

Action needed on play based learning



The State School Teachers' Union of WA has called on the state government to secure all early childhood students' right to access play-based learning (PBL) at WA schools.

The union launched its Play is Learning campaign at its recent Early Childhood Educator Conference, urging the government to act immediately and decisively to secure PBL practice in the early years of WA schooling.

SSTUWA President Pat Byrne said play based learning was vital in utilising children's play as a context for learning.

"It is recognised as a highly effective building block in bringing children's learning to a higher level, it stimulates children's cognitive, emotional and social development," she said.

"Evidence based research shows that adult involvement in children's play can extend learning opportunities within the play itself,

through the provision of developmentally appropriate play experiences."

The union surveyed 617 early childhood teachers (ECTs), school administrators and principals on early childhood education (ECE) from October to December last year.

Results revealed more than 70 per cent of those surveyed experienced difficulties in trying to implement a play-based curriculum in WA classrooms.

Director of Early Childhood Education at Murdoch University, Dr Sandra Hesterman, used the responses as the basis of a research paper, *The State of Play in WA*, the results of which were also released at the conference.

Ms Byrne said research has shown comprehensively and conclusively that PBL has far reaching benefits for children, including improved academic outcomes, wellbeing, creativity, problem-solving and social skills.

"The biggest issue we have is many people see PBL as just play, but this is not the case," she said.

"PBL is when the teacher sets up an environment with a range of activities that spark open-ended inquiry experiences and allow the child to explore what interests them, with the teacher playing a supporting role in facilitating learning when required.

"Our members and early childhood advocates have cited a decline in child-initiated and self-directed play in recent years from Kindergarten, Pre-Primary and Year 1 and 2 classrooms as a result of an increasing tendency towards more formalised learning at earlier stages.

"The SSTUWA supports a state-wide play strategy which outlines the benefits of PBL and promotes a balanced approach between PBL and teacher-led explicit instruction.

“Explicit instruction has its place integrated within a play-based model, but a state-wide play strategy needs to be clearly articulated under the leadership of the department to ensure that principals, educators and parents share an understanding of early childhood pedagogy and an appreciation of its importance for the wellbeing of young children.

“Our members are concerned that the setting of premature targets in early learning is having a negative effect - too much emphasis is being placed on formal assessments for young children at a very young age, the consequence of which is to limit the extent of PBL in K-3 classrooms.

Ms Byrne said teachers were under increasing pressure to meet assessment outcomes dictated from above by people who do not work with young children.

More than 80 per cent of survey participants supported more PBL in early childhood classrooms.

“The curriculum expectations are far too great for younger children, there is a lot of pressure for them to learn,” one respondent said.

“Children are not given the opportunity to discover, create, interact and gain confidence when they are being inundated with an overloaded curriculum.”

Another called for “less pressure on school leaders and teachers to achieve NAPLAN results as this interferes with a focus on play-based learning”.

Recommendations from Dr Hesterman’s research paper include ECTs being consulted on PBL pedagogies and ECE curriculum development, the provision of professional learning on PBL to non-ECE teachers and school leaders and for a review on reporting requirements for ECE.

For more information on the campaign go to playlearning.org.au

