

A report on the

State of Play-Based Learning in Western Australian Schools



SSTUWA Early Childhood Education Survey (2018)
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Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA). I am very appreciative of the feedback, guidance and affirmation provided by SSTUWA personnel.

I would like to thank members of the SSTUWA Early Years Reference Committee (2014–2019) who provoked and promoted critical dialogue and discourse on play matters.

A special acknowledgement needs to be given to the teachers who remain steadfast in their commitment to deliver high-quality play-based learning in the early years of schooling, sometimes amid difficult circumstances.

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Introduction

This study was initiated by the SSTUWA to investigate the perceptions of teachers on matters related to the provision of play-based learning in WA schools. Since 2013, key WA Early Childhood Education (ECE) advocacy organisations (including Early Childhood Australia WA and the Early Years in Education Society) and members of the SSTUWA Early Years Reference Committee have expressed concerns

regarding what they cite as a significant decline in opportunities for children to learn through self-initiated and self-directed play experiences. This has been particularly noted in the early years of schooling. The findings derived from this study will inform the SSTUWA and the WA Department of Education (DoE) about training and resourcing needs for promoting play-based learning at school.

Literature: Play-Based Learning

The early childhood stage in human development is internationally identified as “a highly sensitive period marked by rapid transformations in physical, cognitive, social and emotional development”, and it is during this time that “young children learn by manipulating objects and materials, exploring the world around them and experimenting, using trial and error” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2006, pp.7 & 14). This experiential and experimental mode of learning is facilitated best through the medium of play, which is described as a spontaneous and voluntary activity involving a combination of body, object, symbol use and relationships (Tremblay, Boivin & Peters, 2013). The playing-learning child “does not separate between play and learning, and instead relates to the world around him or her in a playful manner” (Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2013, p.2). While there is no single definition of play, it is widely accepted that play is a flexible, enjoyable and intrinsically motivated activity with a focus

on the process rather than the outcome (Smith & Pellegrini, 2013).

Theories of human development identify child-initiated play as the primary source of early learning (Arthur et al., 2018). Accordingly, the role of an ECE teacher is to utilise play as a context for learning. This educational approach is known as play-based learning (PBL). In Australia, PBL is defined as “a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations” (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2009, p.6). PBL is also recognised as highly effective in scaffolding children’s learning to a higher level, and as such, guides curricula decisions in ECE (Robinson et al., 2018). Evidence-based research has shown that adult and/or peer involvement in child play can extend additional learning opportunities within the play itself (Danniels & Pyle, 2018; Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017).

Background: WA ECE

WA has a proud history of implementing play-based pedagogies in ECE. Cyril Jackson, appointed head of the WA Education Department during the 1890s, resolved to establish a new model of ECE with modern methods and principles in separate infant schools. Such was Jackson’s conviction that children learn better by reason and understanding than by repetitive memorisation (Birman, 1983; Mossenson, 1971) that he recruited experts from England to

instruct department teachers on the kindergarten pedagogy of play (Froebel, 1826). Play pedagogies were further refined by the Kindergarten Union of WA and Claremont Teachers’ Training College, both of which progressed the work of Dewey (1964), who identified “that traditional school methods and subject-matter failed to take into account the diversity of capacities and needs that exist in different human beings” (p.5). Dewey emphasised the importance of a ‘work-

play period' whereby ECE should nurture social interactions, respect individuality, and promote freedom of expression through the natural learning medium of play (Kerr, 1994).


During the 20th century, early childhood became a subject of scientific study within various disciplines (educational, cognitive and developmental psychology). New theorising generated by overseas research reaffirmed the position that developmentally appropriate play experiences and diverse play opportunities are key to children's wellbeing, learning and healthy development (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014).

In 1990, Australia ratified the international human rights treaty on children's rights – the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019). Article 31 of the CRC recognises the child's birth right to play – to grow and learn at different rates through playful experiences (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2018). At that time, there was also a new philosophical catalyst for rethinking ECE practices, research and advocacy in Australian educational settings. The Reggio Emilia philosophy (inspired by the educational project of Reggio Emilia, Italy) was gaining momentum. This philosophy projects the image of the child as strong, resourceful, capable and a protagonist of their own learning and discovery (Malaguzzi, 1986), and has significant teaching implications in terms of enabling children's creative and expressive learning through different mediums including play.

In the years that followed, Australia showed further commitment to children's entitlement to learn through play. In 2012, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) implemented a series of national reforms directed at ECE and care provision (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). One initiative was the National Quality Standard (NQS) that mandates benchmarks for practice pertaining to seven quality standard areas deemed important outcomes for children aged birth–five years (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2018). The first standard is the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) that guides ECE curriculum and teaching pedagogy. The EYLF has a specific emphasis

on PBL (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace, 2009).

Moreover, in 2013, the then Minister for Education in Western Australia informed primary school principals that the EYLF would be relevant to school-based early childhood programs and practice, thereby extending PBL to Year 2 (children aged six–seven years) (Department of Education, 2015) and overlapping the EYLF and the Australian Curriculum requirements in the early years of schooling (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012). Perhaps paradoxically, because of these education reforms WA teachers now grapple with juxtaposed approaches to ECE: there has been a shift from a viewpoint of ECE focused on developmental learning to one focused on academic learning.



...developmentally appropriate play experiences and diverse play opportunities are key to children's wellbeing, learning and healthy development.

