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## **Embedding Play-Based Learning into Junior Primary (Year 1 and 2) Curriculum in WA**

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*Abstract: Governments and their policy decisions inevitably influence the pedagogical practices of teachers. There have been considerable curriculum changes and national reforms in Australia with the implementation of two very different national curricula documents in the early childhood sector in the last decade. The political landscape in Western Australia is even more complex with the mandating of the National Quality Standard (NQS) in all public schools from Kindergarten to Year two. The introduction of the NQS has impacted on the teaching and learning in the early years of school, and in particular, the inclusion of play-based teaching strategies. The tensions that arise from the juxtaposition of these mandated documents is significant to teachers in Years 1 and 2 who in past years have been used to a more didactic and structured approach to early learning. The researchers in this study have sought to explore relevant and current issues impacting on junior primary teachers' pedagogy and practice in relation to the use of play to engage children in learning. Using qualitative methodology, a case study design was chosen and included semi-formal interviews as well as data collected at teacher collaborative meetings. The research identified the necessary supports required for implementing play in the early years of school as well as the challenges experienced by the teachers.*

### **Introduction**

Teachers have experienced considerable change due to state and national reforms in Australian early childhood education. Implementation of the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2010) from Foundation to Year 2 took place in Western Australia (WA) in 2011. Major changes in national policy resulted in a new system for accreditation and regulation being introduced in prior to school settings through a National Quality Framework (NQF) (ACECQA, 2011a). The NQF includes the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011b). In contrast to other states, the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) approved the application of the NQS in all primary schools in Western Australian, across the early years, that is, from Kindergarten to Year two. The first compulsory year of school in Western Australia is Pre-primary (the year prior to Year 1 in the year children turn five years and six months). The West Australian education system also offers a year of Kindergarten instruction (the year children turn four years and six months, junior primary commences in Year 1, the year children turn six years and six months of age).

Teachers in Western Australia who teach in the junior primary years now work with two quite different curriculum documents as well as a set of new school accreditation regulations. In particular, the curriculum documents place very different emphases on the inclusion of play. The pressures that arise from the implementation of these mandated documents is significant to teachers in Years 1 and 2 who in past years have been used to a more didactic and structured approach to early learning. In the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) play is an essential component of pedagogical practice and permeates the curriculum with five distinct learning outcomes whereas in the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2010) play is one of several strategies to meet achievement targets for each particular year level.

Play-based learning is regarded as an important pedagogical approach to support academic and social outcomes (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Over recent years there have been tensions concerning the erosion of play and the quality of teaching and learning in early childhood education (Barblett, Knaus, & Barratt-Pugh, 2016). Growing pressures towards the formalisation of early year's education to improve educational outcomes has seen a decline in time for children to engage in play within the classroom, not only in Australia, but internationally (Ang, 2014). While there is considerable literature documenting the significance of play to children's learning in the early years (Pramling Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2006; Wood, 2004; Lester, & Russell, 2010) there are limited studies reporting on play and learning in the early primary school education.

The focus of this paper is to research the viability of the inclusion of play as a strategy for learning in junior primary classrooms (Year 1 and 2). After the introduction of the National Quality Standard in Western Australia in 2009 by the Minister of Education was applied from birth to the early grades of school (Year 2), the challenge for schools and junior primary teachers is application of two curriculum frameworks, with different requirements, for teaching and learning. This research will report on the successes and challenges experienced by the junior primary classroom teachers in one school that made a deliberate decision to embed play-based learning pedagogy across the Year 1 and 2 school curriculum. A case study approach was used to examine the experiences and beliefs of teachers and administrators throughout their journey to explore the value and inclusion of play based strategies when they were used consistently in teaching and learning. One particular influence to this journey has been the implementation of policy initiatives in education in Western Australia.

Meeting the demands of recent reforms has placed pressure on teachers to interpret and implement changes to support quality improvement (Grant, Danby, Thorpe, & Theobald, 2016). This project sought to explore relevant and current issues impacting pedagogy and practice in relation to play-based learning in junior primary driven by mandated quality improvement. Through teacher interviews the researchers investigated the impact and value of play-based learning in Years 1 and 2 at one school setting. The research questions guiding this project were:

- What are the successes and challenges of embedding a play-based teaching and learning program in junior primary classes in Western Australia?
- What are the factors impacting on teachers' experiences of implementing a play-based teaching and learning program in junior primary classes?
- How does school administration support a play-based teaching and learning program in junior primary classrooms?

