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# Australian Scholarship Group Early Intervention Research Program

## Early Literacy Research Background Paper

by Associate Professor Margaret Brown, ASG Early Intervention Research Program Director

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Literacy learning has had a long history of research. Despite this, we still do not have conclusive answers to questions about why some children experience difficulty with literacy, and how we should try to intervene to improve literacy levels. Statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the USA (1994; 1998) show that up to 40% of children in fourth grade have low levels of literacy with about 17-20% being diagnosed with significant reading disability. Similarly, in the UK, Rose (2005) cites evidence that 15% and 16% of children fail to reach the target levels in reading by the end of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 respectively. Recent work in Victoria, Australia, is showing similar outcomes. What is not yet clear is whether these literacy learning outcomes result from characteristics of the child, developmental experiences before children go to school, to the way we teach literacy, or a combination of these factors.

Nowadays, primary school teachers face the difficult task of working with students in their classrooms who have a wide range of needs and talents. Some children may have disabilities such as hearing loss or intellectual disability. Other may have special needs because they are intellectually gifted. Some children may experience difficulties in learning, especially literacy learning, either because English is the second language of the home or because they have learning difficulties. With this degree of diversity in the regular classroom, teachers often see a referral to a paediatrician as the best solution, citing learning problems as the reason for the referral. Associate Professor John Munro of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education - University of Melbourne, however, suggests that one possible explanation for low levels of literacy is that teachers are not clear about what to intervene in, or how to do it. Despite this, he also suggests that teachers can be trained to investigate literacy learning problems themselves.

Other recent research shows that experiences that children have before entering school are critical to their development and learning. But how do these experiences map into early literacy knowledge? Professor Bridie Raban's work shows that the amount and variety of experiences that children have both at home and in preschool that direct children's interest towards literacy events are critical. For instance, joint book reading with adults, listening to stories, recognising signs and symbols, pretending, expressing one's self in many ways, cement children's understanding that these skills are fundamental to our social and cultural lives. As Professor Raban shows, exploring and understanding the purpose of these literacy events lay the foundations for the development of more sophisticated skills that children will need to 'crack the code' of reading and writing.

These more sophisticated skills include understanding the alphabetic and phonemic (sounds of the letters) rules, different forms of language (genres), and strategies for effective reading and writing. We also know that a wide knowledge of vocabulary is very important, as are children's attention, their overall ability and their memory. Clearly the more formal reading and writing process requires that these abilities work effectively together, but individual children will have varying levels of ability.

It is clear that, while the majority of children experience few literacy learning problems, a significant proportion of the population do and this is unacceptable today. Literacy learning is a complex task and the outcomes we see in children will depend on many factors. The research to be undertaken at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education with the support of the Australian Scholarships Group has two broad aims. First, it will describe the very best ways to prepare children in literacy in the years before they go to school. Secondly, for those children who will inevitably still encounter literacy learning difficulties, the research will assist teachers to unravel the factors that impact on an individual child's performance and use efficient and effective strategies to teach literacy skills. The outcomes of the research will benefit all children through increasing our understanding of how children become literate and will have particular importance for parents, teachers, and children experiencing literacy learning difficulties.

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**Australian Scholarships Group Early Intervention Research Program**, conducted under the auspices of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne and housed at the University's Early Learning Centre in Abbotsford, Melbourne, provides a longitudinal investigation of early learning and literacy development from a multi-disciplinary perspective. The establishment of the program confirms the Melbourne Graduate School of Education's focus on delivering high-impact, best practice research.

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**For more information about the Australian Scholarships Group Early Intervention Research Program:**

- Visit ASG's website: [www.asg.com.au/asgeirp](http://www.asg.com.au/asgeirp) for a comprehensive collection of information about the Program – updates will be posted regularly.
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