Given WA's strong historical commitment to PBL, this research project is timely in its aims to provide insight into issues surrounding the perceived demise of play in WA ECE and to deepen our understanding of factors contributing to tensions in the field. This study makes an original contribution to the literature by voicing participants' thoughts and ideas on how the Department of Education (under the direction of the WA Minister for Education) can support schools' accommodation of diversity through PBL to ensure all students have the potential to thrive.

Methods

The study used a survey research approach to collect data from a range of teachers employed in the WA public education system: those working in early childhood, primary and secondary education, school principals and other school administration personnel.

The research sought to answer two research questions:

1. What is the level of PBL knowledge, confidence and attitudes in WA public schools?

2. What are the barriers and enablers to providing PBL in WA public schools?

Invitation to participate in the research project was circulated through SSTUWA e-newsletters; emails to members through the SSTUWA Early Years Reference Committee network; and existing online school networks (i.e. SSTUWA and ECE teachers' Facebook pages). The data was collected anonymously through SurveyMonkey (an online survey tool). Ethics clearance was obtained from the SSTUWA General Secretary (2018).

Study Results

The project's self-administered questionnaire enabled a large number of teachers to provide information pertaining to their perspectives on

PBL in schools through pre-developed items (closed and open-ended).

Data Analysis

There was a total of 617 respondents to the online survey. The use of italics in this report identifies their direct quotes.

Participants were asked to identify their role at their school using the following classification: Early Childhood Qualified Teacher, teacher, principal, and administration. Most respondents (87%) indicated that they had more than five years of teaching experience and reported that they had

expert knowledge or were very knowledgeable about PBL (see Table 1 below). Respondents included 430 Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs).

Significant to this study, is the number of participants who are confident in their knowledge about PBL. These participants are potential enablers of change processes in schools to reinstate PBL in ECE.

Table 1: Participants' Confidence in how knowledgeable they were (K) about PBL

Role	Expert K	Very K	Moderately K	Slightly K	Not at all K
ECT (n=430)	21%	53%	25%	1%	0%
Teacher (n=159)	8%	52%	35%	4%	1%
Principal (n=11)	27%	64%	9%	0%	0%
Administration (n=18)	22%	50%	17%	11%	0%

PBL Pedagogies

When considering the definition of 'early childhood years of schooling', in terms of play-based pedagogical discussion, the majority of respondents (n=468) identified Kindergarten (K) (children aged three–four years) through to Year 3 (children aged seven–eight years) as the most applicable cohort. This aligns with the United Nations' definition of ECE provision in primary schools (1989). The majority of participants also indicated that PBL in an ECE environment should be a high priority (91%) and stated that there should be more PBL in the early years of schooling context than presently offered (82%).

Respondents were asked to describe play-based pedagogy without using the word 'play'. Responses typically included reference to learning through active involvement using the senses (experimental and experiential) while completing unstructured indoor and outdoor learning activities. PBL experiences were described as personally meaningful and intrinsically motivating for the child with a focus on process rather than product-orientation. PBL pedagogies were also associated with the teacher's provision of developmentally appropriate open-ended inquiry experiences that related to children's interests and imagination in self-discovery or collaborative learning activities. The teacher's role was perceived as instrumental in supporting children to explore and understand prescribed curriculum concepts through PBL, and to intentionally assist learning through adult guidance, scaffolding, and questioning while capitalising on children's natural sense of wonder. The child's role during PBL was perceived as that of being the protagonist and having agency within the learning process. This necessitated exploration, risk-taking, making mistakes, decision-making, problem-solving, resolving conflict (with peers and adults), accepting challenges, and contending with disappointment and failure.

When respondents (n=533) were asked who the predominant pedagogical decision-makers were at their schools, 55% stated that it was school leaders, 25% stated that it was teaching area groups/team members, and 20% stated that it

was individual teachers. School leaders or school leadership teams developed operational plans and whole-school programs that were discussed with teachers (who also provided input). There was an expectation (or mandate) that teachers would subsequently align their classroom activities with whole-school approaches to teaching children, sometimes necessitating one generic all-embracing pedagogy. The level of teacher input in making pedagogical decisions was variable.

- *School leaders set the focus but there is still room for teachers to try their best to do what they think is right. [There is] some but not enough control over pedagogy by teachers.*

The idea of pedagogy is not easily defined and governments' attempts to "package pedagogy" and "train teachers into adopting a state sanctioned version" overlooks pedagogical complexities and the ontological assumptions that underpin individual teacher pedagogy (White et al., 2006, p. 6). Noteworthy is the Department of Education's (hereafter referred to as 'the Department') directive to teachers that inherent to exemplary primary school practice is "a school-wide approach to teaching and learning [that] creates the conditions for student achievement to exceed expectation"; whereby there is "widespread ownership of a school's vision and purpose"; and that "once understood and accepted by all, guiding values are not negotiable" (Department of Education, 2016, p. 3).

Early childhood pedagogies are personalised; teachers use "different theories about early childhood to inform their approaches [that include PBL] to children's learning and development" and draw on "their creativity, intuition and imagination to help them improvise and adjust their practice to suit the time, place and context of learning" (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2009, p. 12). Relevant to this research project, teaching and learning approaches familiar to primary school education "require reinterpretation for an early years context" to embed a range of ECE perspectives and theories of child development (Petriwskyj et al., 2013, p. 15).

