Arabic & Indian languages, one mother interpreting for Ethiopian. Mix of proficiency in understanding and speaking English. Discussion onsite at school.
APPENDIX 2 – FOCUS GROUP QUESTION SCHEDULE

1. (as an icebreaker) What were their experiences of early learning, when about age 4 to 8?

2. Is there one memory that stands out where their learning experience was really positive, or they felt really supported. Are there any memories that stand out as barriers to their learning? (use “learning experiences” prompts list as necessary). How well can they read and write English (and their first language)?

3. Do they think their children will be different? Will they be better off than them? (expectations)

4. All the university research is saying that children’s literacy is fundamental to their future, so we want to find out where all these different parts fit in (show partnership diagram of School, Home, Community/Friends). Looking at this diagram, what’s really important in terms of children’s learning? What’s really supported?

5. The research also shows that parents can do a lot to help children’s learning, so I’d like you to tell me what you do at home (prompt: link back to their answers to question 1 about their own learning experiences ie if they liked x, do they do x with their children?)

   o Prompt: How do they do it; what does it look like; how do they feel about it; is it a regular, occasional or one-off activity? (use Literacy List for examples of activities, and check level of sophistication – eg speaking in one word answers vs full sentences).

   o Prompt: How did they come to do this (eg sing nursery rhymes, play with playdough – is this what their parents did, just what they think parents do with kids, saw on TV, heard from friends, learned from Kindy or childcare…)

6. If they are to continue with this, or even to do more/better/easier/richer things with their children around learning, what would most support this, and in what ways? What would need to be different? Could there be stronger links anywhere? Preferred location?

   o Prompt with partnership areas (School, Home, Community, Friends etc)

   o Prompt: Are they aware of any particular programs to do this (eg Smith Family, Seaton Central, recent parent workshops at the school or community?)

7. What factors affect their ability to do this? (prompt: key social determinants of health ie own education level or time at school, social connections, housing, English and non-English language skills, family situation/size/partner, family/others’ attitudes, racism, children/parents’ health, employment, income eg to buy materials, time; social access & location of support.

8. Can they give one good story and one bad story about engaging with their child/ren’s learning or getting help for this (prompt: getting information, asking for help, helping in the school, supporting homework eg listening to child read).

9. Would they like to make any other observations or comments about children and learning