

Discussion Paper 1: A call for high quality early childhood education in the early years of school in Western Australia. January 2014

The following discussion paper is presented by the

Alliance for High Quality Education in the Early Years of Schooling

Consisting of



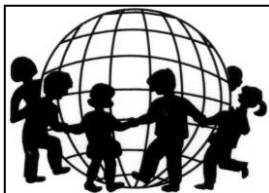
Early Childhood Australia: West Australia Branch



Early Years in Education Society



Early Childhood Teachers Association of Western Australia



OMEP: World Organisation for Early Childhood Education

A call for high quality early childhood education in the early years of school in Western Australia

This paper has been written in response to the growing concerns from educators of children in the early years of school (kindergarten to year 2) and university teacher educators who are experiencing first-hand a rapid increase in the formalisation of the early years of schooling in many classrooms in Western Australia (The West Australian, 2013). Concerns for the general and long term health and wellbeing of young children have surfaced in the early childhood profession as we witness increased pressure placed on improving school achievement in national literacy and numeracy tests (King & Janson, 2009; Wescombe-Down, 2013).

Formalisation of the early years of school and pressure on schools to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes has resulted in lack of time in the early years' timetable for children to learn in more active ways. We are concerned that sector directives, the translation of recent media reports and pressure from sections of the community who do not understand the full value of play-based learning for young children will result in a further narrowing of the curriculum and the use of even more formal teaching strategies in the early years of school. Increasingly it is being observed that long blocks of formal, teacher directed instruction begins in some schools as early as Kindergarten, four years prior to children completing their first NAPLAN test, further devaluing play-based learning during the very formative years of learning.

International research on brain development and early learning environments proves it is paramount for young children to be engaged in high quality early childhood education programs if later academic success is to be achieved (Fleer, 2011; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Shonkoff, 2011; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). It would seem from anecdotal evidence that the meaning of 'high quality' early childhood programs has been poorly understood or misinterpreted by some educators and professional development providers. The result is a push down of more complex content to younger and younger children who have not been afforded the time to accommodate foundation learning and skills.

The 'earlier is better' formalised teaching approach embraced by many schools with the intention of improving later educational outcomes (Laevers, 2007; Whitebread, 2012, p. 3) has missed the point that young children need to experience a rich range of child centred, hands on, play-based experiences and intentional teaching to develop the early learning required for future academic achievement. The current emphasis on achieving improved literacy and numeracy outcomes through more structured programs comes at the expense of rich play-based learning (Fleer, 2011) which has experienced a significant decline in many schools in Western Australia. Play-based learning, where children are active participants, can also have a positive impact on developing and improving literacy and numeracy learning.

The Value of Play in Early Years Learning

'The value of play is increasingly recognised, by researchers and within the policy arena, for adults as well as children, as the evidence mounts of its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional well-being (Whitebread, 2012, p. 3).

Play is a child's natural dominant learning approach and contributes to their knowledge and skill development across the cognitive, social/emotional, creative and physical domains, while also providing a solid foundation for future learning (Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). Therefore, it should be given serious consideration in the design of learning programs in the early years of school as recommended in the Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009).

Vygotskian theory recognises play as the leading activity shared between young children and their educators. Effective learning takes place when it is tailored to the child's individual stage of development and understanding (DEEWR, 2009; van Oers, 2007). This is visible in classrooms where a more child-centred approach to learning is implemented (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). These learning activities have relevant purpose to each child and accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity.

When educators and young children co-construct learning through play activities, cognition and imagination work together in the learning process and both develop in complexity (Fleer, 2011). The increasing complexity of shared learning between the child and teacher forms a bridge between play and more complex learning. Therefore, it is vitally important that early years classrooms retain learning centres and activities which offer children opportunities to engage in meaningful play-based learning experiences. Without the opportunity to develop their cognitive and psychological resources through play, "children will find it difficult to engage in the literacy and numeracy programs that governments are advocating" (Fleer, 2011, p. 236).

A high quality early years learning environment offers a balance between child-initiated and teacher-directed learning activities. Conversations about what is learnt and opportunities to make connections between learning areas occur as teachers and children discuss shared knowledge and understandings. This is referred to as 'shared sustained thinking' and has been found to be a high level measure of quality early learning programs that promote robust early learning across a range of learning areas (DEEWR, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

Impact of Standardised Testing in the Early Years

School accountability and funding to improve literacy and numeracy achievement in relation to standardised benchmarking tests continues to build across Australia. In Western Australia the impact of this pressure on schools acutely affects kindergarten, pre-primary and year one classrooms. Kindergarten children are regularly tested on 'sight' words learnt by rote, reading, knowledge of sound patterns of spoken Standard Australian English and written symbols of the English writing system. In pre-primary, children's understanding, knowledge and skill in these areas are 'tested' using the *On-entry Assessment test* or *Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS)* assessment program. The stated purpose of these 'tests' is to use the results to tailor relevant, timely learning programs designed to build on essential learning and skills. Sadly in some schools this is not the case and results are used to 'measure' a child's capability and progress towards achieving school attainment targets.

School targets embedded in whole school planning is another factor emerging as a catalyst for the increasing pressure on young children. The practice of mapping back expected school literacy and numeracy achievement targets from national benchmark tests to set expectations leading up to testing years has become a common practice. Reports of unrealistic expectations of what children 'should' achieve in the early years have emerged where knowledge of best practice in early childhood learning and teaching is ignored or not fully understood by those designing whole school plans,. As a consequence, young children who are just beginning to become literacy and numeracy learners can now be labelled as failing to meet set targets, often mislabelled too soon and are subjected to a narrowing of the curriculum in order to 'catch them up'.