PBL in WA Public Schools

Most ECT participants (74% of ECT respondents) reported there were barriers to implementing PBL in their classroom. All the ECTs indicated that only 54% of their ECE program incorporated PBL. A high percentage (79%) advised that assessment expectations at their school influenced PBL integration. Many ECTs (78%) revealed that the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2016) had a significant impact on PBL provision.

Reflecting on how well they were supported at their school to implement a PBL program (on a sliding scale from one to five: one being the least supported and five being the most supported) ECTs responded that they received the most support from colleagues (with an average score of 3.76/5), followed by parents (3.58/5) and then, school leaders (2.92/5). Enabling quality PBL in schools requires support from leadership to establish a shared philosophy on the importance of play, provide access to professional learning (PL) and mentoring, and ensure sufficient resourcing (Early Life Foundations, 2019):

All school leaders need to have a good understanding of the importance of play in early childhood. Without their support Early Childhood Teachers cannot do what they have been trained to do.

The tendency of explicit teaching/instruction in WA early years of schooling has resulted in more time, space and resources being directed towards teaching formal lessons (Hesterman, Targowska & Howitt, 2016). Explicit teaching/instruction is one aspect of a teacher's instructional repertoire (SSTUWA, 2018): it is focused on clear lesson objectives and success criteria. It is also affiliated with, but not limited to, highly structured instruction in basic skills in early literacy and numeracy education (Luke, 2013).

Asked whether there should be more explicit instruction in ECE classrooms, the majority of ECTs (85%); teachers (84%); and administration personnel (56%) responded 'no'.

Explicit instruction has its place integrated within a play-based model ... explicit instruction can be delivered in a play-based way.

While majority of ECTs indicated their support of using explicit teaching strategies in ECE, their opinion on implementing these strategies in their K–Year 2 class varied.

When explicit instruction is not implemented in my K–2 classroom, the results are ...

- I feel that I am not teaching everything that I need to teach. I feel like I can't 'cover' everything expected of me.*
- Children are not covering all the areas of the curriculum required by administration.*
- Children can have gaps in their knowledge and understandings of new information and specific skills required to progress learning.*
- Harder to meet specific learning targets.*
- Difficult to fill in reports and meet criteria and current learning expectations.*
- Most children do not understand what they are learning and have greater difficulty achieving the desired outcomes.*
- Some children fall through the cracks as they need a structure to learn.*
- The children do not move forward, particularly with literacy and numeracy skills.*

There were ECTs who advocated for a 'balanced' approach, where there is an equilibrium between explicit teaching and PBL. The two approaches were not considered mutually exclusive.

- *Explicit instruction has its place integrated within a play-based model ... explicit instruction can be delivered in a play-based way.*
- *I believe there needs to be to be a balance of some explicit teaching along with a play-based program.*
- *There needs to be some explicit teaching, but we need to go back and play more. The curriculum expectations are too great for younger children, there is a lot of pressure for them to learn.*

Other ECTs commented that there was more student engagement and motivation to be independent learners when students used other means of learning. They argued that when instruction was not teacher-centred there was more time to focus on children's wellbeing.

- *Children are calmer, feeling like they can contribute and have time to notice what they notice. There are less behavioural issues as children are more active.*
- *[Children are] socially aware ... independent, co-operative and happy learners. Literacy and numeracy develop for those who are ready for it.*
- *More child-centred learning happens.*
- *Children can take a little longer to do some things, but they remember it for longer.*

- *Children who thrive and enjoy their early childhood education at their own pace.*
- *Children are more engaged and experience less stress and anxiety.*
- *[There is] [m]ore time for social interaction and student questions, inquiry learning, and independent self-directed work.*
- *Children think for themselves and don't worry about mistakes they make.*
- *Children have more opportunities to be creative and explore at their own level with their classmates. Turn-taking, sharing, consideration and cooperation can be practised and encouraged along with all the values that can so easily be highlighted when children get to actually play.*

There were also several ECTs who stated that they were unsure, uncertain, unable to make a comment or simply did not know the answer.

The wide diversity in responses related to the role of explicit instruction in K–Year 2 classrooms may be attributed to the broad nature of the question. The scope of what was deemed developmentally appropriate practice with consideration to Kindergarten and Year 2 children is considerable. Therefore, participants' perceptions of the time and place for explicit teaching/instruction in the early years of schooling was likely to be dependent on the ECE year level that the ECT had experienced.

Perceptions of Providing PBL in Classroom Learning

The importance of PBL in supporting children's classroom learning was overwhelmingly positive (91%). Participants' feedback related to three dominant themes: wellbeing, creativity and academic outcomes.

Wellbeing

Each participant cohort acknowledged the importance of PBL in supporting children's wellbeing across different developmental domains: social and emotional, cognitive, language, physical, and creativity. PBL was identified as instrumental in providing essential foundational experiences that contributed to the

development of the child's *life skill set*. There was a belief that through PBL, children developed and refined skills *to navigate an ever-changing world*.

Children learn how to socialise and get along with other children by learning rules and expectations of what is expected of them during play-based learning. It allows them time to explore and learn different skills.

