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Play-based learning in Western Australian schools: Contributing to the process from policy to practice

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**PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN WESTERN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS:
CONTRIBUTING TO THE PROCESS FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE**
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INTRODUCTION

The role of play within Western Australian (WA) schools has been the subject of much debate since the publication, in 2016, of The Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Discussion Paper which called for a WA Play Strategy in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The Discussion Paper was the result of a 2013 consultation of ECA's WA based members. The members identified a noteworthy limitation to the opportunities that young children in WA have to play and that these opportunities are diminishing. Other significant organisations active within ECEC policy and practice in WA, including family, child and educator representation groups, publically agreed with this ascertain (Hesterman, Targowska & Howitt 2016). ECA agreed to advocate for play through the creation of a WA Play Strategy Initiative. Since the publication of the Discussion Paper in 2016, there have been further significant developments.

2017 saw WA based ECEC stakeholders debate the topic of play and align themselves in unity within the centrality of its importance for WA children in communities, homes, centres and schools. In a show of their commitment to Play-Based Learning, Early Childhood Education academics at The University of Notre Dame, Australia, The University of Western Australia, Australian Catholic University and The Independent Schools Association of Western Australia (AISWA) undertook to develop a textbook on play pedagogy for Australian Educators (Robinson, Treasure, O'Connor, Neylon, Harrison & Wynne, 2018). The Early Childhood Education Academics within all five WA Universities actively engaged in research on Play-Based Learning and an increased number of WA based peer reviewed publications on Play and Play Pedagogy transpired and continue to emerge.

In 2018 the textbook on Play-Based Learning was published, The WA state Department of Education cited Play-Based Learning as the number one priority for the coming year. The State Schools Teachers' Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA) commissioned the author of the 2016 Discussion Paper to undertake a largescale research project on state school based early childhood teachers' perspectives on Play-Based Learning in WA (Hesterman, 2019).

In 2019, the SSTUWA launched a 'Play is Learning' campaign mobilising its support for Play-Based Learning in WA schools. The Director of Early Childhood Education at Murdoch University and lead researcher on the SSTUWA study released her findings in a paper titled 'The State of Play in WA' (Hesterman, 2019). Hesterman's paper is a further call to action on Play-Based Learning in WA and progresses the conversation by recording and presenting both the commitment of WA teachers to Play-Based Learning and the difficulties and obstacles that they experience within the practical implementation of a Play-Based Curriculum in a WA policy and practice context. The paper speaks to a need for curriculum expectations within the early years of schooling to be less content focused and more process orientated, for a reduced emphasis on standardised testing, for Early Childhood teachers to be consulted on policy relating to pedagogical and curriculum development, for

Professional Learning to be provided to non ECEC trained teachers and leaders and for the ECEC reporting procedures in WA to be reviewed.

This paper, is presented in solidarity with the view that WA needs a Play Strategy that encompasses all the spaces and contexts that young children occupy. The authors seek to contribute to the conversation at a state level with policy makers, academics, educators, parents and children. The two main aims of this paper are firstly to provide a resource for educators to reflect upon and position themselves within this state wide debate and secondly to contribute to the debate itself by providing discussion points across four main tenets aimed at promoting further debate. In the first of these, we seek to succinctly outline the benefits of Play-Based Learning. In the second, we aspire to contextualise this in the policy structure of WA. In the third, we wish to reflect on the claim, which originated in the 2013 consultation with ECA members that play opportunities for children in WA are diminishing. Fourthly and finally, we hope to support a further step towards a state wide definition of Play and Play-Based Learning through presenting some assertions to invite additional discussion and debate on this important question. The semantics of play and the diversity of understandings around what play is and what play-based learning can offer vary widely and deeply. We seek not to put forward the definitive answer, but to support the conversation to progress.

THE KEY BENEFITS OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING

There is much evidence to support the contention that both free play and pedagogically supported play benefits children's social-emotional skills (Denham & Brown, 2010; Lillard et al., 2012), Maths skills (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer & Berk, 2010; Sarama & Clements, 2009a, 2009b), literacy and language skills (Hanline, Milton, & Phelps, 2009), as well as physical skills and risk-taking (Sandseter, 2013; Sandseter, Little, & Wyver, 2012). Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk and Singer's (2009) research presents imaginary play as the forerunner of self-regulation inclusion of reduced aggression, delay of gratification, increased social competence, and increased empathy. Imaginary Play also supports the competent expression of both positive and negative emotions, the modulation of affect and the ability to integrate emotion with cognition (Jent, Niec & Baker, 2011).