International and national research shows that 'testing' often results in narrowed curricula (Reid, 2009). When 'teaching to the test' occurs, the design of learning programs is changed to match the narrowly defined developmental pathway represented in standardised tests (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2008). This phenomenon is currently being observed in early years classrooms in Western Australian schools. Of added concern is the apparent limited transparency in the assessment process. Parents/guardians do not attend assessment sessions; in some cases, they are not informed of the test results and may be unaware of potential cultural and linguistic bias in the test results (Salinger, 2003).

Western Australia leads the nation in universal access to kindergarten education, however, this does not mean that consistent, high quality programs are provided across the State or even to nationally prescribed standards.

Finally, as a result of the pressure to improve literacy and numeracy test results, there are increased indicators of stress and mental health problems (Whitebread, 2013). Prolonged stress-related anxieties related to sitting for long periods in order to complete teacher-assigned tasks can ‘actually turn off thinking processes and do more harm than good’ (Nagel, 2013). The WA Commissioner for Children (Scott, 2013) confirms that 20 per cent of five-year-old children have significant behaviour problems, and ‘a doubling in the number of suspension notices of pre-primary students in 2012 reinforces this point’ (p. 6). When children are pressured to perform beyond their current capabilities and development, an environment is created in which they feel unable to meet expectations, and they see themselves as failures (King & Janson, 2009). This has a direct influence on self-esteem and motivation to learn which, in turn, contributes negatively to their attitude to school (Department of Education and Children's Services, 2006). The early development of negative self-worth, if prolonged, can present a long term mental health risk for children particularly if additional risk factors are present (Shanker, 2013).

Clearly, children who struggle to perform at a ‘satisfactory level’ in an increasingly formal learning environment, who sit for extended periods and attend to mandated tasks covering abstract content they may not be ready for, will not develop a ‘sense of belonging’ necessary to give them the best start in life (Ministerial Council of Australian Government, 2008). Advocacy groups are now voicing serious concerns about the potential negative impact on young children as a result of increased pressure to increase the intensity of teaching and assessment throughout the early years and the focus on preparing children for standardised tests. Back-to-basics-teaching ‘intensity’ for the purposes of ‘hurrying the child’ during the early years of schooling raises serious questions (Elkind, 2001) concerning the quality of contemporary early childhood education in Western Australia.

Enriching the Curriculum

There is no doubt that all Australian Governments recognise the importance of high quality early education. This was acknowledged in 2008 with the signing of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians where it is written that the ‘Australian government commits to supporting the development and strengthening of early childhood education, to provide every child with the opportunity for the best start in life’. This statement is also reflected in the Australian Curriculum and the Early Years Learning Framework.

The Australian Curriculum gives a clear indication of the content and achievement levels required by children in the early years of primary school. A wide variety of experience and multi-modal ways of learning is prefaced in this document (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2010).

In 2013 the West Australian Minister for Education informed all schools they are now required to meet the National Quality Standard (NQS) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2013) in early years classrooms to Year 2. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is embedded in the NQS and clearly articulates a framework for high quality learning outcomes for young Australian children however; anecdotal evidence has suggested that up until now it has been ignored in many Western Australian schools. It urges educators to provide opportunities for “*children to become active and involved participants in learning*” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 32).

Intentional teaching, which is featured in the EYLF, calls for educators to be deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions while cautioning against defining intentional teaching as rote learning or continuing with traditions simply because it is the way things have always been done (DEEWR, 2009, p. 45). The key to providing rich learning and teaching programs of high quality is the

careful assessment of learning and reflective practice of educators to thoughtfully monitor the effectiveness of children's learning in the context of the classroom.

We congratulate educators who design learning opportunities for young children based on a combination of evidence collected from careful observations of children in the classroom and test results to inform future teaching plans. These educators choose the best possible balance of motivating and engaging activities including intentional play-based teaching to assist children to learn.

There is no research to suggest that teaching young children in a more formalised way, earlier in their life, will increase deeper understanding of literacy and numeracy concepts as they grow older. Elkind (2012) warns against the risks of early formal academic instruction and suggests that even if a child can 'know something' by verbally repeating as instructed, it does not necessarily follow that the child has developed an understanding of the concept taught.

Conclusion

We call for further and extended discussion of the definition of high quality early childhood education to be conducted in Western Australia. Discussions and forums should include educators, parents and carers, school administrators, researchers, education policy makers and the media working with and for young children. All discussion should be based on national and international evidence of best practice for teaching young children. Knowledge of the principles, practices and pedagogy mandated in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework and content material of the Australian Curriculum should underpin the conversation.

We urge educators and school administrators to engage with the implementation of the National Quality Standard (NQS) and realise it as an opportunity to examine and improve the quality of teaching and learning programs based on the seven quality areas of the NQS.

We believe that high quality education in the early years rests ultimately in the hands of teachers who are supported to plan and deliver robust learning programs and who teach in ways they know and understand are best practice for young children.

We believe that high quality educators must be wholly supported by school principals who understand and support the principles and practices of providing a quality early years education.

Endorsed by:

We, the undersigned early childhood professional advocacy and leadership groups and associations, unequivocally endorse this paper and demand high quality teaching and learning programs for all young West Australian children:

- Early Childhood Australia: West Australia Branch
- OMEP: World Organisation for Early Childhood Education
- Early Years in Education Society
- Early Childhood Teachers Association



This paper is also endorsed by the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia

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