



HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION in the early years of school

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.

In 2013 an alliance was formed between four early childhood professional organisations—Early Childhood Australia (ECA), the World Organisation for Early Childhood (OMEPE), Early Years in Education Society (EYES) and the Early Childhood Teachers Association (ECTA). This occurred after listening to the growing concern from educators of children in the early years of school (kindergarten to Year 2), who are experiencing firsthand a rapid increase in the formalisation of many classrooms in Western Australia. This concerning

trend is seen as a result of the mounting pressure to improve school achievement in national literacy and numeracy tests in later years. The related impact of the formalisation of education on the long-term health and wellbeing of young children has sparked discussion among members of the alliance and the early years learning community about pedagogical practices and high-quality learning in the early years. In Western Australia, children turning four years have access to a kindergarten program at their local school.

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. As a result some West Australian classrooms are exhibiting concerning trends including:

- narrowing of the curriculum in the early years in order to 'teach to the test'
- misunderstanding the value of play-based learning for young children
- using long blocks of formal teaching in the early years of school

- misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the meaning of 'high-quality' early childhood programs by some educators and professional development providers.

We are concerned about sector directives, the translation of recent media reports and pressure from sections of the community who might not understand the full value of play-based learning for young children. These issues may 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, in some schools, long blocks of formal teacher-directed instruction begin as early as kindergarten, four years prior to children completing their first NAPLAN test, with less focus on play-based learning during the very formative years of learning.

International research on brain development and early learning environments proves that 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). 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 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) seems to miss the point that young children need to experience rich 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.

The value of play in early years learning

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. Educators and young children co-construct learning through play activities, creating a bridge between play and more complex learning (Fleer, 2011). 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.

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 literacy 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 (DEEWR, 2009, p. 45). The key to providing rich learning and teaching 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 multi-modal ways of learning is prefaced in this document (ACARA, 2010).

Conclusion

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.

Associate Professor Jenny Jay
Curtin University

Dr Marianne Knaus
Edith Cowan University

Dr Sandra Hesterman
Murdoch University

References and resources

- Alliance for High Quality Education in the Early Years of Schooling. (2014). *Discussion Paper 1: A call for high quality early childhood education in the early years of school in Western Australia*. Retrieved 9 May 2014, from www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/WAUpdateDecember2013.pdf.
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). (2010). *The Australian Curriculum: Science, Version 1.0*. Retrieved 9 December 2013, from www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/home.
- Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2009). *Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Barton, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Fleer, M. (2011). 'Conceptual play': Foregrounding imagination and cognition during concept formation in early years education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 12(3), 224–240.
- Laevers, F. (2007). The curriculum as means to raise the quality of early childhood education: Implications for policy. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 13(1), 17–29.
- McCain, M. N., Mustard, J. F., & Shanker, S. (2007). *Early years study 2: Putting science into action*. Toronto, Canada: Council for Early Childhood Development (CECD).
- Shonkoff, J. (2011). Protecting brains, not simply stimulating minds. *Science*, 333(6045), 982–983.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2009). Quality teaching in early years. In A. Anning, J. Cullen & M. Fleer (Eds.), *Early childhood education: Society and Culture* (pp. 147–157). London: Sage.
- Whitebread, D. (2012). *The importance of play: A report on the value of children's play with a series of policy recommendations*. Retrieved 4 December 2013, from www.importanceofplay.eu/IMG/pdf/dr_david_whitebread_-_the_importance_of_play.pdf.