

2016 ECA WA Discussion Paper

A Call for a WA Play Strategy in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Background

In 2013, ECA WA members were invited to contribute to the development of a strategic plan that would set priorities, focus energy and resources, and work toward the core function of Early Childhood Australia: to advocate for the rights and well-being of children in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Members identified the diminishing opportunities for children (aged birth to eight years) to access quality play in these environments as a major concern necessitating it as a key priority in future planning. The vision that child-initiated and self-directed play be reinstated as a fundamental right in early education and care settings, including the early years of schooling, was similarly shared by members of other leading early childhood advocacy organisations in WA (OMEP, ECTA, EYES and the SSTUWA). Moreover, the demise of play in ECEC was considered by key stakeholder representatives (of Playgroup WA, CareWest, Family Day Care WA, Meerilinga, and Childcare Association of WA) at the ECA WA AGM (2014) during a *Panel Discussion on Play*. Shortly thereafter, ECA WA pledged its commitment to developing a play strategy initiative.

In 2015, to further discussion on the play strategy initiative, ECA WA held two separate discussion forums with branch members and additional key ECEC stakeholders (40 forum attendees in total). The purpose of these forums was to identify why WA should develop a play strategy and the potential benefits of a play strategy. This discussion paper summarises the information obtained from these forums against a backdrop of published research relating to the place of play in early childhood development and learning. It calls for an integrated approach; an approach that includes all key stakeholders and advocates for children's rights to facilitate play-based learning in ECEC settings.

The potential stakeholders of a WA Play Strategy include children, educators, families, the broader community and society as a whole. Each of these stakeholders is considered a recipient of the social, intellectual, physical and economic benefits of play.

Why develop a WA Play Strategy?

Four basic reasons were identified as to why it is important and timely to develop a WA Play Strategy.

WA is experiencing the demise in play in ECEC settings

The demise of play in ECEC in WA is attributed largely to the push down of more structured programs for younger children and the increased formalisation of early learning (Rose, 2016). Although this trend has been identified in relation to a range of settings, it is most commonly observed in the early years of schooling. A growing number of teachers have been mandated by primary school administration to implement *explicit instruction* and/ or *direct instruction* lessons to prepare children (aged 4 - 5 years) for the state On-entry Literacy and Numeracy Assessment program and Year 3 children (aged 7 - 8 years) for the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

Explicit instruction refers to teacher-centred instruction that is focused on clear lesson objectives and success criteria. It is affiliated with, but not limited to, highly structured instruction in basic skills in early literacy and numeracy education (Luke, 2013). The tendency of explicit instruction in WA early years learning has seen an increase in time and resources spent on formal lessons. These prescriptive lessons frequently show a disregard for children's developmental stage and individual learning style. For instance, the WA early years classroom is increasingly characterised by children as young as 3 years expected to respond to flash cards to rote learn sounds and words, and to commence formal penmanship before developing postural control, shoulder stability, arm strength, wrist stability, and hand strength required for finger strength and pencil manipulation. This happens despite reminders that developmental stages of writing are not to be viewed as discrete and sequential steps, and that handwriting tasks must be appropriate to young children's fine motor physical abilities (Brock, Jarvis & Olusoga, 2014; School Curriculum and Standards Authority South Australia, 2007).

Direct instruction (which is a specific version of explicit instruction) has a more extreme behaviourist focus on teacher-centred instruction: "Teachers follow a step-by-step, lesson-by-lesson approach to instruction that follows a pre-determined skill acquisition sequence administered to students placed in ability/achievement groups" (Luke, 2013, para 2). In WA, both forms of instruction are tightly paced and devoid of opportunities for divergence:

the approaches do not engage with children's individuality, cultural resources, background knowledge or community context. The rising prevalence of such scripted teaching to automate and streamline children's responses has resulted in fewer authentic opportunities for self-directed learning through play.

The focus on standardised testing favours a narrowly defined developmental pathway: a pathway that does not accommodate "diverse ways of knowing, thinking, doing and being" (O'Rourke, 2005, p. 10). Mainstream WA ECEC practices focus attention on a one-size-fits all product-oriented approach to learning (for example, through the use of commercial templates and standardised worksheets) in preference to a 'process approach' that provides valuable insights to the young developing brain. As a consequence, time for self-directed play, which is process driven and allows for individualised learning, is disappearing from the lives of young children (Dent, 2013).

Furthermore, the new WA school report structure relevant to the early years of schooling (children aged 5 - 8 years) assesses academic merit employing a five-point scale (A-E metric or using language representative of a five-tiered achievement classification) (School Curriculum and Standards Authority Western Australia, 2014). There is no reference to 'play-based learning' in the report. Consequently, the importance of play in children's learning, along with some of its unique developmental benefits (such as creativity, ownership, and perseverance) is diminished. International research shows that an 'earlier is better' approach to teaching formal skills of literacy and numeracy is detrimental to the provision and support for rich play opportunities (Whitebread, 2012).