The research is clear that rich play opportunities support children to develop their executive function and higher level thinking skills (Graue, 2011; Moyles, 2012). In longitudinal studies, Russ and Fiorelli (2010) found that early imaginative play was associated with significantly increased critical and creative thinking in later years. When children play, they learn to focus, pay attention, remember, and inhibit impulses; as a result, they are able to plan, solve problems, and work toward a goal. These skills are also connected to increased achievement later in both social behaviour and in academic content, such as mathematics and literacy (Best, Miller, & Naglieri, 2011; Said, 2013). There is a growing body of evidence to support that these skills are stronger predictors of academic performance and outcomes than a child's intelligence quotient (IQ) or entry-level of mathematics or literacy skills (Visu-Petra, Cheie, Benga, & Miclea, 2011).

In over 20 longitudinal studies of Play-Based Learning, the benefits for children, economies and societies has been proven (Camiero & Heckman, 2003). Within these studies, children from Play-Based settings staying in school longer, were more likely to graduate from high school and more likely to graduate from university. In one longitudinal study, children who received additional play opportunities to others, earned on average 42% more 20 years later (Kellogg, 2015).

In The Perry Preschool Longitudinal Study, the longer the follow up data collection continued, the greater the evidenced benefits of Play-Based Learning became. At age 27, those who had been educated in the early years through play pedagogies had a 44% higher high school graduation rate and were four times more likely to have a university degree (Schweinhart, 2013). The North Carolina Abecedarian Research Project found similar findings with Play-Based Learning leading to greater engagement longitudinally within education, higher emotional competence and subsequent greater employment and economic outcomes (Campbell, Pungello, Burchinal, Kainz, Pan, Wasik, Barbarin, Sparling & Ramey, 2012).

In a longitudinal study comparing children who received play-based learning interventions and children who did not, disadvantaged children who received the play-based learning interventions grew up to match the earning capacity of undisadvantaged children thereby demonstrating the power of play in breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Walker, Chang, Vera Hernandez & Grantham-McGregor, 2011). In addition, the children in the Play-Based group scored higher as adults within cognitive test,

psychosocial tests, were less socially inhibited and had lower rates of depression and anger (Gertler, Heckman, Pinto, Zanolini, Vermeersch, Walker, Chang & Grantham McGregor, 2013).

In other large scale studies, early explicit academic instruction has been shown to be harmful to children's development over time. A study of 700 children engaged across play-based and formalised learning programs showed that the children engaged in early formalised learning had significantly reduced overall cognitive function by the time the children turned nine years of age. A greater focus on the skill of remembering had been achieved at the greater cost of limiting the higher level thinking skills (Macron, 2002).

In play, children become thinkers. Play enables children to integrate all six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of thinking skills (Nkhoma, Lam, Sriratanaviriyakul, Richardson, Kam & Lau, 2017). Within even the shortest of true play experiences a child incorporates remembering, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation and creation. With play as the foundation of both social competence and thinking skills, it is clear that the processes that support and engage children in play are of vital importance.

PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN A WA POLICY AND PRACTICE CONTEXT

WA State School Teachers have gone on record to say that the pressure to improve literacy and numeracy is contributing to non-play based approaches being utilised to support teaching and testing children in preparation for National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Year 3 (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013). Much other research affirms the ascertains of the 2019 SSTUWA study (Hesterman, 2019) that many early childhood educators believe that the introduction of the Australian Curriculum and the growing allocation of time for pre-academic and academic content in prior-to-school settings has compromised play-based learning approaches in our schools (Graue, 2011; Jay, Hesterman & Knaus, 2014; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Sandseter, Little & Wyver, 2012).

