

## Kids and Kindergartens

### Access to preschool in Victoria

Janet Taylor

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This is the latest publication in the Brotherhood of St Laurence's valuable longitudinal study *Life Chances* which traces a group of children born in two inner Melbourne suburbs in 1990. By the time the children are four, over half of the families had moved elsewhere, mostly to other parts of metropolitan Melbourne. The sample of children is thus becoming a window on to family life in a broader range of contexts than the original inner urban location. The Brotherhood of St Laurence is to be commended for undertaking a study of this kind which is expensive and arduous. It has yielded important findings which should be heeded in policy and program development. This report is of particular significance in the light of growing research which demonstrates the long term educational advantages to children who receive intellectually and socially enriched preschool education.

In an earlier review (*Children Australia*, 20, 2, pp 29-30) the children were described at three years of age. This publication is based on interviews conducted in 1995, before these children were due to commence school. At this point in the life of the study, 149 children were able to be traced, with a small but inevitable loss of subjects. Both poor and affluent families are over-represented in the sample, reflecting both the development of public housing estates and the process of gentrification which has occurred in the inner city. Such a sample provides an excellent opportunity to explore how socio-economic status shapes the life chances of children.

Over a third of the children in the sample come from low income families. Of these half had parents of Non-English Speaking Background, one third were single parents, and only half of the fathers and one fifth of the mothers were in paid employment. These families were also more likely to have more children than the other families in the study.

This report examines the impact of the restructuring of preschool services on this cohort of children. The changes occurring in preschool education in Victoria at this time involved an increase in kindergarten fees and a greater devolution of responsibility to parents for the financial and general management of kindergartens.

The study found that 76% of the children from low income families attended kindergarten and 80% of the children from the other families attended kindergarten. While this does not indicate a significant difference, the children from more affluent families who were not in kindergarten were more likely to be in day care arrangements. Moreover, the children from lower income families were significantly less likely to have attended three year old kindergarten programs as these are not subsidised. Kindergarten fees were reported to be a major issue for low income parents, even when they received a rebate. In contrast, the complaint of some higher income parents in relation to access was not financial but the

restricted hours of kindergartens which did not suit parental employment commitments.

Like the earlier reports, this one is well written and presented, with methodological and technical details included in the appendix for those interested in this. The first chapter sets the stage, giving an overview of the longitudinal study and providing a brief but excellent summary of the history of kindergartens in Victoria and the recent changes to policy. Following this the data relating to the children's participation in kindergarten and other forms of preschool and day care, and parents' perceptions of the kindergarten experience are presented. There was generally a high level of satisfaction with the program itself, except for a few mothers of Chinese background who felt kindergarten was not adequately teaching the children English. Most parents however, saw kindergarten as valuable in preparing children for school and developing their social skills. Some mothers also spoke of the break it gave them from the constant demands of caring for their children with the amount of learning.

As in previous reports, brief parental quotes are used effectively to bring to life the range of responses. This is enhanced by the use of case vignettes which capture representative types of responses relating to kindergarten and set these within the family context. Thus, for the low income families who find kindergarten fees a burden, we see this in the context of other stressors such as health problems, retrenchment or language difficulties.

The low income parents were less likely to be involved in running the kindergarten and those parents who were involved found it a heavy responsibility on top of their other commitments.

The devolution of management was also seen by some parents to be inappropriate, particularly in relation to continual fund raising. Obligations as employers such as the requirement to declare staff redundant, the instability of the committees reflecting the brief period of parental, and the difficulties arising in a local community in relation to some families' inability to pay fees, combined to create a problematic situation for many kindergartens.

The report pays particular attention to the small number of children who did not participate in any form of kindergarten or preschool program, and these are examined case by case, highlighting the issue of fees and other disadvantages of these children and their families. In a couple of cases the children had prematurely started school and were experiencing difficulties. This has long term educational and social implications, which could prove costly to the society as well as the child, and which highlight the short sightedness of creating barriers to participation in preschool education.