## Literature Review

### Play as a Pedagogical Practice in Early Childhood

Early childhood is commonly defined as the period from birth to eight years of age. Play is central to and highly valued as a quality pedagogical practice in early childhood settings. It is considered by educators of young children as pivotal to the processes of learning and development (Gleave, & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). The importance of play-based learning is widely documented, especially in relation to early years settings prior to the commencement of formal schooling. Whitebread (2012) reports there is now a body of research evidence demonstrating the overwhelming benefit of the role of play in supporting intellectual achievement and emotional well-being. Bodrova and Leong (2007) comment that mature, high level play supports the critical elements of learning and leads child development and Fleer (2011) proposes that quality play-based programs impact schooling outcomes and can lead to higher outcomes in literacy and numeracy. In his report Whitebread (2012 p. 26) goes on to highlight the environmental and social factors which support and inhibit children's playfulness and the provision of opportunities to play pointing out that:

*Even the most playfully inclined children will not be able to play, sufficiently for them to reap the benefits in terms of their learning and development, if they are not given the time, the space and the independence to develop their own spontaneous and self-initiated play activities.*

A challenge arose in WA schools when the introduction of a mandated play-based framework (the EYLF) encourages teachers to contest and adapt the more formal, traditional school setting of the junior primary classroom to include play-based experiences to enhance the children's learning (DEEWR, 2009).

There are multiple and diverse definitions of play which may be based on either type, characteristic, player perspective or outcome. Pramling Samuelsson, and Johansson (2006) examine some of the rhetoric regarding play in preschool and this strongly correlates to our experience of the primary environment. They summarise that in research literature and teaching practice, play and learning are often separated. This is mirrored in some teachers' beliefs that children's play should be an expression of their own interest and creation of meaning and the teacher's role is to "support, not disturb" (p. 48). Likewise it is suggested that 'real' learning takes place in specific formal activities, often teacher planned and directed (Pramling Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2006). McInnes, Howard, Crowley and Miles (2013) note that children often see the more formal, teacher directed activities as 'work' and not connected to learning. Their research found that, in the two sites they closely observed, children who were engaged in playful practices (where the adult was nearby) performed and behaved in ways that were more effective for learning than when engaged in situations where the adult was present and formal teaching practice conditions were engaged. Whether explicitly stated or implicit in attitude and action, the rationale which separates play from learning is neither helpful nor accurate and has assisted in the promotion of more formal didactic teaching methods in the junior primary arena. Pramling Samuelsson, and Johansson's (2006) commentary examined the dimension of learning in play and that of play in learning. They conclude it is important to find alternative ways of thinking and knowing about play and learning which see the two dimensions as "indivisible entities" which stimulate each other and are a part of children's experience and understanding.

### **Including Play in the Junior Primary Classroom**

Although play-based learning is recognised widely as a valuable pedagogical practice common to prior-to and in-school environments, it has been noted that there are often fewer opportunities for the inclusion of play-based learning activities and availability of equipment to support play in junior primary classrooms as the requirements and expectations of a more formalised curriculum begin to appear (Dockett, & Perry, 2012; Hunkin, 2014; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011). Children's playful activity looks different and changes as children develop and enter formal schooling. Their play becomes more complex, organisation and structured processes begin to appear; other children are drawn into the play and these complex interactions develop social, language and cognitive skills. In older children, play episodes give them an opportunity to negotiate, understand and follow rules, develop an awareness of consequence and self-knowledge and empathy and sympathy for others (Martlew et al., 2011). In some school cultures the compartmentalisation of play has resulted in reduced opportunities for young children to engage in play as it is limited to school recess and lunch times (Hunkin, 2014). Play is also limited in primary school as learning becomes more formal and academically oriented (Hännikäinen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010). The focus on academic skills changes the pedagogic practices and the learning becomes more teacher directed and instructional. For the purposes of this research the authors acknowledge that junior primary teachers have curriculum imperatives to meet achievement targets which are formally stated through the state curriculum (SCSA, 2014). Historically curriculum and timetable organisation has resulted in less time in the junior primary classrooms to allow children to have sustained daily play activities of their own choosing. An understanding of the definition of play based pedagogy in the junior primary classroom includes classroom dramatic play opportunities and play based strategies including games with rules; using manipulatives and hands-on activities and active child inquiry.