However, the ECEC policy context does not support reduced play. On the contrary, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) requires that all children in EC settings should experience quality teaching and learning that are play-based, social, communicative and culturally appropriate (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) and the National Quality Standard (NQS) calls for educators to scaffold children's learning by responding to their interests observed through play and to provide an environment that promotes learning through play (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2013). Furthermore, it is WA Government policy that requires all schools to meet these National Quality Standard (NQS) in early years' classrooms to Year 2.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) is the foundation of teaching and learning in early childhood throughout all Australian states and is strongly underpinned by the importance of play-based learning. The EYLF is also embedded within the National Quality Standard (NQS) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2013) and articulates a clear framework for high quality learning outcomes. However, our WA based research suggest that up to this point in time it has been ignored or misinterpreted in many WA schools. The EYLF and Quality Area One (Educational programs and practices) of the NQS has a specific emphasis on play-based learning and teaching. The use of play is a practice advocated for by the EYLF and NQS; however, there is a concern that the use of play within early childhood classrooms in Western Australia is diminishing. With over 80% of state teachers citing their support for Play-Based Learning and 70% communicating that there are significant challenges and obstacles to engaging pedagogically within Play-Based Learning in WA's early childhood classrooms (Hesterman 2019), it is imperative that we sit up and listen. Hesterman's finding further provide evidence to previously published claims regarding the same message (Jay, Hesterman & Knaus, 2014); Play-Based learning may be strongly present within our policy and evidence base but it is being compromised within practice.

The EYLF is based on sound, research based early childhood pedagogy and practice principles. The framework supports educators to engage pedagogically within play and give children the opportunity to explore, make choices and take initiative as competent learners (DEEWR, 2009). However, personal views and beliefs about play directly influence the quality of the play environments and experiences set up for children to engage with. Accomplishing a successful play-based approach in

early childhood education lies within the competence and confidence of the educator and leaders of the school. Both Hesterman's 2019 study and Barblett et al's 2016 study, report that play-based practices and pedagogies within Early Childhood classrooms in WA are under-utilised due to the value of play not being understood by school decision makers.

DIMINISHING PLAY OPPORTUNITIES IN WA

While there is much research on the benefits of play, only few researchers have identified what might be lost if play disappears from early childhood settings. If children lack opportunities to experience play, their creativity (Almon & Miller, 2011; Kim, 2010), and long-term capacities for metacognition, problem solving and social cognition, as well as in academic areas such as literacy, mathematics and science, is more likely to be diminished (Moyles, 2012). "It's not so much what children learn through play, but what they won't learn if we don't give them the chance to play. Many functional skills like literacy and numeracy can be learned either through play or through instruction. However, many coping skills like compassion, self-regulation, self-confidence, and the motivation to learn cannot be instructed. They can only be learned through self-directed experience (i.e. play)" (Oliver, n.d. cited in Special Education Resource Unit, 2013, p.1). Hence, it is essential that we seek to integrate our literacy and numeracy agenda into true play pedagogies rather than diminishing play opportunities in order to teach such skills explicitly.

It has long been acknowledged that children have a fundamental right to play (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). This is considered an important right of every child and learning through play is a key issue at the forefront of discussion within early childhood education in Australia. However, with the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, the growing allocation of K/PP time to academic content has consistently pushed play to the edges (Graue, 2011; Jay, Hesterman, & Knaus, 2014; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Sandseter, Little & Wyver, 2012).

The feedback from teachers is that the pressure to improve literacy and numeracy results has led to a decline in the amount and quality of play available to children in early childhood education settings. The disappearance of play in early childhood education is well documented with a plethora of international research contending that play pedagogy and play opportunities are being squeezed out of early childhood education in the United States of America (Miller & Almon, 2009). Our WA studies (Jay, Hesterman, & Knaus, 2014, Hesterman & Targowska, 2016; Hesterman, 2019) present concerns that pressure on schools to improve NAPLAN test results and a top-down reliance on formal teaching methods has diminished the importance of play in early childhood settings with findings suggesting that play-based practices are under-utilised due to the effects of a push-down curriculum (Barblett et al., 2016).

Nicolopoulou (2010) further suggests standardised testing has led to the pressures on teachers to train successful test takers at ever younger ages, and in such a context play assumes a low priority. Fayez, Sabah, and Oliemat (2011) also assert that parents put pressure on teachers to teach more literacy and math. It is clear that the attitudes and beliefs about play held by the adults educating children strongly influence the quality of play environments and experiences they provide for children, and ultimately affect the quality of the provisions made for play. Any discussion aimed at realigning early childhood practice with policy and evidence must include support for leaders, educators and parents to evolve their thinking and understanding around Play-Based Learning.

