Pre-packaging Preschool Literacy: what drives early childhood teachers to use commercially produced phonics programs in prior to school settings

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ABSTRACT Language-rich environments are key to overall quality in early childhood settings, including frequent child–staff interactions around picture books and dramatic play. In a language-rich environment, explicit teaching of literacy concepts, such as phonics, is embedded in authentic and meaningful situations where alphabet letters and sounds are taught in a context meaningful to the child. Recent research, however, suggests that the use of commercial pre-packaged phonics programs (such as Letterland and Jolly Phonics) is widespread in prior to school settings in Sydney, Australia. Little is known about why early childhood teachers choose to use such programs with children aged five and under. In the present study, thematic analysis of data from interviews with five early childhood teachers using commercial phonics programs found that their reasons were pragmatic rather than pedagogical. Motivations included the idea that the programs reduced their workload, provided tangible evidence to parents of their child’s ‘school readiness’, and served as a marketing tool to attract parents. Further analysis found that the teachers were unable to articulate what phonics and phonological awareness are and how they are learnt in early childhood.

The ability to read fluently requires the integration of many complex skills and concepts, including phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, a rich vocabulary, background knowledge of the world, and knowledge of the grammatical features of different genres including narrative and explanation (Snow, 2006; Christie, 2008; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Over the last three decades, research in early childhood language and literacy development has examined the skills and understandings about written text which are learnt informally in the years prior to school (Clay, 1991; Neuman & Dickinson, 1991; Makin, 2003; Snow, 2006; McLachlan, 2007). Through everyday interactions with familiar adults, especially through shared reading and play, young children come to appreciate that print conveys meaning which is fixed and unchangeable, that songs and rhymes are different from conversational speech, and that written text is different from visual images, although both are meaningful (Beecher & Arthur, 2001; Senechal et al, 2006).

The provision of a language-rich environment in early childhood settings is a major determinant of overall quality, which in turn relates to positive outcomes for children, especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Dickinson et al, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Poniitz, 2009). Features of high quality early childhood services include frequent staff–child interactions around picture books, regular opportunities for imaginative play, and sustained and reciprocal conversations between staff and children about subjects which are based on children’s interests and focus of attention (Flere & Raban, 2005, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). In language-rich classrooms, explicit teaching of literacy concepts is embedded in authentic situations (Stipek, 2006). For example, letters of the alphabet are taught in a context which is meaningful to the child (such as the
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letters in a child’s name) and new vocabulary is introduced in relation to a child’s immediate interests (Christie, 2008; McLachlan & Arrow, 2010).

Given the large body of evidence on effective pedagogies for supporting children’s emergent literacy development, it is important to investigate the motivations of early childhood teachers who, by contrast, choose to employ commercially produced, pre-packaged literacy programs (such as Letterland, Ants in the Apple and Jolly Phonics). Commercial phonics programs often employ a synthetic phonics approach, where children are instructed in letter sounds, or groups of letters in isolation, in a way which is systematic, explicit and rapid (Johnston & Watson, 2005). Such programs have been criticised on a number of grounds. First, they tend to concentrate on a narrow skills base (the relationship between a set of phonemes and graphemes) in a predetermined sequence, and thus are not able to meet the varied and rapidly evolving learning needs of each individual child (Wren, 2002). Second, they employ highly structured, teacher-directed approaches that rely on drill, practice and memorisation. Such practices are questionable in terms of pedagogical appropriateness for preschool aged children (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Neuman & Roskos, 2005). Third, the fact that commercial phonics programs often require teachers to follow a set script to develop children’s phonemic awareness and vocabulary knowledge (Ede, 2006) can be seen as undermining the professional knowledge of teachers and their ability to provide differentiated learning for their students (Duncan-Owens, 2010). Finally, such programs make strong claims for their success in teaching children to read; however, it is difficult to verify such claims (Osborn et al, 1997). Evidence for the efficacy of such programs is often generated and compiled by the program developers themselves, with limited or no peer-reviewed research (Duncan-Owens, 2008).