It is a matter of serious concern, not only for children but for the future of our nation, when play-based learning during childhood is perceived as problematic and does not fit in with the WA government's new early childhood education performance and accountability agendas.

Play is a fundamental right of the child (and a fundamental right of the educator to provide it)

Australia's mandated early childhood document, *Being, Belonging and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), has a specific emphasis on play-based learning. The EYLF refers to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations

General Assembly, 1989) that recognises children's right to play in order to maximise their potential and develop a foundation across all developmental domains for future success in learning. Thus, educators have a responsibility and moral obligation to enable diverse opportunities for children to play. Less opportunities to provide play, in all its forms, is viewed as a roadblock to children's agency, and an assault on the professional ethics of early childhood educators. The quality of the EYLF's implementation in relation to play-based learning in schools should be more rigorously monitored to make the quality of play and its value more transparent. It is timely to discuss whether schools should be 'spot checked' by an independent body to ensure that schools are not paying lip service to the National Quality Standard (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2013). Should schools nominate a staff member to perform the role of 'play leader' to ensure play is a context for learning that empowers child agency and supports children's capacity to initiate and lead learning?

Play-based learning has long been emphasised in teacher training courses. Presently, however, anecdotal evidence demonstrates that there is a mismatch between what early childhood pre-service teachers are taught at university about the importance of play-based learning and the lack of play opportunities for children they observe when completing their school practicums. Although in theory the role of play-based learning is acknowledged, there appears to be minimal 'walk the talk' and mainstream education culture often seems to be indifferent to play. Time for play is sidelined in favour of educator assigned 'work' or used as a reward for children's 'conformity'.

There is a need to achieve cross-community awareness and consensus on the importance of raising the status of play in WA early childhood. The School Curriculum and Standards Authority of Western Australia (responsible for school curriculum, assessment, standards and reporting); the Director General of Education and the Office of Early Childhood and Learning (overseeing the quality of ECE programs in the public education system); and the Director General of the Department of Education Services (overseeing the quality of ECE programs in non-government and independent public schools) all have important roles to perform in elevating the status of play in WA. Presently, government authorities pay homage to the importance of play but in many schools time and resources available for young children to participate in play-based learning have been reduced or removed.

Play is a central activity in the lives of healthy children

Play is not only related to intellectual development but is integral to children's social and emotional well-being (Whitebread, 2012). Feedback from both ECA WA forums indicated that the push-down of the curriculum had resulted in huge pressure being placed on young children, leading to increased levels of anxiety. Along with this is 'parent anxiety' associated with children's inability to keep pace with regimented and fast-paced instruction. Children are now less inclined to take risks with lateral thinking/ pursuits and exploration of content. They are also less likely to partake in risk-taking to test their physical limits.

Today's children are living more structured lives, both in and out of school and care (Ginsburg, 2007). Consequently, there is less freedom and opportunity in children's lives to play (Gray, 2013). With the growth in urbanisation there are fewer places for children to physically play: less independent mobility and less access to the outdoors. There is also more sedentary and isolated time viewing screens (television, video game, and computer). In addition, electronic play that enacts violence provides the child with no experience of how to deal with real-life conflict and violence (Kernan, 2007). Play as a natural medium of self-expression can inform adults of children's perspectives on violence and real life conflict.

Associations such as Nature Play WA Inc. promote the importance of unstructured play outside and in nature (Longley, 2011). However, the visibility of these forms of play and the provision of adequate resources to support it has significantly diminished in mainstream early years of schooling. While it is a fact that children today spend considerably less time playing outdoors (Longley, 2011), it is also a fact that children today spend considerably less time playing in stimulating and creative early childhood education indoor spaces. Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that WA educators are directed to limit the amount of time that children 'play' outside; the mistaken belief is that children outdoors are not learning, thus wasting valuable time in which they could be attending to formal learning indoors.

Play was recognised by the forum participants as an essential part of a 'healthy diet' for childhood that contributes positively to children's sense of identity and sense of belonging to social groups. Increasingly it is the case that ECEC settings, including early years of schooling, are over-controlling young children's activities infringing on their independence and agency: making children feel less competent. A lack of time to play can lead to serious consequences for children and for the future of childhood itself (Almon, 2014). The complexity of play and what it means to young children's learning and well-being cannot be underestimated.