The application of executive function skills was observed during PBL: building confidence, identity, agency, resiliency and self-regulation; also, promoting independence, curiosity and exploration. In addition, social empathy and

acceptance of cultural and linguistic diversity was nurtured: children learn how to cooperate with and tolerate others. This research confirms that it is paramount that the early years learning environment allows children to exercise their developing executive function skills through PBL activities that foster creative play and social connection (Harvard University, 2019).

A significant finding was the perceived relationship between PBL and children's happiness; this was emphasised in several responses. PBL was also associated with nurturing a love of school and a love of learning for life.

Creativity

There were numerous statements pertaining to the relationship between PBL and inspiring *creative minds*, *creative learners*, and *creative*

[During PBL] children are engaged in a variety of open-ended activities that are stimulating the brain, imagination, vocabulary, social skills, fine or gross motor skills.

thinkers. Associative qualities and conditions conducive to creative pursuits identified by the participants included children: engaging in risk-taking; developing intrinsic motivation; not being pressured; being able to learn at their own pace; taking responsibility for their own learning; building confidence, and engaging in child-led and individualised learning. PBL opportunities supported children to be *free thinkers* and explore topics of personal interest.

I believe it is important for students to have flexibility within the classroom and learn in fun and engaging ways... I currently teach Year 3/4, so I mix up play-based with flexible learning. I want to create independent learners. I feel [that] by creating a positive classroom ... students want to come to school. It is important for students to have flexibility within the classroom and learn in fun and engaging ways.

Similarly, PBL afforded teachers opportunities to develop confidence in their own creative endeavours; in their program, teaching strategies and environment design (Nilsson & Ferholt; Thomas, 2013).

Academic Outcomes

PBL was considered an effective means to achieve academic outcomes in ways that were engaging, enjoyable, and non-stressful. Numerous respondents indicated that through PBL, children could relate experiences to self and their own lives, which assisted in making classroom learning relevant. Children were also observed to be more focused and interested in authentic learning (Herrington & Herrington, 2006): children reflected on the way knowledge was used in real life. Their participation in PBL activities also assisted with the collaborative construction of knowledge and provided exposure to different ways of knowing, thinking, doing and being (O'Rourke, 2005).

Participants' reference to PBL was consistently linked to the advancement of cognitive and motor skills and improved ability to retain information taught: *we more readily remember things that we do*. Research reveals that playful physical activity increases language, literacy growth, attention, working memory, and academic success (Zeng, 2017).

- *[During PBL] children are engaged in a variety of open-ended activities that are stimulating the brain, imagination, vocabulary, social skills, fine or gross motor skills.*
- *Children learn when they can apply new knowledge. Play-based learning allows children to apply this knowledge through play which ensures a deeper understanding of content.*

Furthermore, through play children can learn critical thinking and higher order problem-solving skills (L'Hôte et al., 2019). Participants' perceptions of the long-term benefits of PBL were that children would become citizens who were healthy, well-adjusted and calculated risk-takers throughout their lives; they would be motivated and interested learners able to think flexibly; and they would be committed to explore and investigate the 'how' and 'why' lines of inquiry, making positive contributions to society.

Consequences if PBL is not Integrated in ECE

An ECE without playful experiences was described as providing surface-level learning only. Content was easily forgotten and contributed to feelings of frustration for both students and teachers. Teachers noted that some behavioural problems stemmed from children's sense of failure and their opposition to conform to activities deemed boring.

Children are not enthusiastic and are withdrawn from their learning, sometimes resulting in no self-regulation, and therefore inappropriate behaviour occurs ... children develop anxiety ... because of formal expectations beyond their normal developmental stages.

Describing an early years classroom without PBL (keywords identified in Figure 1), participants depicted students as being passive, robotic, fidgety and restless; also, becoming bored, anxious, distracted, and disengaged. Moreover, many teachers commented on the increased need for behaviour management. Behavioural problems were associated with children feeling unhappy, frustrated, apprehensive, and disconnected – not having a sense of belonging.

Children were said to be 'overwhelmed' and sometimes 'tearful' when required to complete

classroom tasks before they were 'ready' to do so. For example: sitting or standing stationary for too long, hand printing on standardised practice worksheets/textbook pages with abstract content and commencing formal reading and writing. Resistance to comply with developmentally inappropriate activities was evidenced in children's *non-participation or angry participation*, which teachers reported was occurring more frequently nowadays. It was noted that children who felt exposed, unsafe and upset were less likely to 'have a go' when asked to engage in writing, speaking, reading and maths activities. Many teachers perceived *children as emotionally strung out when they were forced to behave in ways that were not developmentally appropriate*, which then had an adverse effect on their academic outcomes.

Anxious children are scared to have a go, because they may make mistakes because developmentally they are not ready to be stuck at a desk being taught by direct instruction.

There was also evidence of stressors in children's school lives when they were unable to resolve conflicts and make decisions for themselves.

Figure 1: When Play-Based Learning Is Not Implemented in My K-2 Class, the Results Are ...



Other Issues Impacting on PBL

Respondents confirmed that current practices in WA schools that included the push-down of more structured programs for younger children and an overcrowded curriculum had led to the demise of PBL in ECE.

The curriculum has become so crowded and the pressure to deliver and show growth via data is greater than ever before. Children are not given the opportunity to discover, create, interact and gain confidence when they are being inundated with an overloaded curriculum.

In some schools, the overwhelming amount of explicit teaching that was required to cover curriculum content had placed excessive pressure on young children (and teachers).