Adopting a more integrated view of the relationship between play and learning opens possibilities for the inclusion of play-based learning and activities which include a playful element in which the children can become active agents of their own learning in the junior primary program (Pramling Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2006; McInnes et al., 2013, Hännikäinen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010). The Queensland Government recognises the importance of play and that children learn best in active environments stating that "...it would appear that the introduction of the Australian Curriculum has been misinterpreted by some as the introduction of a set of formal instructional approaches" (Department of Education and Training n.d., p. 5). A range of pedagogical practices are recommended by the Australian Curriculum to suit the age of children, their experiences and the diverse backgrounds that they bring to school (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012). In a Foundation Paper released by the Queensland Government, age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling are outlined (Department of Education and Training, n.d.). These include the suggestion that play and explicit instruction can co-exist in a learning program and urges that a range of approaches to teaching be used by teachers and that these should include play-based learning (Department of Education and Training, n.d.). It is the responsibility of school administrators to ensure teachers are aware of age-appropriate pedagogical practices in a school setting and support their effective use.

Unfortunately the term 'play' has sometimes been misunderstood by some as free-play, meaning 'anything goes' (Miller, & Almon, 2009). It is the misconception that play is frivolous that has prevented many primary teachers from considering it as a pedagogical practice. However, there are many forms of play and Miller and Almon, (2009) developed a spectrum to demonstrate the range of teacher interaction within play activities, with free-play at one end and teacher-led, direct instruction at the opposite end, and guided play taking up

the centre of the spectrum. Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2013) argue that guided play is more effective for academic outcomes encouraging children to become active and involved in the learning process. Guided play comprises of a classroom rich in play opportunities and including focused learning with the teacher guiding the experiences (Miller, & Almon, 2009). In guided play the teacher's role is to guide and facilitate learning and to intentionally teach involving "deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful" actions and decision making (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). A study by McInnes, Howard, Miles, and Crowley (2011) examined teachers understanding of play and found that the group that had little understanding or training in play pedagogy tended to adopt adult led activities as they were unsure of how to include play-based strategies. Hyvonen's (2011) study of play in the school context found that integrating play and learning is challenging for some teachers as they were concerned they were not meeting the goals of the curriculum. Guided play requires a teacher who knows the curriculum well and is able to scaffold the learning, and according to Weisberg et al. (2013), this method is more effective for achieving learning goals.

### **Some Challenges to Play Inclusion in Junior Primary**

The very nature of the primary school culture can inhibit a teacher's opportunity and desire to provide a more child-directed, active learning program. Hännikäinen, and Rasku-Puttonen (2010) comment on the contrast in the learning environments between a pre-school and primary classroom noting that in 'traditional' primary school cultures children find it difficult to engage in more participatory activities and discussions because teachers use more formal instruction, teacher organised learning activities and compulsory curriculum and standardised achievement. Combine these factors with higher teacher/child ratios and classroom environments designed and resourced for less active learning then challenges to a play-based program begin to emerge. A similar situation was described by Stephen (2010) in Scotland before a curriculum change to 'active learning' was introduced into the first year of primary school (Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011). In addition Martlew et al., (2001) found in their study of Scottish teachers that while teachers in primary classrooms acknowledged play as an important element to learning they were unsure of how to plan for it and it was not supported by "many of the planning frameworks commonly used in primary schools" (p.73).

Rogers, and Evans (2007) suggest some important considerations to facilitate the use of play-based learning strategies in the classroom. Predominantly these include the inclusion of more space and time for play where a more creative and flexible use of indoors space would challenge an overabundance of traditional desk top activities and allow for the facilitation of child choice within the learning program. A teacher's observations of children's play preferences and interests, even in junior primary classrooms could provide ideas that would extend and motivate their play and stimulate engagement in learning. Rogers, and Evans (2007) note the use of the outdoors would offer greater choice and availability of materials and space and is another area that could be considered by schools and classroom teachers. In their study it was found that boys in particular were disadvantaged by the limitations of the classroom to offer more active engagement and recommendations to consider extended periods of uninterrupted play be provided for deeper, meaningful play to emerge. However for these inclusions to take place, teachers need to recognise the value of play and its contribution to learning (Rogers, & Evans, 2007).