A report by Tayler (2010) into learning in early childhood education (K, PP, Yr1) stated that W.A schools needed a strong focus in teaching pre-school children the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy early if results on NAPLAN tests were to improve for the Year 3 test cohort. As a result of this report, in 2011 the Education Department W.A produced new guidelines for teachers and the director-general urged schools to "sharpen their focus" on teaching reading, writing and maths skills to pre-schoolers and to raise their own expectations of what young students could achieve. Now many schools and districts map trajectories for students regardless of ability differences or social emotional development to achieve the Year 3 benchmarks of the NAPLAN tests. These expectations are often

made explicit for each year level, with a much greater focus on literacy and mathematics using non Play Based pedagogies. Many schools have dedicated specific daily schedules for literacy and numeracy, this often sets numeracy dedicated time of at least 60 minutes a day and literacy dedicated time of at least 90 minutes a day with whole school timetables adjusted to allow for these uninterrupted blocks of teacher-directed learning experiences (Banksia Grove Catholic PS, 2012; Scotch College, 2014).

These lengthy blocks of time are being dedicated to literacy and numeracy despite the fact that there is no research to suggest that teaching young children in a more formalised way, earlier in their lives, increases deeper understanding of literacy and numeracy concepts as they grow older (Jay et al., 2014). In fact, research from other countries supports play based learning in early childhood contending that children do better if they are exposed to play first and then engage in testing later (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). With much of the school day seemingly taken up with instructional time dedicated to literacy and numeracy the time left for play and exploration within early childhood settings is inevitably compromised.

THE SEMANTICS OF PLAY AND PLAY-BASED LEARNING. TOWARDS WA BASED DEFINITIONS.

Play is notoriously difficult to define. Pellegrini (2011) states that play is something which people recognise when they see it but that they find hard to explain. Even though there is no specific definition of play, researchers agree that there are a number of characteristics that comprehensively describe play. These include experiences that are pleasurable, active, freely chosen, directed by children and intrinsically motivating (Fleer, 2013; Kennedy & Barblett, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009; Shipley, 2009). However, Graue (2011) found that “what counts as play in many early childhood classrooms are highly controlled centres that focus on particular content labelled as ‘choice’ but that are really directed at capturing a specific content-based learning experience” (p.14). This leads us to the question of whether the play based experiences that children are engaging in matches the characteristics of the research depicted notion of play. The EYLF and NQS promote a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). This requires educators to value children as competent, active players who are capable of initiating and leading play experiences. Earlier studies often noted that educators were not comfortable with play, child-led activities or allowing children choice (Garrick et al., 2010; Howard, 2010). There is also research to suggest that a lack of understanding of play, combined with a mistrust of child-led activities and reluctance to give children choice and control, results in an overreliance on adult-led activities where adults have control and make choices (McInnes et al., 2013). While we must bear in mind that such challenges as these may be part of what we must contend with before we can progress, it is heartening to see 80% of WA state teachers expressing their commitment to and belief in Play-Based Learning. While we certainly have much road to make up, it is clear that there is a will to make the journey towards more evidenced based practice in the early years’ classrooms of WA.

Children’s voices, internationally, are perhaps more unified in their perspectives on Play-Based Learning. A number of studies have established that play is the preferred mode of learning for all children (Clark & Moses, 2001; Corsaro, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005; Kernan, 2007; O’Kane & Hayes, 2007; Sutton-Smith, 1997). When children are asked about their preferred learning experiences, kindergarten, preschool and primary school children respond similarly in prioritising play (O’Kane & Hayes, 2007), free play (Corsaro, 2005), play with friends, play with open-ended materials (Einarsdottir, 2005) and play outdoors (Clark & Moses, 2001). When asked about their play experiences, children talk about the importance of having fun, social engagement, emotional security, agency, freedom, choice and being outdoors (Clark & Moss, 2001; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

The role of the educator within play is pivotal. However, the quality of this involvement is key. There is evidence of educators inappropriately interrupting children’s play (Weldemariam, 2014) and managing and monitoring play rather than playing with children and supporting their development (McInnes et al., 2011). However, there is also clear evidence that high quality engagement on the part of a caring

educator can have a hugely positive impact on children's development (Ebbeck & Waniganayake 2010). Weldemariam (2014) also asserts that the quality of the adult's involvement significantly influences the quality of the play activities in which children engage.

As such, the authors of this paper support a WA definition of Play-Based Learning that places the educator within the play, holding an intention for the child but not leading the direction of the play. While we believe the involvement of the adult to be enhancing for the child's experience, development and learning, we also believe that such involvement must be supportive and respectful of the child's choices. Such an approach will ensure that the integrity of the child's natural learning system remains intact and is enriched by the educator rather than limited or interrupted. A WA definition of Play-Based Learning should empower both children and educators for the agency of both will support their mutual growth.

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