An additional concern with the use of commercial phonics programs is their cost. They are marketed with multiple programs and associated products and the price ranges from AUS$200 to AUS$2000, depending on the number of components purchased. Production of commercial reading programs is a growing industry (Duncan-Owens, 2008; Reeves, 2010). This is particularly evident in the United States of America (USA) where pre-packaged commercial programs, claiming to be based on reading research and to meet state and federal educational standards, are being increasingly employed by schools as they resort to employing ‘quick fix’ solutions to meet government literacy testing mandates (Fang et al, 2004).

Recent research has suggested that the use of commercial phonics programs, such as Letterland, Ants in the Apple and Jolly Phonics, in Australian prior to school settings is widespread with 36% of 263 early childhood teachers in New South Wales (NSW) surveyed stating that they use one or more programs in their preschool or long daycare classroom with children under five years (Campbell et al, 2012). This finding points to the need to consider the motivations behind teachers’ decisions to use such programs. Current evidence indicates that children’s literacy knowledge can be enhanced by explicit teacher-directed instruction in phoneme–grapheme correspondence and vocabulary knowledge, while engaging in stimulating child-focused activities such as shared reading, dramatic play, singing and experimenting with print (Britto et al, 2006; Connor et al, 2006; Pianta, 2006; Cabell et al, 2008). Recent studies suggests that quality preschool programs are ones that involve children spending more time in adult-led small group and individual activities, where instruction is provided through teacher questioning, modelling and scaffolding of children’s play, rather than the context of whole group ‘instruction’ (Sylva et al, 2007).

It has been suggested that early childhood teachers in NSW may be motivated to use commercial phonics programs with children prior to school because of the recent introduction of an ‘outcomes based’ assessment of all NSW children on entry to their first year of school, resulting in pressure on early childhood teachers to ‘prepare’ children for more formal school-based learning. In NSW, this assessment is known as Best Start (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2011). Similar assessment of children’s literacy and numeracy skills on entry to the first year of school occurs in some other Australian states and territories. Additional evaluation of children’s development on school entry is undertaken nationally (Australian Early Development Index), the results of which are linked to government funding. Further testing of children’s literacy skills at the age of eight years is also undertaken nationally (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy). In the USA, where accountability measures are linked to government funding, some preschool programs have begun to prioritise basic literacy skills, such as letter knowledge, which is
more easily quantified than less tangible, but equally important in oral language development (Dickinson et al., 2008). With the focus on increasing children’s literacy skills in the USA, there is a trend towards early childhood teachers using scripted lessons or scripted literacy programs with young children (Elliott & Olliff, 2008). In Australia, Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF), a national curriculum framework for children aged from birth to six years, requires educators to support the development of children’s literacy through intentional teaching practices such as modelling, open questioning, and engaging in sustained reciprocal conversations (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

Research has identified that inconsistencies may exist between what teachers believe about appropriate literacy pedagogy and their actual practices in the classroom. Such inconsistencies may be due to a mismatch between personal beliefs and external factors, such as needing to produce evidence of meeting government compliance requirements (Foote et al., 2004; Mesmer, 2006), or due to policy pressures (Stipek & Byler, 1997). These factors may influence motivation for using commercial phonics programs. Given that there is currently no evidence to support the efficacy of commercial phonics programs in enhancing children’s current or later literacy achievement, and the substantial costs involved in both money and time, this study aims to explore what motivates early childhood teachers to use commercial phonics programs with young children prior to school, and what early childhood teachers know about young children’s oral language and literacy development.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

