

## Ready to learn? Mill Park Heights Primary School's Pre-Prep Program

Mill Park Heights Primary School Principal Deborah Patterson faced a problem. Increasing numbers of parents were pressuring her to enrol their children before they were emotionally, intellectually or socially ready. Their demands contradicted the advice of kindergarten teachers who had assessed their children to be too immature to cope with the challenges of school. In Victoria children had until age six to start prep<sup>1</sup> but could begin from the age of four years and nine months. In 2009, Patterson attempted to convince 22 sets of parents to delay enrolling their children until 2010, but discovered that 16 had gone ahead to place them in other local schools.<sup>2</sup> As an educator, she was keenly aware of the potential hazards.

Patterson saw that children who commenced school before they were ready often struggled to make friends, pay attention in class or cope with structured tasks. This frequently resulted in low-achievement and emotional or behavioral problems which could endure through primary school and beyond. There was also evidence to suggest that younger children were significantly more likely than older classmates to be diagnosed with problems such as ADHD. One US study suggested that as many as 20 percent of children diagnosed with ADHD didn't have developmental issues but had simply commenced school too soon.<sup>3</sup> In Finland, widely recognised as having one of the world's best education systems, children typically started school between the

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This case was written by Marinella Padula for Professor John Alford, Australia and New Zealand School of Government as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation.

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<sup>1</sup> The first year of formal schooling is known as the prep or preparatory year in Victoria and Tasmania.

<sup>2</sup> Gough, D. 'Strapped for cash, parents push for two years' prep' *The Age*, 28 August 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Elder, T. 'The importance of relative standards in ADHD diagnoses: Evidence based on exact birth dates' *Journal of Health Economics*, 17 June 2010.

<sup>4</sup> McNeilage, A, 'Students may be disadvantaged by starting school at 5 years old' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January 2014.

ages of six and seven. Prior to this, they usually attended state-funded pre-schools and child-care centres. Children in Singapore, South Korea and Shanghai also started school at a similar age. By contrast, Australian students were, on average, just over five years old.<sup>4</sup> Many education specialists endorsed a deferred start to formal education with research suggesting that children's development was better suited to play-based learning during the early primary years.<sup>5</sup> Lack of school-readiness was an ongoing problem at Mill Park Heights, one of the largest primary schools in Victoria with approximately 1000 students. Kindergarten places were in short supply, meaning some children did not get the opportunity to interact with their peers prior to formal education. The school community was also very ethnically diverse; significant numbers of children came from non-English speaking homes. Veteran local teacher, Carol Vidmar, taught at a nearby school and observed that literacy levels among incoming students were in decline; some students were barely able to form coherent sentences: "What has stood out is the lack of oral language skills as they enter school," she said. "From an educator's point of view, kids are not reaching the benchmark level and we need to ask why. How can we teach kids to read and write when they don't know what things are?"<sup>6</sup>

When Patterson tried to dissuade parents from sending their children to school prematurely, the usual response was that they couldn't access or afford any suitable alternatives. The financial strain was too much for many parents in the outer northern "mortgage-belt" suburb. Children who had been assessed as developmentally delayed in two or more areas (as per Education Department guidelines) were entitled to an extra year of government-funded kindergarten but most children who weren't ready for school would not meet the eligibility criteria. Also, some parents didn't want their children to just repeat "kinder" but take a program more focused on preparing them for school.

Australian Education Union state president Mary Bluett confirmed the existence of the problem, claiming that some parents were shopping around for schools that would allow their child to repeat prep. "It does happen, particularly with working families, where a kid may have been in childcare and it's a lot cheaper to send them to school," Bluett said.<sup>7</sup> Some parents deliberately enrolled their children in one school with the intention of commencing prep in another school the next year to avoid the stigma of repeating a grade. Others decided to use the pre-prep programs offered by some Catholic and independent schools as an alternative to childcare which, in some instances, was more cost effective.

Reflecting on 2009, "We took the high moral ground on the issue and supported the kinder teachers' assessment," said Patterson, "but we weren't considering the financial factors and other issues for parents who couldn't keep their children at kinder or pre-school for another year...I can see the dilemma that parents are in and often they cannot even get a second year of kindergarten. In our area of Whittlesea, only one kindergarten has any vacancies for next year."<sup>8</sup> As 2010 progressed and the 2011 school year approached, Patterson knew she'd soon face a new group of parents with the same old problem.

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<sup>5</sup> Whitebread, D. 'School starting age: the evidence' University of Cambridge, 24 September 2013, [www.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cam.ac.uk), Accessed: April 2014.

<sup>6</sup> 'Literacy levels fall' Whittlesea Leader, 18 August 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Gough, D. 'Strapped for cash, parents push for two years' prep' The Age, 28 August 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Gough, D. 'Strapped for cash, parents push for two years' prep' The Age, 28 August 2011.