Quality early learning is achieved through play

There is conclusive evidence across cultures that the role of play is instrumental to children's learning: "Many believe that it is impossible to disentangle children's play, learning and development" (Barblett, 2010, para 5). Play has been found to positively impact on young children's brain development, which sets trajectories for learning and development throughout life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Play also enhances emotional well-being (Whitebread, 2012, p. 3) and contributes to the advancement of children's social skills and leadership abilities (Ginsburg, 2007). Play allows children to explore their world, master adult roles and overcome their fears (Tsao, 2002). During play, children set their own goals that match their level of competence. This results in the feelings of achievement and resilience required to succeed and to face current and future challenges (Hurwitz, 2003). Child-directed play also encourages creativity and development of skills of negotiation, cooperation and conflict resolution (McElwain & Volling, 2005).

Play is vital to the academic milieu as it allows for integration of socio-emotional learning with cognitive skills (Ginsburg, 2007). Play helps children better regulate their behaviour and therefore adjust to the school setting (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). It enhances children's readiness to learn (Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez & McDermott, 2000) and supports intellectual achievements (Whitebread, 2012). Engagement in play also contributes to improved memory and language skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

The importance of play in early learning and development has been acknowledged and addressed by various countries. Recently, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland have developed play policies and play strategies in acknowledgement of the child's rights to play (National Children's Office, 2004; Play for Wales, 2015; The Scottish Government, 2013). Similarly, Scandinavian countries consider play to be fundamental to their teaching and learning philosophy in early learning centres. For example, the new 2010 Swedish Preschool Curriculum is based on the premise that the child should be able to shape the learning environment and the planned activities in the early childhood context. Indeed, it has been reported that: "In classrooms where play was not incorporated, teachers had problems such as classroom management and decreased interest in reading and writing" (Sandberg & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2011, p. 45).

WA could be considered to be at crisis point due to being 'out-of-step' with the international community in regards to the place of play in children's learning and development. As global

citizens, we need to be part of the movement towards reinstating children's right to play. Many educators share a vision that Australia should provide the best possible opportunities to support children's optimal development and learning. Valuing play as a life-enhancing daily experience for all children in their homes, early education and care centres, pre-schools, schools and communities will achieve this goal.

Potential benefits of a WA Play Strategy

The participants of the 2015 ECA WA stakeholders' consultation forums identified a broad range of benefits of the proposed WA Play Strategy. These included: lifting the status of play; using it as a tool for advocating the importance of play in children's learning; developing a shared language across stakeholders in order to unite actions and thinking about play; increasing confidence in educators to consistently encourage play-based learning; and extending parental and wider community understanding of the value of play.

Lifting the status of play and providing a tool for advocating its importance

As discussed previously, a large body of research findings points to the important role of child-directed play in the overall development and well-being of children. Children need to have frequent opportunities to be involved in a range of high quality indoor and outdoor play experiences to enhance their psychological, social, emotional, linguistic, intellectual, physical, and creative development (Ginsburg, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). These findings, as well as the recognition of play as a child's fundamental right, have been acknowledged for many years in the early childhood sector. In Australia, a play-based curriculum is recommended by the EYLF in the early years of schools and mandatory in ECEC centres. This recognition, however, needs yet to be matched by consistent practice. The 'earlier is better' formalised approach to children's learning (Whitebread, 2012) is currently reflected in the early education settings' approach to teaching, which compromises the availability of rich play-based learning (Fleer, 2011). In addition, the false message that structured programs lead to better developmental outcomes filters through to other environments such as family and broader community, and leads to the gradual disregard for the importance of play-based learning (Dent, 2013). Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that this trend can be also observed in some ECEC centres where learning opportunities for children under 3 years of age have become increasingly structured.

A WA Play Strategy has the potential to lift the status of play and become a tool for advocating its importance. This could be achieved by an organised campaign to provide information to all stakeholders about the importance of giving children frequent opportunities to engage with others in child-directed play for the enhancement of their creativity, social and emotional competence and cognitive and physical skills.

The development of a shared language across stakeholders to unite actions and thinking

Play has many definitions, interpretations and misunderstandings associated with it. While play is a concept that everyone seems to understand, it is also a concept that is difficult to define. There is no agreed universal definition for play in the literature, possibly because play is something that is ‘felt’ rather than ‘done’ (Reed & Brown, 2000). Play is most commonly described by a range of defining criteria proposed by Garvey (1997): play is enjoyable to the players; play has intrinsic goals to the player, the pursuit of enjoyment; play is spontaneous and voluntary; and play involves active engagement by the player. Similarly, in the absence of a common definition of play, the value of play is sometimes unknown, misunderstood or misrepresented in education settings and the wider community.

A WA Play Strategy will contribute to the development of a shared language across a range of stakeholders so that actions and thinking come from a common understanding of play. This will provide a common platform for stakeholders’ discussion and recommendations in relation to the need to restore the focus on play-based learning for children in a range of settings.