The participants in this study were five early childhood teachers who were using a commercial phonics program with children in the year before school. The teachers were recruited via a large scale postal survey investigating whether or not they used commercial phonics programs. Respondents to the anonymous survey were invited on the survey form to indicate whether they were willing to participate in a follow up interview. Five respondents who reported that they use a commercial phonics program were subsequently recruited and engaged in a semi-structured interview with the first author. Participants were selected to cover a range of qualifications, levels of experience, type of early childhood service, and beliefs and practices regarding children’s emergent literacy development. The particulars of each participant are set out in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Service type</th>
<th>Not-for-profit or For-profit</th>
<th>Highest qualification</th>
<th>CPP used</th>
<th>Years of service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Preparatory School Based Community based</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td>Letterland</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>Not-for-profit</td>
<td>Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood) (college)</td>
<td>Ants in the Apple</td>
<td>15+ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Long Day Care</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td>Jolly Phonics</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>Community based Not-for-profit</td>
<td>Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood) (college)</td>
<td>Letterland &amp; Jolly phonics</td>
<td>15+ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>Long Day Care</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education (Primary) and Diploma in Social Science</td>
<td>Letterland</td>
<td>15+ years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Participants

**Data Collection**

The five participants were interviewed individually by the first author at their early childhood service. With the participants’ permission, the interviews were audio-recorded on a small unobtrusive digital recorder. The duration of the interviews ranged from 33 minutes to 67 minutes.
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The interviews were structured using standardised open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A), where all participants were asked the same set of questions to obtain data so as to compare one set of responses to another.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were read several times by all authors and initial analysis began by discussing the underlying ideas and assumptions evident in the interviews. Gradually we identified patterns in each interviewee’s responses which we grouped into tentative categories or themes on the basis of repetitions as described by Ryan and Bernard (2003). Using the constant comparative method both within and across interviews we gradually refined our interpretations and identified three key themes or concepts. These constitute the underlying ideas, assumptions and ideologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which motivated the teachers’ decision to use the commercial phonics programs in their classrooms.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from the interviews regarding the teachers’ motivations for using the commercial phonics programs. These were based on the perceived value of the programs in: (i) reducing teachers’ workload; (ii) providing visible evidence to parents that they, the teachers, were preparing children for school; and (iii) serving as a marketing tool to attract new parents to enrol their children at the setting. Cutting across each of these themes were deeper views about what literacy is and how it is learnt. The teachers were unable to articulate what phonemic or phonological awareness is, how it is learnt, and how it contributes to later reading development. We will now discuss each of the findings in turn.

Commercial phonics programs reduce workload. Four of the five teachers stated that they use a commercial phonics program because it provides many resources, such as teacher manuals, literacy lesson plans, alphabet flashcards, alphabet CDs, songs, picture books, games and worksheets for duplication, which they would otherwise need to create for themselves. This is evident in the following statements:

I think that the way we are using it [Letterland], and anything I created, I would use the same way as I am using this anyway. So it seems a bit like reinventing the wheel. (Kim)

Why keep a dog and bark yourself? Messrs Ants [Ants in the Apple] did it for me, or some other literacy genius did it, so I don’t have to. You can buy them. (Judy)

I like that there’s resources for it [Letterland]. Because a lot of the time the teachers can be making resources all the time, well, why do we do that when there’s already resources there? So let’s use the resources already out there. (Louise)

You get the posters, and you get the information, you get the books, you get everything! (Haley)

These statements reveal a number of assumptions about literacy development. Firstly, the teachers see ‘resources’ as playing a central role in children’s emergent literacy development. The choice is expressed as being one between either commercially produced products or time-consuming and self-made resources. There does not appear to be the recognition of a third option, which is to focus on the provision of an oral language-rich classroom with frequent shared reading where such resources are not necessary or have only peripheral value. Secondly, there is the assumption that the resources in commercial phonics packages are equivalent to or superior to those which the teachers could create themselves. One teacher even characterises the commercial product as created by a ‘literacy genius’. This suggests a lack of confidence in the teachers’ own professional knowledge or decision-making, as it is likely that resources created by teachers who know the children and their context intimately would be pedagogically preferable to a ‘one size fits all’ commercial product.
Commercial phonics programs promote children’s self esteem, which is connected with school readiness. All five teachers explained that they used the commercial phonics programs because they believe they enhance children’s ‘self-esteem’. Louise stated that:

Well, they [the children] love it [Letterland]. They really love it. I mean, you can see them, they ... feel good about things – themselves. Self-esteem is so important.