- *Children are less engaged – more behavioural issues, tasks are not age-appropriate, leading to anxiety plus early burnout ... Why expect young children to complete tasks that are way beyond maturity, brain development and body readiness?*

Why expect young children to complete tasks that are way beyond maturity, brain development and body readiness?

Several teachers asserted that the introduction of literacy and numeracy timed-rotations did not facilitate an integrated learning program. This had resulted in both teachers and students experiencing dissatisfaction. A shared sentiment in the survey responses was that when PBL is not central to ECE, not all students' needs are met. Lewis (2017) has observed that an increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy learning in ECE has resulted in an erosion of play time; and,

when PBL is integrated to support children's achievement of academic outcomes it is increasingly highly structured and orchestrated by teachers.

If we really want children to BE engaged, enthusiastic in learning exploration and BECOME all that they can BE and to feel and thrive in a community with a sense of belonging then PLAY will provide the environment, offer the opportunities to create the possibilities to deliver the outcomes.

The overcrowding of the curriculum and elements of the curriculum being introduced too soon were concerns expressed by others who had been working in schools for some time. The following statements were made by principal participants:

- *If we really want children to BE engaged, enthusiastic in learning exploration and BECOME all that they can BE and to feel and thrive in a community with a sense of belonging then PLAY will provide the environment, offer the opportunities to create the possibilities to deliver the outcomes.*
- *There is too much confusion about what Explicit teaching really is in ECE. New concepts and skills in literacy and numeracy can be delivered in an intentional play-based way, it is not one or the other.*

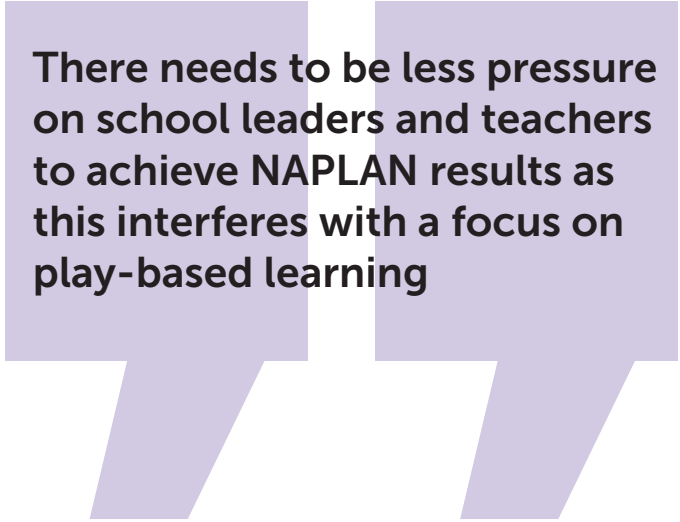
The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) (2014) claims it is a case of too much, too soon, too complex! Moreover, they argue that there is a need to reduce the assessment and reporting in primary schools. The directive of employing a five-point scale (A–E metric or using language representative of a five-tiered achievement classification) to grade academic performance (pertinent to Pre-Primary (PP)–Year

2), coupled with the pressure of NAPLAN and On-Entry Assessment requirements, had escalated teaching load and heightened ECE formal learning expectations.

- *Do not place so much importance on collecting data – and trying to raise the results of assessment/data by pushing more and more and more explicit teaching in Early Childhood.*
- *Stop the need for constant assessment! Let our teachers actually TEACH the children. We spend too much time crunching (often useless) data to satisfy Australian and state-wide school comparisons.*

School accountability in relation to the Department's internal school review processes (when a DoE personnel closely interrogates school/student poor NAPLAN performance) (Department of Education, 2008; 2018) and public scrutiny of a school's NAPLAN performance through the My School website has contributed to further teaching to the test, narrowing of curriculum outcomes, and restrictive pedagogic choices (Harris, 2013; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013). This has permeated WA ECE and eroded play provision:

- *There needs to be less pressure on school leaders and teachers to achieve NAPLAN results as this interferes with a focus on play-based learning.*



There needs to be less pressure on school leaders and teachers to achieve NAPLAN results as this interferes with a focus on play-based learning

- *Scrap NAPLAN, or at least linking it to the My School website – making parents believe it is the only indicator of a good school.*

The My School website provides parents and the wider community with information about every Australian school. Every Australian school has its own landing page on the website where information about the average achievement of students in NAPLAN can be obtained (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2018).

Recommendations to Optimise PBL in WA Schools so Children Can Thrive

With consideration of the NQS and understanding of the EYLF, participants were asked to write a message to the Department or Minister of Education to express their opinion on how young students can best thrive. Themes embedded in the participants' writing encapsulated their diverse concerns about the status of PBL. The Government of Western Australia (hereafter referred to as 'the Government') was beseeched to be proactive in ensuring PBL is a universal right for all children, regardless of who they are, where they live, and what school they attend. It is not within the scope of this paper to detail the 587 individual messages that the participants in this study communicated. Rather, the following writing collates participants' responses pertaining

to five key foci and provides associative recommended actions that the Government can enact to ensure there is public accountability and transparency of processes surrounding appropriate play pedagogies and sufficiency of PBL in WA schools.

