

Teachers distressed by 'demise' of play-based learning in era of NAPLAN testing ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Parents and early childhood educators have voiced their concerns about what they see as the decline of play-based learning in schools.

They blame NAPLAN testing and the pressure to succeed for making modern-day school unnecessarily stressful for young children.

Dr Sandra Hesterman, a senior lecturer in early childhood education at Perth's Murdoch University, said more was expected of children in kindergarten and pre-primary school than ever before.

"Pre-primary has become like Year 1 would have been 20 years ago," Dr Hesterman told ABC Radio Perth.

"For example, expectation in learning phonics; the phonics that children in Year 2 would have learned 25 years ago are now introduced into kindergarten and pre-primary."

She said pressures to meet literacy and numeracy objectives meant the time spent doing free play and play-based learning was restricted in many schools.

"Free play is the cornerstone of early childhood education," she said.

"That is the feedback that comes from teachers, early childhood teachers in particular, and definitely from the leading WA early childhood advocacy groups."

Media player: "Space" to play, "M" to mute, "left" and "right" to seek.

AUDIO: Are schools taking away playtime? (Focus)

Dr Hesterman's concerns were echoed by numerous teachers who contacted ABC Radio Perth to voice their experiences anonymously.

[Audio clip available online, "Are schools taking away play time?"]

"I was a school-based early childhood teacher for 18 years. I believe that NAPLAN is driving the demise of play. Measurable literacy and numeracy is the only thing that matters now, and no-one seems to understand that learning across the curriculum is what fuels literacy and numeracy in the long run."

"I am an early childhood teacher who has taught for over 20 years. I am so distressed about what has been happening over the past years. I know I couldn't teach pre-primary again, it goes so much against all I know is right for children."

"As kindy teachers, my colleagues and I are always trying to create play-based activities that cover the curriculum. There are parents on the other side of the coin who are asking for reading books on the second day of kindy."

"As a pre-primary teacher of nearly 40 years, I am so distressed to see pre-primary lunchtime shortened so we fit into school lunchtime. Some of my little people barely have time to finish their lunch, let alone play. No wonder childhood anxiety is on the rise."

"Play gives children time to learn how to make decisions, to learn self-control and self-regulation. We end up with a middle primary playground full of children with a lack of social skills."

No set rules on play-based learning

Garry Hewitt, assistant executive director of early childhood education at the WA Education Department, said there was no formal policy mandating time spent play-based learning.

He said it was up to individual schools.

"There isn't a stipulation of how much play, but it is fundamental that children do learn in the early years in a playful way," he said.

"School principals and their communities have a strong say in the way schooling is delivered.

"The curriculum is the curriculum, but the way you go about delivering that is the decision-making at a school level."

Ian Anderson, the president of the WA Primary Principals Association, said he believed most schools were getting the balance right.

"Principals are fully aware of the importance of play and what is needed to get children started in their education," he said.

Mr Anderson acknowledged schools faced outside pressures which could affect how teachers delivered education.

For example, schools are often judged by their academic successes by NAPLAN results and the MySchool website.

One parent's story

Talkback caller Danielle said her son had just turned five and started pre-primary this year; he was already struggling with the formality of the classroom.

"He was so excited to start pre-primary after finishing kindy. Now we have very big struggles to get him to go to school at all," she said.

"His response is always the same: 'It's too hard and too much'.

"I've been told my son is struggling in literacy and needs more homework.

"When I sit in the classroom and watch him, it's the consistent expectation of him having to sit on the mat, doing worksheets, writing sentences, his first name and surname.

"He doesn't fit into that box."

Other parents said they had chosen to move their children to different schools in the quest for more playtime.

Narelle: "I ended up with two girls who didn't want to go to school. They were developing phobias about reading and writing in particular. We have ended up at a wonderful independent school, very much about play-based learning."

Anna: "We started private for kindy and moved to public for pre-primary at a great school – no shoes in school hours for kindy and pre-primary, mud kitchens and crazy play. I couldn't be happier with the shift."

Number of desks a tell-tale sign

Dr Hesterman said styles of early learning differed markedly from school to school and it could be impossible for parents to know in advance what their local school's approach was like.

"One telling tale is when you walk into the pre-primary classroom, which may have been play-based in the past, is the trend that all children will sit down to complete a worksheet," she said.

"So there is a provision of one desk per child ... if you walk into a pre-primary classroom and it's full of desks, look for large blocks, because those things are disappearing."

She said the parents and teachers she spoke with would like to see play-based learning mandated across the state.

"We want universal access to quality play-based learning for every child in Western Australia," she said.

"People don't think that it is satisfactory that it's an ad-hoc implementation across the state."

-reprinted from ABC News

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