Further analysis enabled us to determine in more detail what the teachers meant by self-esteem and how they saw commercial phonics programs as promoting it. Two sub-themes emerged here. Firstly, children’s experience with more formal ‘school’ practices, such as skills-based group lessons and completion of worksheets, was viewed as preparing children for the first year of school. As Lisa commented:

I feel that if they know that [letters and sounds], if they know how to look at a home reader book, if they know where to write their name on a piece of paper, they are that little more ahead and they’ll feel a little more comfortable in a new environment.

Similarly, Louise stated:

When they go to school and they start just being introduced to these stencils of sounds and letters and they have no idea what they’re writing, it [Letterland] gives them a little bit of background information that they can draw on, and so they can use those skills ... and then they just feel so good about themselves cause they already know this.

Haley also considered that:

It gets their ears tuned to it, and I think it sets them off at school next year, some of them, have then some idea of what they’re doing ... they kind of feel it’s a real school kind of lesson.

Secondly, the teachers explained that the children’s ability to connect a phoneme with a grapheme would impress their parents and they would be praised for their ability, and this was seen as building children’s self-esteem. Louise explained that the children:

love it that they can point out things to their parents, like I can see a /k/ and I can see a /d/ and the parents respond, ‘cause they understand. They [the parents] go ‘oh my God, they’re learning something’ and they’re [the children] excited, then in turn will point out more letters to them [the parents].

Lisa also discussed how parents were impressed, stating that it was all about:

Just getting them to enjoy it, you know when their mum or dad comes to collect them in the afternoon, ‘oh listen to blah blah, you know, they made a /s/, great sound’. So mum and dad know about it.

These quotes suggest that the teachers perceive a chain of connections between children’s familiarity with worksheets and school readers, their ability to participate in formal structured group lessons, and parental praise, which in turn increases their self-esteem and leads to their school readiness. The children who have been exposed to commercial phonics programs will have the advantage of ‘knowing more’ when they start school, compared with other children who have not had such exposure.

Commercial phonics programs serve as a marketing tool. All the teachers referred to pressure by parents for some tangible indicator that their child is being ‘taught’ to read and write. Parents were said to be more likely to believe that a setting is offering a quality literacy program if they see that a commercial phonics program is in use. This in turn is viewed as giving the preschool or centre a competitive edge over other settings. For example, Kim stated:

The head ... said ‘I think we need to think about using something, some sort of commercial program, cause we want to be different to other preschools in the area. We don’t want to be the same as everybody else’. It was mainly parent pressure I think, and the head of the school deciding that would be a useful way forward.

All the teachers emphasised the parents’ approval and satisfaction with the use of the programs as is evident in the following quotes:
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They [parents] are very happy we are doing this Letterland business, very happy. (Haley)

They [parents] love it [Letterland]. They absolutely love it. And they love it that we take it [Letterland] from two [children two years of age], that we start it at two [two years of age]. (Louise)

They [the parents] want to know whether their child can have readers, why they don’t have readers. They want to know how often we use Letterland, why we use Letterland, why we don’t use the Letterland exercise books. (Kim)

They [parents] often want visual proof, if you want to call it that, of what their child is learning. (Judy)

I think they’re [parents] pleased that their children are being exposed to some sort of awareness of speech and language and letters and sounds and all of that ... they are not particular about what system [commercial phonics program] we’re using. (Lisa)

A closely related issue motivating the use of commercial phonics programs was the perceived expectations of parents. The teachers expressed the view that parents were motivated by competitiveness for their child to outperform other children, coupled with unrealistic perceptions of their child’s ability. These views are reflected in the following statements:

The parents in this situation [the service] are very concerned about when their child will learn to read, and they want their child to be ahead of everyone else. (Kim)

They’re [the parents] often looking for indication that their child is going to achieve, they want them to achieve ... well pity help us if they don’t achieve. They [the parents] want the edge, they want them [the child] ahead, all this ghastly stuff. (Judy)

[The parents] feel that once their child reaches the preschool room, we take children from two, that their children should be learning some form of letters, or alphabet ... you get parents in the two year old room wondering why their child is not doing it [phonics]. (Lisa)

These statements suggest that an important motivation for using the commercial phonics programs was teachers’ perceptions that this would please higher level management and parents. If so, this suggests that important issues to be addressed include teachers’ knowledge about early language development and emergent literacy, their professional decision making, and their capacity to articulate to parents and managers what research suggests are appropriate practices in teaching literacy in the prior to school years.

Implicit Views about What Literacy Is and How it is Learnt

In the course of the interviews, as teachers explained why they used commercial phonics programs, it was possible to discern aspects of their implicit views about what reading is, how best to support children’s understanding of written text, and what role the teacher plays in children’s learning. One teacher, for example, explained that she used Letterland in order to ensure that all staff in her several centres taught the same literacy program to all children across the age ranges from two to four years. This suggests a view of literacy as a skill that can be acquired in a staged manner, regardless of the knowledge, home experiences and dispositions of individual children.

This view is reflected in the following comment from Louise:

We need something that the teachers can use, go and use all the way through, and across the board. So if I move a teacher from a different centre to a different centre, they know where we’re at and what we’re doing ... When you’ve got so many staff, and a big centre, you know, especially when the twos move up to the threes, move up to the fours, you have the one program you’re working at, and that’s why I love Letterland.

This contrasts with an emergent literacy perspective which sees reading and writing as a dynamic form of meaning-making which is learnt in the context of purposeful interactions and which varies from child to child (McLachlan, 2007).

Any widespread use of pre-packaged literacy programs raises issues about the role of the teacher as a professional decision maker. Some of the interviewees touched on this issue, reporting
that they used commercial phonics programs according to their own purposes and did not necessarily follow the programs exactly as specified by the publishers, suggesting that they felt they had autonomy to make their own pedagogical decisions. As Kim expressed it:

I think it [Letterland] is quite flexible, but I think that it depends on the teacher. I think anything is adaptable, if you can work out how to adapt it ... that is more on the teacher rather than the program.

All the teachers stated that they engaged in practices which would be congruent with an emergent literacy play-based pedagogy, including building explicit instruction about sound–symbol correspondence into everyday activities, such as transitions, drawing attention to letters starting a child’s name, and scribing on children’s drawings. Lisa, for example, commented that:

We would do that [Jolly Phonics] in a formal group time, but throughout the day we do so much of that you know, like the child can just be playing with words and you’re sitting with them, and you say, listen to that sound, what other word can you think of that makes that sound at the beginning, and just stuff like that, so it’s just happening all day long.

Yet there appeared to be a disparity between teachers’ claims and their reported practices. For example, four of the five teachers decided to adopt a ‘letter a week’ strategy, some following the sequence of the alphabet, from A to Z. This is not the practice required by the commercial phonics programs, yet equally it is not consistent with an emergent literacy perspective which recommends teaching letters of the alphabet in meaningful contexts following the children’s interests. Louise rationalises this process in this way:

Oh, I just think it’s easier for parents to remember which letter we’re working on next. And I actually don’t think with Letterland it doesn’t really matter, ‘cause you’re actually teaching the character more than the /æ/, /b/, or the /i/. I just think it is easier to go through the alphabet, I don’t know, it’s just me, and everyone knows that parents know it, so last week we did /d/’ now we must be up to /e/.