### **Impact of Standardised Testing and Meeting Benchmarks**

Another challenge to implementing play-based learning is the stress placed on teachers from school and system administration regarding standardised testing (Miller, & Almon, 2009). One of the consequences of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing is the pressure it puts on teachers to meet set targets and the ripple effect of teaching to a test (Klenowski, & Wyatt-Smith, 2012). Results of annual national tests (NAPLAN) in Australia are published on the MySchool website allowing for comparisons to be made between schools. This is a result of the Federal Government's reform agenda to improve the quality of education and allow for transparency and accountability (Thompson, 2013). Reid (2009) states that testing often results in a narrowing of the curriculum which has a negative impact on the teaching and learning of specific content. The drive to improve test results impacts the whole school, even into Kindergarten and Pre-primary where children still have four or five years remaining before they sit their initial NAPLAN test (Thompson, 2013). Findings from research in the United States also reported formal instruction has now become the standard in Year 1. Young children were observed completing whole class activities while sitting at desks and teachers commented openly on preparing students for the tests (Alford, Rollins, Padron, & Waxman, 2015).

However as the national test results become a measure of school performance and the curriculum and pedagogy is at risk of being profoundly affected, student wellbeing due to stress and anxiety can be a result of a pushdown curriculum. Thompson (2013) reported that teachers observed a negative impact on student's self-confidence and motivation due to the competition and stress of a test regime. Miller, and Almon (2009) advocate that play is a strong indicator of children's wellbeing and when a push down curriculum is in place too many schools place a double burden on children. Firstly stress is heightened when children are expected to master materials and concepts beyond their developmental level and then becomes compounded when opportunities to play, and therefore relax, are reduced. Siraj-Blatchford, and Sylva (2004) discuss academic pushdown in the form of didactic, highly structured curriculum as providing short term academic benefits that are counterproductive, generating stress and anxiety as well as behavioural problems in young children. In addition reliance on test results and pressure to achieve send a strong message to parents who become over anxious about their child's progress and may increase pressure at home resulting in further reducing play and relaxation time in young children's lives through the use of extra homework tasks and, in some cases, private tutoring.

While it is acknowledged that there is a place for transparent accountability and measurement of school effectiveness, it is essential that the rights of children are taken into account and Klenowski, and Wyatt-Smith (2012) remind us to consider how they (children) have been "positioned by testing and accountability priorities" (p. 76). Paying attention to whole child development should be taken into account, particularly when applied to children in the early years when social and emotional development and attitude to learning and school are being developed. Therefore opportunities to learn through more active, play-based approaches are recommended and specifically encouraged in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

### **Methodology**

A qualitative method was used to investigate, describe and interpret the views and experiences of teachers and administrators in a metropolitan school in WA. A case study methodology was chosen as the most appropriate way to provide a detailed investigation on the critical issues of one particular school and multiple perspectives of the participants. Tellis

(1997) describes case studies as being effective in providing the participants with a voice and exposing specific details. A case study approach is the best method to explore a within-site single program (Creswell, 2012). The two methods used to collect the data included interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews of teachers and school administrators and observations of teacher collaborative meetings were conducted with practitioners over a period of 12 months. In this study the researchers were aiming to examine the multiple perspectives of play-based teaching and learning in one school site. Case studies investigate contemporary phenomenon in real-world contexts to understand people and situations (Yin, 2014).

### Participants

The participants included seven teachers working both full and part time in Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms and two administrators of the school including the Principal and Deputy Principal. The participants had a varying breadth of experience ranging from one year to 17 years. Of the seven teachers, five were trained in primary education and two were early childhood (birth to eight) trained. The school was chosen as they had purposefully been working with the junior primary teachers to implement play-based learning. The drive for this action was a school response to the introduction of the Australian National Quality Standard as a mandated national and state government policy for all early childhood classrooms (Kindergarten to Year 2) and was originally led by participant A2:

*A2: "the mandating of NQS to Year 2 in WA was probably the biggest factor influencing implementing and starting the change process...I have always had this passion for play-based learning myself as a leader ... and I felt that these teachers were ready for something new, they were very keen, very passionate about a child's learning, but they didn't have the knowledge. So it was a great platform to start from."*

Approval for the research to be conducted was granted from the researchers' two university ethics committees as well as the Western Australia Department of Education.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-formal interviews were conducted with the seven teachers and the two administrators. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for analysis. The researchers also attended four collaborative teacher meetings throughout the year and recorded the discussions which were then also transcribed. In case studies, analysis involves description of the case and themes as well as cross-case themes (Creswell, 2012). The researchers organised the transcribed data according to their responses into themes to establish commonalities, variance and patterns. A theme is a particular topic that organises a group of repeating ideas that show patterns of similar ideas. The researchers followed Braun, and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis that includes six phases:

1. Familiarising yourself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report



Throughout the analysis a recursive process was used in a flexible way to revisit and go back and forth rather than a linear pathway from one phase to the next. This allowed for deeper engagement and understanding of the data set over time. Two main themes were identified:

1. Supports existing for play-based learning programs
2. Challenges to play-based learning at this school.

From these two main themes sub-themes were developed and are reported in the next section. In the excerpts below the teachers are referred to as T1, T2 etc. and the administrator as A2.