Five key foci

1. Government Leadership
2. Department School Reform
3. PBL Support in Schools
4. Teacher Agency
5. System Accountability

1. Government Leadership

A crucial observation made by the respondents is that PBL is not a mandated requirement in the early years of schooling, despite the EYLF having a specific emphasis on PBL. PBL in WA schools is variable and its quality is not a certainty. Tensions exist when ECTs have the responsibility of reinforcing in their daily practice the principles laid out in the United Nations (1989) CRC – specifically, the right to learn through play but face barriers in its provision. The WA Government has an obligation to protect this fundamental right and act to prevent other people or organisations interfering or restricting this right provided for in

Article 31 (International Play Association, 2013) and further elaborated in General Comment 17 (International Play Association, 2013).

- *Please make quality play-based learning mandatory in K–2 classrooms and abolish the need for mandatory standardised testing – bring back the joy of learning and teaching. Please provide funding for outdoor learning environments to be upgraded to promote nature play and funding for early childhood classrooms to have new resources to help promote play-based learning.*

Recommendations for Action

- The Government to act immediately and decisively to secure all children’s right to PBL in the early years of schooling.
- The Government to review education models implemented in Scandinavian countries and the Italian educational project of Reggio Emilia with the aim of facilitating child-centred and emergent ECE programmes that foster children’s PBL in ways that are natural to them and foster their wellbeing.
- The Government to work with the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) to review reporting requirements for ECE.
- The Government to reassess the requirement for Year 3 students to participate in NAPLAN testing.
- The Government to ensure funding for the reinstatement of a university qualified ECE specialist in each regional education district office to support school leaders and teachers on matters pertaining to PBL.

2. Department School Reform

During their assessment of PBL, participants identified key factors requiring urgent school reform by the Department that comprised of more provision and access to PL on PBL, clear directives on PBL provision in schools (related to sufficiency of time, space and resources), and a reduction of curriculum content, standardised testing and reporting requirements.

- *The Office of Early Childhood Development should not just be involved in setting policy, it should also determine the PL offered to schools or have the authority to shut down PL that is fostering formalisation of the curriculum in the Early Years. The PP curriculum is now in subject areas which destroys making a play-based learning program integrated. This needs to be looked at.*

- *Consult widely. Be explicit with your definition of ECE in Western Australia. Bring back Early Child Directors and experts in DoE [the Department] to redefine and guide educators and school leaders to know what practices should be or not be used throughout WA.*
- *That all the bodies that encompass or have bearing on children and educators in the early years work together to make the EYLF, NQS, SCSA work together so that educators don't feel pulled between the results that school leaders and the Education Department want and the principles that drive EYLF.*

Recommendations for Action

- The Department to provide clear guidance to schools for implementing a developmentally age-appropriate curriculum with a stronger emphasis on PBL; and to ensure that such a curriculum reduces the current demands on teachers both in terms of content and reporting to parents.
- Arising from the development of an age-appropriate curriculum, the Department to develop a comprehensive ECE policy in consultation with key stakeholders including representation from the SSTUWA, WA universities and WA ECE advocacy organisations.
- The Department to provide PL on PBL to teachers and leaders in schools.
- The Department to require PL for all primary school principals and primary teachers (without ECE qualification) on child development in relation to PBL.
- The Department to ensure play specialist support is available to school leaders, teachers and parents on PBL.
- The Department to create one or two of the new Lead Principal positions for ECE teachers with a track record of effectiveness in PBL.

3. PBL Support in Schools

If play is to be one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills (UNICEF, 2018), then school support for PBL and its delivery in the early years of schooling is essential for children to thrive. Children's access to the affordances of play is ultimately dependent on adult gatekeepers (Clerkin, 2019). However, many participants identified a reduction in these affordances at school due to barriers that were beyond their control. The need for increased support to deliver PBL was strongly emphasised by participants.

- *Training and upskilling for K–2 staff so play-based learning can be implemented effectively, and funding to accommodate for the purchasing of resources and materials.*
- *The number one message would be that we need more generosity with education assistant provision to implement developmentally appropriate learning programs. We want to get the balance right between play and explicit teaching.*
- *Early Childhood Teachers need to be supported in their aims to keep/introduce/increase play-based education with administrators having a good understanding of what this looks like and the resourcing required to implement this style of learning.*
- *We need TIME! We need SPACE! We need RESOURCES! We need SUPPORT!*

Recommendations for Action

- Schools to develop a school philosophy on PBL underpinned by research on play that emphasises the importance of play for children's wellbeing, learning and development.
- Schools to provide supportive leadership of PBL and deliver sufficiency of play time, play space and play resources in indoor and outdoor environments for children aged three–eight years.
- Schools to nominate a play specialist to oversee the implementation of PBL pedagogy that aligns with the EYLF and United Nations CRC.
- Schools to provide opportunities for teachers to observe first-hand how children thrive in play-based environments then engage in reflective practice with school colleagues.
- Schools to develop a school play policy in consultation with all members of the school community.

4. Teacher Agency

To maximise the benefits of PBL, ECT participants reflected on their own efforts and demanded that their professional expertise in ECE be respectfully acknowledged: frustration at their diminished autonomy to implement PBL was a dominant theme in the data. The Department and school administration's respect and trust in their professional judgement on how to utilise PBL to support children's learning was considered paramount.