Kim, on the other hand, could not provide a rationale, stating:

Letterland recommends we teach in a particular order, but we’ve just ignored that and just teach them from A to Z.

In other words, the teachers who use the commercial phonics programs flexibly are not necessarily introducing emergent literacy practices, but are rather substituting one form of skills-based, top-down practice with another. Again it is noteworthy that this is done in order to please parents in some instances rather than for pedagogical reasons.

Inability to Articulate What Phonemic Awareness and the Alphabetic Principle Are

It is claimed that commercial phonics programs teach reading through an explicit focus on phonics. During the interviews it became clear that the teachers who have chosen to use commercial phonics programs were not able to articulate what phonics, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and the alphabetic principle are and why they are foundational for subsequent reading and writing in the conventional sense of the word. The following statements are typical:

Isn’t phonological (pause) no, I don’t know phonological, is that like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5? ... phonemic awareness, I assume it’s just their knowledge of all the phonemes how they work with each letter. (Lisa)

That’s [phonological awareness] a university thing, I don’t get that. (Judy)

Basically I think it’s [phonemic awareness] the blending, yeah ... mmmmm [phonological awareness] I’m not sure about that. (Louise)

Phonics is listening to the sounds in words ... you know, it’s listening to the sounds that make up a word. (Haley)

The teachers explained that they had relied on the manuals provided by the programs, in-service training conducted by commercial phonics programs sales representatives, or watching others
engaged in lessons using commercial phonics programs for their understanding of phonological awareness. The following comments are typical:

I’ve just come up with what I would do [teaching phonics] from watching other people ... rather than going out and looking for research ... I know it sounds terrible ... by [watching] what she [primary trained teacher] does [Letterland lesson] is what I do from watching her, then I do a similar thing [Letterland lesson] during my time. (Kim)

Some of my new teachers have never been introduced to Letterland, so I have got to teach them how our program works, and so last year we actually got the lecturer [Letterland trainer] ... and she came for an in-service [i.e. in-service training]. (Louise)

We’ve done inservices [in-service training] about it [phonics], about Ants. We had the Ants people [commercial phonics programs owners] ... who wrote it [Ants in the Apple] came and gave an inservice training, well to us, and the parents. (Judy)

I used to go to them [in-service training] ... but I think people have different opinions and different ways [about phonics teaching] ... and you just don’t know which is right or which is wrong, or which is better or worse, but I think it’s still trial and error ... so it is kind of hit and miss sometimes. (Lisa)

This indicates that some teachers may be making decisions about the use of formal didactic methods with very young children without a sound knowledge base about how literacy is learnt and how they can support children’s understanding. This suggests that these early childhood teachers have a general lack of knowledge about early oral language and literacy development, and are in need of a greater understanding of phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, and phonics, and how these concepts should be taught to young children. This knowledge is not provided through commercial phonics programs.

Discussion

These findings raise many issues regarding the use of commercial phonics programs in prior to school settings. There is currently no research evidence to suggest that the use of these programs with children under five is effective in supporting children’s emergent literacy in the short or long term. Research has shown that a wide vocabulary, phonological and phonemic awareness, and the ability to use language to narrate, reason and predict in early childhood are the most robust predictors of reading in the primary school age ranges (Roskos et al, 2009). Alphabet knowledge is also a key predictor (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Foulin, 2005; Justice et al, 2006). Cross-cultural research has shed light on the diversity of literacy-oriented practices in homes and communities, indicating that there is no single pathway towards literacy (Neuman & Dickinson, 1991; Snow, 2006). Children differ in the ways they develop phonics knowledge. High quality centres are those which support the development of these concepts through shared thinking, extended reciprocal conversations between teachers and children which are intellectually challenging, follow topics of interest to children, and involve frequent discussion around picture books and other forms of literature (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Snow, 2006).