## Findings and Discussion

### Supports Existing for Play-Based Learning Programs.

Teachers [T1] [T6] [T7] reported that the most helpful aspects of the school environment included having a supportive line manager who deeply understood and was passionate about play-based learning in junior primary classrooms. The school principal also acknowledged the role of A2 in supporting and directing teachers in implementing play-based learning strategies.

*T1: "I think having a manager who's on board with that has helped. Because before [A2], I had a manager who told me that she expected to see the children at desks doing a worksheet when she walked in. So I went from that kind of structure to [A2] coming in and going, "No, if I see them playing, I'll be really happy."*

In addition several teachers [T2] [T3] [T5] [T6] [T7] mentioned that working with colleagues who were also working towards a common goal gave them an opportunity to discuss their work and ideas and review their practice after attempting new strategies. Added to this was the use of the collaborative team meetings [T2] [T3] [T5] [T6] to discuss aspects of their work, hear how others were implementing change and share ideas and resources with each other. This indicates that a 'community of practice' has been established and the teachers have found this supportive.

*T5: "What helps me is the fact that we can all share what resources we do have and materials, and we do that well. And we also, there's a lot of flexibility. If, you know, you know, somebody's busy collecting something or finding out some information, you know, you always have people there to come and help you. They'll say, "Oh yeah, I can do this for you and I can do that" so we all kind of help each other that way. We are a little bit short on some of our resources because of the changes in staff and so forth – it makes a bit difficult. But I think just everybody sharing and helping each other, you know, and swapping ideas. You know, we can get into our collaborative meetings and we'll just throw the ideas around and somebody will say, "Hey, I might try that".*

When asked, most teachers [T1] [T2] [T5] [T6] indicated that parents seemed to be supportive of the play-based learning program and this was taken as positive because no parent had questioned or indicated they were not happy with what was happening in the classrooms. One teacher [T1] had visited other schools at the beginning of the discussions on how to implement more play-based strategies into the school. She felt this had afforded her with one model of how the classrooms could look and also provided her with some ideas for teaching strategies and learning centres that were more play-based. One teacher [T3] described how her colleagues' practices had helped her to visualise and consolidate her understanding of the hands-on, more play-based approach to early learning. In particular

another teacher [T7] with experience and specific training had joined the team and had also made a strong contribution to the ideas and approaches that others implemented.

There was a common understanding that play-based learning is a valuable approach from all participants, however, several emphasised must be a balance of intentional explicit teaching alongside play-based learning [T1] [T3] [T4] [T6] [T7].

*T1: "So I think it's just, you know, you need to have a balance in your classroom. There are times when things need to be explicit, and sometimes where they actually need to be hands-on and play-based. And you need to find that balance and what works with your group, you know."*

## **Challenges to Play-Based Learning at this School**

### **Resources**

Many of the participants [T1] [T2] [T3] [T4] mentioned the challenges of resource use and availability when implementing a play-based pedagogy. Teachers indicated that they thought that more resources were required to run a regular play-based program with small groups participating in learning centres and activity style learning. Some commented that the lack of additional adult resources to assist with small group work impacted on the type of activities that they offered.

*T4: "There's a lot of things I'd like to do but we don't have the resources and the storage for that so it can be quick access. That's a really big constraint for me. There's a lot of great activities that you can do but we don't have the resources, and the time – that's another thing."*

*T3: "you need resources and bits and pieces to put the play-based sort of activities in action."*

Martlew et al. (2011) concluded from their study that even when teachers are keen to implement new practices such as active playful learning additional resources and training is required. Some of the teachers interviewed commented that the lack of funding to purchase the resources required was a challenge for them as the allocated classroom budget was not sufficient. However one teacher [T1] mentioned that she had used the local recycling centre 'Remida' to gather a wide range of materials that were suitable for drama and other open ended play activities she had implemented.