Increased confidence in educators to implement play-based learning

Increasingly, educators are uncertain about the use of play-based approaches in early childhood learning. Reasons underlying this lack of confidence include constraints such as: time allocation for play activities; limited and unsuitable space for play; and lack of knowledge and skills required to implement developmentally appropriate teaching strategies that include play. As a consequence, educators resort to a didactic teacher-directed approach (Nor Puteh & Ali, 2013). A didactic teacher-directed approach is most evident in early childhood settings where there is increased pressure for formal instruction and where learning achievements are judged formally using standardised assessment tasks (Rose, 2016).

According to the attendees of the ECA WA branch meetings and the stakeholder forum, this lack of confidence in the role of play-based learning can be also observed in some ECEC

centres, where educators strive to do the ‘right thing’ and structure young children’s learning in the belief that this will ‘prepare them for school’.

As part of the WA Play strategy, a targeted campaign directed at education policy and practice will be organised to challenge the demise of play based practice in ECEC settings, including the early years of school. The campaign will highlight the importance and benefits of child-directed play, the right of the child to play, and the position of the EYLF on play. The campaign will provide examples of the existing best practice. In addition, the campaign will support educators’ right and obligation to provide play-based learning in ECEC settings.

Increased parental understanding of the value of play

Children need trusting and loving relationships with consistent parents. Such relationships, which can be facilitated through play, positively impact on children’s developmental trajectory (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Observing children play, or joining them in play, provides parents with an opportunity to understand their child’s world. Child-directed play interactions with parents inform children they are loved and respected. Such interactions also allow parents to effectively communicate, indirectly guide, and develop positive relationships with children (Smith, 1995; Tamid-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb 2004).

According to a study conducted by Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (2012) Australian parents seem to be aware of the importance of play. They accept it as a ‘natural’ children’s activity. However, some of them struggle with what role they could play to encourage it. Some parents also find it difficult to engage in play with their child due to the lack of time related to work and household duties, and decreased levels of energy.

Parents are often targeted by carefully marketed messages of the importance of structured extracurricular activities for children’s future success. This results in ‘overscheduled’ children and parents who spend large amounts of time organising these activities and transporting their children at the expense of engagement in child-centred play (Elkind, 2007; Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000). This adds to parents’ already busy schedules and often leads to frustration and guilt for not spending enough time interacting with their children (Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth, 2012).

As part of the WA Play strategy, a targeted campaign directed at parents and the wider community will be organised. The provision of play-related information and resources for parents can empower parents in making informed decisions about the quality and type of their children's play activities and their role in those activities.

Increased community and society understanding of the value of play

As children are citizens of tomorrow, the critical importance of early supportive social environments for children's future success has been evidenced by international and Australian research (Moore & Oberklaid, 2010; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2010; Shanker, 2010). The 'overscheduling' and pressure put on young children to develop skills they are not ready for at the expense of play activities often leads to high level of stress and anxiety (Elkind, 2007; Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000).

High level of stress can have a negative future impact on children as well as adverse social, mental health and economic implications for communities and societies (Heckman & Masterov, 2005; Shanker, 2010). It is important, therefore, to recognise the value of play as an antidote for children's 'hurried lifestyle' (Elkind, 2007) and provide them with increased opportunities for high quality play in many social settings including indoor and outdoor public spaces.

A WA Play Strategy will provide a platform to involve local councils and community organisations in discussing and decision making in relation to the provision of resources and spaces to encourage child-directed play. The planning of such places should be organised in consultation with community members including parents and children.

Conclusion

The value of play in facilitating optimal developmental outcomes in the early years across the psychological, social, emotional, creative, linguistic, cognitive and physical developmental domains is indisputable. The demise of child-initiated play in WA ECEC settings, including the early years of schooling, is also indisputable. Why is it the case that WA educators feel that they need to ask for permission for children to play as part of their education program? Why has the word 'play' become problematic in early childhood learning environments?

A playful childhood is the most basic right of childhood (Elkin, 2007; p. xvii). Play is an integral part of early childhood and its importance should not be minimised in WA. Whether school-based or in early education and care centres, the development of a world class education and care system must include play as a solid foundation. WA parents, WA early childhood education advocacy organisations, and the wider WA community have an important role to perform and are invited to become partners in ECA WA's endeavour to elevate the status of play in early learning. A secure pedagogy of play should also include a thorough understanding of the meaning of play activities from children's perspectives.

Children cannot formulate their grievances collectively about the demise of play, or conduct a campaign for improvements in their conditions of play and the mode of their early year's education. They must be supported by adult advocates who are resolved to remedy this crisis situation. ECA WA remains committed to developing a WA Play Strategy in alignment with its core business: advocating for the rights and well-being of young children.

We ask for your support NOW to develop the WA Play Strategy

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