- *Teachers are professional, well-educated members of our society!!! Trust in them!!! Encourage them to create memorable moments for young children. Excellent play-based learning will produce a society of problem-solvers and creative thinkers which is exactly what we will need for our future!*
- *Allow ECE teachers to have input into what is decided for ECE rather than unilaterally decide what and how the pedagogy should involve. The push-down of the Curriculum has meant an erosion of time for play in classrooms, a push for explicit teaching and a more formalised approach in order to reach outcomes decided by those who do not work with young children.*
- *Respect that Early Childhood Teachers are highly trained in the different needs of young children and that pedagogical decisions should be made by the teachers in the best interests of the children.*

Recommendations for Action

- ECE teachers to be encouraged to build their leadership capacity through PL; for example, ECE school networks, ECE conferences, ECE leadership forums, involvement in PBL ECE research projects, ECE post-graduate studies, and membership to ECE advocacy organisation events.
- ECE teachers to be representatives at Government and Department forums to share their PBL expertise and voice their concern if PBL is compromised in a school.
- ECE teachers to be nominated as educational leaders in school administration to support the early phase of learning that aligns with evidence-based research on ECE pedagogies.
- ECE teachers to provide guidance on embedding PBL pedagogies in school policies: consistent with the role description of educational leaders detailed in the National Quality Standard – Quality Area 7 (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2019).
- Experienced ECE teachers to lead the development of ECE curriculum, to ensure the establishment of clear goals and expectations for PBL in ECE, and to monitor the provision of quality PBL environments for children's learning and development.

5. System Accountability

The findings from this research survey affirm that there is an urgency for the Government, the Department and schools to demonstrate their commitment to the delivery of quality PBL through system accountability. WA ECE advocacy organisations believe that a government-led WA Play Strategy will counterbalance the significant demise of PBL that has occurred in schools over the past decade and will raise community awareness about the importance of play in children's lives.

- *[Without PBL in ECE, children are] bored, disengaged, fidgety kids who are difficult to manage in large group situations. These kids often get into trouble, but it is the system that is causing the problem!*
- *It's sad and a sad reflection on our system that seems to be run to suit politicians and their advancement rather than child-focused. Wake up government and realise you don't always have to be voter pleasers, especially when it comes to our most precious commodity in Australia – our children!*
- *Continue to reinforce the message that play based learning is essential in an early childhood environment (K-2). Ensure that documents, resources and future assessments show clear links to play based learning.*
- *DoE [the Department] and the Minister need to lead by taking on board the knowledge and expertise of ECE experts (university level and most importantly teachers) and clearly and explicitly inform school leaders and teachers about what true PBL (including the importance of child agency) is. Then PL is required because too many teachers have not had experience with true play-based education and have never had or have lost the art of ECE.*

Recommendations for Action

- The Government to commit to elevating the status of PBL in schools as part of addressing important issues facing Western Australia. Integral to the Government's *Bright Futures: Sharing the Prosperity* statement of intent (Government of Western Australia, 2019) is improving the health and wellbeing of children in the early years. This includes children at school aged four–eight years.
- Develop and promote a WA Play Strategy for children aged birth–eight years. A WA Play Strategy will elevate the status of play in WA, and strongly encourage the provision of quality PBL in education, care, school and the community.
- The Government to invest financially in resourcing high-quality school-based PBL in ECE.

Commentary

In Australia, the early childhood period is defined as birth–eight years. This period is recognised as the most important phase of life, influencing developmental trajectory and life course (World Health Organisation, 2019). It is during these early years that there is remarkable growth across the developmental domains; this growth is highly influenced by the environment and the people that surround the child (UNESCO, 2019). The role of play in supporting children’s development remains central to ECE principles worldwide. PBL is cited internationally as the best approach to delivering quality outcomes for children (especially those experiencing disadvantage) and continues to be anchored deeply in ECE pre-service and graduate university teacher education courses (Mondiale Pour l’Education Prescolaire (World Organisation for Early Childhood Education), 2017).

In 2018, 15 early development experts (Australian and international) participated in a one-hour individual interview to share their knowledge on a range of issues that included play. This was a WA initiative sponsored by CoLab: a partnership between Telethon Kids Institute and the Minderoo Foundation. Feedback about play was that it supports healthy early development by facilitating the acquisition of key skills and capacities and can protect young children’s socio-emotional development. It was highlighted that more needs to be done to create opportunities for play. It was recommended that play experiences for learning need to be better facilitated by schools by “removing existing obstacles”, “adding ‘play competencies’ to the list of desired outcomes for early development in school”, and “reducing class sizes to give children more freedom and opportunities to play” (L’Hôte et al., 2019, p. 11).

Also relevant to this research study is an independent review (2018) commissioned by State/Territory officials on how to ‘lift our game’ to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools. The review recognised ECE as different from primary school education and stated that its provision should be delivered through PBL by a qualified ECE teacher (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). It also reaffirmed that play continues to perform a vital role in the development and education of all children. In addition, the Australian Primary Principals Association’s submission to the Review of the Melbourne Declaration stated that “A

revised or new [Melbourne] Declaration will serve young Australians best if it drives policies which privilege play and unstructured social interactions across the early years of childhood” (2019, p. 3). A whole-system reform requires 100% of the system (the Department, professional associations, union, school leaders, teachers, parents, and those advocating for children’s wellbeing and their rights) to be in ‘concert’ and act jointly to drive change (Fullan, 2011). The Government has the capacity to lead this orchestration.