Closely related to the reported lack of sufficient equipment was the comment that storage space in the junior primary area was at a premium and that even after the storage of existing resources it would be difficult to have space to store more materials, even if they were available. A few of the teachers [T1] [T4] [T5] mentioned that easy access to current materials was also a hindrance to setting up a various and engaging classroom environment. The teachers acknowledged that using more hands-on resources required for play-based activities required additional time to source, organise, and make and at times they spent their own money purchasing some resources not available but needed in the classroom.

### **Time**

A challenging factor that several teachers mentioned in their interviews was the impact of the time needed to implement play-based learning. Some teachers [T2] [T5] [T7] commented play-based activities took more time to organise than structured, less resource-intensive teaching strategies, they commented that extra time was needed to teach and then

organise children for exploratory learning and added time was required to keep up with the latest research and professional reading required to inform their practice.

*T7: "The curriculum is just so jam-packed with everything. It's just finding the time to fit everything in and, you know, the good thing is when play-based is done correctly, the kids are quiet, they're getting on with it, they're learning, it's all absolutely fantastic and, you know, a big chunk of time is gone – it's not wasted, but it's gone. And then you've still got everything else to fit in, which is always a struggle."*

Suggestions for activities that were easier to implement were discussed at some of the interviews. One teacher [T3] commented that changing teaching practice and pedagogy takes considerable time and effort making it too hard to maintain.

### **Environment, Curriculum and Assessment**

Throughout the interviews many of the teachers made comments about factors impacting on the play-based program which are acknowledged as 'out of their hands' to effect change but never-the-less did influence the experience they had in implementing play-based pedagogy and practice in the Year 1 and 2 classrooms. These factors included space in the classrooms and surrounding areas; sharing available space with other classrooms and dealing with increased noise. Rogers, and Evans (2007) report in their study the impact of organisational factors and 'poverty of space' within the classroom environment as problematic and impeding on the opportunities for role play.

Another issue included an overcrowded curriculum and assessment imperatives (NAPLAN) including requirements for moderation across grade levels. Teachers found it a struggle to fit everything in that they were expected to teach and that this impeded their ability to implement a play-based program.

*T5: "Because the curriculum is so full, it's a very full curriculum and to cover every single part of that sometimes can be quite heavy. And so you're chasing your tail trying to get, you know."*

One comment which reflected the dichotomy teachers experienced when introducing play-based learning was the expectation that the teachers were accountable for the learning of the class and ensuring students make progress in the formal, mandated On Entry tests and NAPLAN assessments.

*T2: "Well, for me, I had a discussion with a pre-primary teacher in the staffroom the other day, and she said that she and her colleagues were held accountable for on-entry testing results. And that made the pre-primary teachers feel very uncomfortable because they felt like they had to actually justify themselves to management to say 'on-entry is actually not being created to measure progress, it's to give a snapshot of each individual child.'"*

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) in their position paper of 2009 recommend principles which could be adopted by schools when considering annual NAPLAN results. These principles urge schools to "make informed and balanced judgements" that involve evaluations of schools' and systems' performance based on multiple sources of reliable evidence that relate to not just the academic goals but also include the key socio-emotional goals of schooling" (cited in Klenowski, & Wyatt-Smith, 2012, p. 71). In light of these recommendations the school in this case study has attempted to consider a range of approaches to learning, including the development of children's rights and social and emotional well-being to support them to engage with the learning program.

In some of the interviews the teachers mentioned assessing children's progress in a play-based program needed further deliberation [T1] [T2] [T6]. Their experience appeared to be that it was more difficult to capture children's learning in a play-based activity and felt that photographs and teacher observations were very important. Some teachers [T1] [T4] commented that challenges included teachers needing to be mindful for printing restrictions which would prevent too much printing of photographs; being confident that the assessments taken in play-based learning were rigorous and that with so many children and limited adult assistance time to assess all children during play was difficult.

### **Behaviour**

In discussing the children's reaction to the play-based program many of the teachers thought the children appeared to enjoy the experience and were engaged throughout the activities. Some concerns about classroom behaviour were raised including children becoming overexcited when new activities were introduced [T6]. However other teachers noted that time needed to be taken to teach children the behaviour expectations, such as, staying on task and the development of collaborative skills. While one teacher [T3] expressed a fear of possible "loss of control of the classroom" another participant turned this into a positive aspect of play-based learning by implementing learning centres as a strategy to improve behaviour [T1].