The reasons given by early childhood teachers in this study for using commercial phonics programs were pragmatic rather than pedagogical, and focused more on the needs of teachers and parents than on children’s learning and development. Commercial phonics programs were considered to save teachers’ time and parents were reported to mistakenly think that their children are learning to read prior to school. The fact that teachers report that children enjoy using the programs is not a justification for their use, as children enjoy many things which would be seen as inappropriate in early childhood services.

In Australia and internationally, it has been found that pre-service teacher knowledge of phonics is limited (Coltheart & Prior, 2006). The teachers in this study all graduated more than ten years ago when there was some reluctance to explicitly teach phonics. Therefore, the early childhood teachers in this study may be using commercial phonics programs because of insufficient knowledge about how to teach phonics effectively and appropriately with young children. Research has highlighted that pre-service teachers recognise the importance of teaching phonics,
yet they do not feel equipped to teach it effectively in the classroom (Fielding-Barnsley, 2010). Early childhood teachers generally lack the disciplinary knowledge needed to promote early language and literacy development (Cunningham et al., 2009), possibly because they have not received sufficient preparation in pre-service undergraduate courses (Joshi et al., 2009).

Commercial phonics programs are expensive and widely marketed and promoted as successful in teaching reading (Duncan-Owens, 2009), yet they focus on just one of the strands which is required for reading and comprehending written text, and they do so in a way which has not been validated by empirical evidence (Soler & Openshaw, 2007). Although research suggests there is merit in explicit instruction of vocabulary and alphabet knowledge embedded in shared reading and pretend play, commercial phonics programs’ scripted one-size-fits-all approach with preschoolers is questionable. The money invested in these programs could be spent on teacher training, picture books and more staff to interact with children.

Parental pressure appears to be a powerful influence driving the use of commercial phonics programs. This has been recognised by some educational authorities who acknowledge that there is ‘increased pressure from parents, who connect commercial phonics programs with becoming literate and ready for school’ (Queensland Studies Authority, 2011, p. 2). Parental education is important here, as is increasing the status of early childhood teachers, whose professional knowledge of children’s learning and development should take precedence in the best interests of the children. It is necessary for early childhood teachers to understand how language and literacy are learnt in early childhood, and to articulate the reasons behind their professional decisions. By justifying decisions that support high quality teacher interactions with children when engaging in a wide range of literacy practice, early childhood teachers are not only advocating for children, but also for other professionals.

Websites such as Best Start and the Australian Early Development Index inform parents that their child will be evaluated using a ‘checklist’ for cognitive skills once they commence formal schooling. Although such evaluations may be beneficial for national and state policy and planning, they may lead to misinterpretation by parents as to what contributes to school readiness. Early childhood teachers play a crucial role in being able to articulate the value of play-based literacy experiences, and by explaining that literacy development is not just knowing one subset of skills such as letters and sounds. Ongoing professional development and mentoring is pivotal in creating and continuing to provide a high quality language and literacy environment for young children (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009).

The findings of this study suggest that these teachers do not have the requisite knowledge of early childhood language and literacy development to enable them to make informed decisions about whether or not to utilise commercial phonics programs. Preschool teachers need to understand the importance of alphabet knowledge, phonemic and phonological awareness, and be able to adjust their literacy program to support individual children’s learning (Invernizzi et al., 2010). The fact that in-service teacher education programs are being provided by the manufacturers of commercial phonics programs raises concerns about the conflation of education services and commercial interests that promote their products as the ‘answer’ to teaching reading to preschoolers.

Implications

As noted above, the use of commercial phonics programs in Australian preschools and long day care centres is widespread, with an estimated one in three settings making use of them to some extent. This study has implications for the language and literacy curriculum of pre-service teacher education programs in universities and other higher education institutions. Graduates need to have the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about their language and literacy programs, and the confidence to justify their decisions to parents and other regulatory bodies.

