Young children need a rich range of child-centred, hands-on, play-based experiences and intentional teaching to develop the early learning required for future academic achievement. 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; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). The misinterpretation of ‘high-quality’ early childhood programs is resulting in pushing down more complex content to younger and younger children who have not been afforded the time to accommodate foundational learning and skills.

The ‘leaner is better’ formalised teaching approach embraced by many schools with the intention of improving later educational outcomes (Laerres, 2007; Whitebread, 2012, p. 3) seems to miss the point that young children need to experience child-centred, play-based experiences combined with 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.

Impact of standardised testing in the early years

In Western Australia the impact of this pressure on schools now acutely affects kindergarten, pre-primary and Year 1 classrooms. School targets embedded in whole school planning are a catalyst for the increasing academic pressure on young children. As a consequence of inappropriate literacy and numeracy targets, young children, who are just beginning to become literate and numeracy learners, can now be labelled as failing to meet set targets. Child advocacy groups are voicing serious concerns about the pressure to increase the intensity of teaching and assessment in the early years and the focus on preparing children for standardised tests. There is no research to suggest that teaching very young children in a more formalised way will increase deeper understanding of literacy and numeracy concepts as they grow older. Intentional teaching, featured in the Early Years Learning Framework, 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 (DEEPS, 2009, p. 45). The key to providing rich teaching and learning programs of high quality is the careful assessment of the learning and reflective practice of educators, to thoughtfully monitor the effectiveness of children’s learning in the context of the classroom. 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 multimodal ways of learning is prefaced in this document (ACARA, 2010).

Conclusions

Discussion about high-quality early childhood education needs to be conducted across the Western Australia community. 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 understand best practice for young children. 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.

References and Resources


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