### **Experience**

Teachers regularly commented about their own experience throughout the interviews. They noted that a lack of experience with play-based learning and the need to change their mindset had impacted on their experience. A few [T2] [T3] [T7] described a "fear of implementing play-based learning" and mentioned they had not seen play-based learning in action, leaving them unsure of their own practice and seeking confirmation that they were "on the right track". Teacher attitude to the value of play as an authentic learning strategy, regardless of their particular teaching qualification, is developed as they work with young children and they refine their personal teaching approach.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Based on the experience of one school some pointers to ensure successful implementation and the inclusion play-based teaching and learning in Year 1 and 2 of school can be made. In this school's experience it was acknowledged by both administrators interviewed that changes to pedagogical and teaching practice will take time to implement.

*A2: "I have come to know that change can take a long time. And now I'm being a little bit more, yeah, circumspect about my expectations. And I am saying now perhaps between three to five years. I thought we'd be looking at months/a year. But because, again another factor, another driver in this is new staff."*

In referring to the change of staff highlighted that creating a cohesive and like-minded team takes time and can change as staff change. Schools seeking to embed play-based strategies into junior primary classroom will need take a long term perspective giving teachers time to understand the pedagogy behind the practice and support new teachers with strong induction and a team approach to change. Teachers' knowledge and understanding of the early childhood pedagogy and principles underpinning play-based learning will constantly

develop over a long period of time when school leadership believes in and supports teachers to continue working in ways that are successful and supportive of play-based pedagogy.

A strong feature of this school's journey was having a genuine 'community of learning' approach through teacher mentorship; the formation of collaborative year level teams; weekly collaborative team meetings in which teachers openly shared ideas and resources and planned learning events together. Vesio, Ross, and Adams (2011, p. 88) in their review of research on professional learning communities found that through participating in a community of practice "teaching culture is improved because the learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning". Schools interested in developing play-based strategies should strive to provide time and space for teachers to collaborate; share and discuss their professional practice. In her research of elementary mathematics teachers, Gellert (2013) found that through a community of practice positive changes in (mathematics) knowledge, pedagogy and identity were witnessed as participants reflected, questioned and took ownership of their own practice.

During this research project teachers described how they would value school based resources which are relevant to their school's context and available for their use. It is recommended that school communities develop a bank of resources such as a school philosophy; ideas for curriculum areas; suggestions for classroom organisation; current information on play-based learning e.g. develop a teacher library of literature on play-based learning; and the development of school resources will ensure that all members of staff will come to understand the direction being taken. Providing guidance and resources for new staff members will ensure that progress towards the inclusion of play-based learning opportunities will remain unbroken.

A final recommendation arising from this project is the consideration of teachers having the opportunity to visit each other's classrooms and engage in professional development in the area of play-based learning. Teachers at this school particularly commented on the value of visiting schools and talking with teachers who are also approaching early learning in the same way. Tsoulou (2016) suggests that teacher development will occur and generate change as teachers process new information through their own experience and then construct new meaning of the information through reflection, and experimentation. Taking personal responsibility and actively participating in observing experienced peers will stimulate reflection and shared perception and visiting other schools and classroom will "expose practitioners to differing views and varying teaching styles, leading to enriched experiences and expanded knowledge base" (Tsoulou, 2016, p. 10).

## **Conclusion**

The data gathered at this school illustrates the key factors that support and challenge the introduction of a play-based learning program for Years 1 and 2 of primary school. The changes that will happen throughout this change process include an examination of pedagogies used and principles held by the teaching team and a measured and well planned move to change the nature of the teaching and learning program to play-based learning over a considerable period of time. It appears that a combination of supportive leadership and teacher teams are a powerful combination which will impact on the success of the implementation. Likewise teachers' experience and knowledge of the pedagogy and practice combined with an opportunity to see the practice of other teachers trying the same approach are important supports to continue to strengthen to work which has already commenced.

The challenges to play-based learning should be openly discussed with teachers. This would include those in the school context which cannot be changed such as the physical environment and the crowded curriculum. Open and honest discussion about blocks to thinking and working in a play-based way which have become perceived challenges must also be discussed. These may include the idea that in a play-based environment it takes more time to prepare for and assess learning; and that evidence of learning from play-based exchanges is guided by the children's active engagement of play episodes which can be unpredictable and less controlled than test based evidence. A creative 'community of learners' approach to problem solving will need to be undertaken to discuss and research the challenges.

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