With government focus on expanding the early childhood sector and the diverse qualifications of early childhood staff (e.g. from technical certificates through to four year university degrees), professional development of early childhood teachers needs to move towards more effective teacher training in phonics (Pianta et al., 2011). This signifies that there are implications for the provision of professional development programs (both pre-service and in-
service) and teacher mentoring and leadership, as focused professional development of early childhood teachers can lead to improved quality early childhood literacy programs. Effective professional development would help teachers to challenge and critically evaluate the quality of the content of commercial phonics programs and whether they wish to invest considerable parts of their budgets and time in these programs, which could otherwise be used with investing in professional development.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

It is important to note the small number of interviewees who participated in this study. It is acknowledged that the use of standardised open-ended interview questions may have limited the flexibility of responses of the participants. The interviewees were employed across a mix of middle and higher socio-economic areas which could affect what teachers and parents value in early childhood education. Whilst this study highlights the reasons why some early childhood teachers decided to use a commercial phonics program, future research is needed to examine the reasons behind the decisions of teachers who have chosen not to make use of commercial phonics programs in their classrooms.

Acknowledgements

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Note

[1] In NSW, long daycare is a form of non-parental group care that caters for children from six weeks to five years, typically for up to eleven hours a day for forty-eight weeks per year. Preschool is a service for children aged three to five years, operating during school hours and school terms. A preparatory service is a preschool which is attached to either a government or independent primary school. A Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) is a four year university teaching qualification, while a Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood) is a three year teaching qualification obtained from a College of Advanced Education. A Diploma in Social Science is a two-year children’s service qualification obtained through a technical college with a focus on birth to five years.

References


Pre-packaging Preschool Literacy


APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

What do you think is the most important area of literacy development of children, particularly the prior to school year?
Can you describe what you think the term phonics means?
Can you describe what you think phonemic awareness is?
Can you describe what you think phonological awareness is?
Did your tertiary studies cover phonics teaching?
Have you been able to find out any information about teaching phonics or the alphabet in the prior to school years since completing tertiary studies?
If you were to go out and find information about teaching phonics, where would you go to find it?
Do you teach children directly or indirectly about the letters of the alphabet, letter names specifically?
Do you teach children directly or indirectly the sounds of the letters? Or do you teach both letter names and sounds together?
Do you use a commercial phonics program?
How often do you use the commercial phonics program?
Do you use the commercial phonics program with small groups or whole groups of children?
Can you give an example how you have taught a child or group of children the letters of the alphabet?
Can you give an example of how you have taught the children the sounds of the letters?
Have you ever made your own resources to teach the letters and sounds of the alphabet?
What have parents asked you about teaching of letters and sounds?
Have potential parents who come through the service here to put their child on the waitlist ever enquired if you teach reading or teach alphabet letters and sounds?
What do you like most about using the commercial phonics program?
Are there any parts of the commercial phonics program you dislike, or choose not to use?
Could you describe in detail why you decided to use a commercial phonics program?
What elements of the commercial phonics program are you using? Why did you chose these specific elements?
Do you have the commercial phonics program’s teacher/teaching manual?
Can you describe how you actually use the commercial phonics program with the children, and can you give me an example?
Can you describe a teaching experience you’ve had with the children using the commercial phonics program? For example, your objectives, what happened in the experience, and the children’s responses.
Do you follow the commercial phonics program’s suggested format to teaching phonics? What sequence do you teach the letters in?
What are the children’s responses to the commercial phonics program?
What are the parents’ general responses to the use of the commercial phonics program?
Do the parents follow up with parts of the commercial phonics program at home?
If you did not have the commercial phonics program, do you think you would still teach about the letters and sounds of the alphabet?
How would you teach phonics without the commercial phonics program?
Have you seen all products that this particular commercial phonics sells?
Have you seen other brands of commercial phonics programs?
Do you think the program is flexible, in that you can adapt it easily to your daily routine or your centre/preschool?
Is there anything else you would like to add that you think I might have missed, or anything additional you’d like to add about how you teach phonics or literacy in your setting?
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