WA public schools have been described as “fantastic places for children to learn through play” (Department of Education, 2019, para. 5). However, as evidenced by participants’ responses, this is not always the case: there are barriers to PBL implementation. The findings from this research provide valuable insight as to why not all schools are ‘fantastic places’ nor places ‘to learn through play’. In the new millennium, the Government has given insufficient attention and public transparency to the provision of quality PBL in early years classrooms.

Leading into the 2021 state election, the Government can make things right – show leadership by ensuring the sufficiency of play required for children’s wellbeing, creativity and learning at school. This is not a new nor radical idea. Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have play policies: Wales has enshrined the child’s right to play into its legislation (Goodhall & Atkinson, 2017; King & Howard, 2014). These governments have responded to community concerns through legislation and policies: how will our Government respond?

Within the WA community there are qualified experts in child development and those knowledgeable about early learning who can guide the Government on play matters and enable schools to deliver PBL, not as a privilege but as a right (Souto-Manning, 2017). Clearly, legislation and policies specific to ECE are important. The UNICEF (2018) has stated that legislative reforms and government policies “can clearly affirm children’s right to play and can state that play-based learning is a distinctive and essential feature of effective early learning ... [and] create an expectation that playful learning will be taken seriously and implemented” (p. 16).

Conclusion

This report conveys feedback from 600+ adults working with young children in WA schools and bears testament to the demise of PBL in ECE. Importantly, the report voices the concerns of 430 ECTs who have expressed an urgency for the Government to remove the barriers that prevent them implementing PBL in their early years classrooms. Members of key WA ECE advocacy organisations have also expressed their concern and are urging the Government to lead the development of a WA Play Strategy to raise public awareness about the importance of

play in children's lives (Early Childhood Australia WA, 2019). To date, 8,000+ WA citizens and 150+ organisations (including associations for core subject/learning areas and allied health services) have endorsed this proposed initiative, and in so doing have declared their support for the Government to act now. Young Western Australians are our most precious resource. We can do no less than to demand excellence and equity in the provision of PBL at their schools on their behalf.

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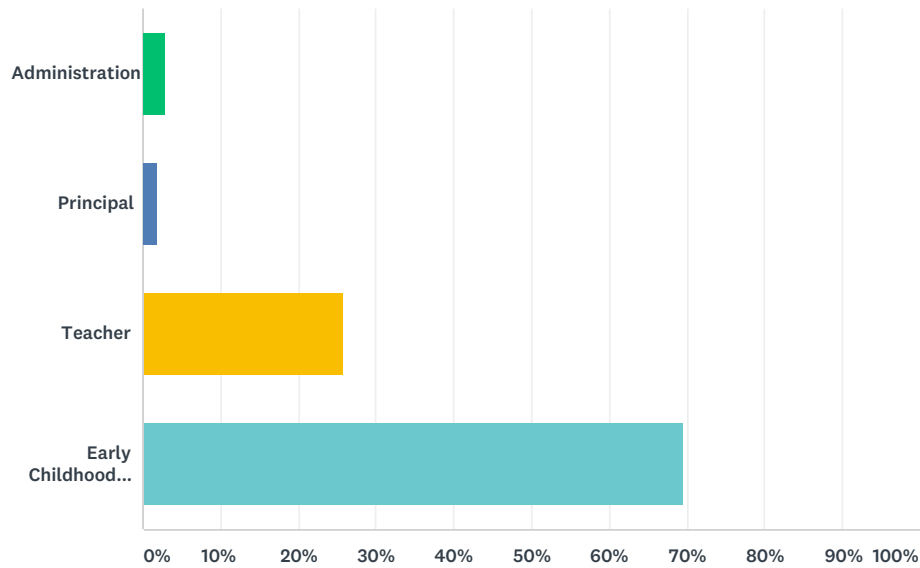
Appendix

The following pages contain the questions asked in the SSTUWA Early Childhood Education Survey (2018), as well as tabulated responses to the closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions are listed at the end; responses to open-ended questions are not included due to space restrictions.

Early Childhood Survey

Q1 Role at school

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

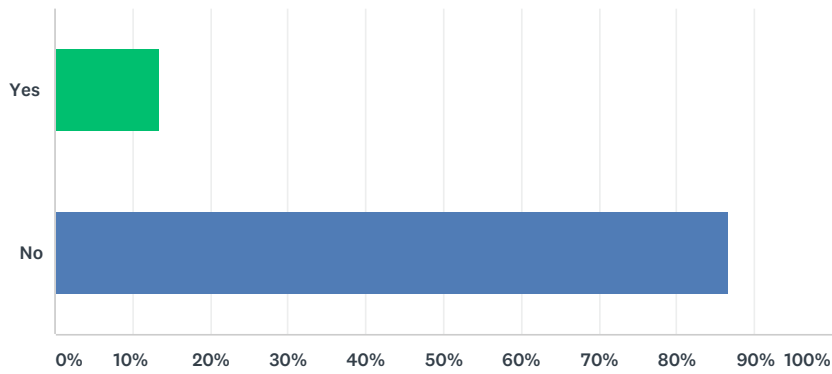


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Administration	2.92%	18
Principal	1.78%	11
Teacher	25.77%	159
Early Childhood Qualified Teacher	69.53%	429
TOTAL		617

Early Childhood Survey

Q2 Are you a new teacher (in the first five years?)

Answered: 616 Skipped: 1

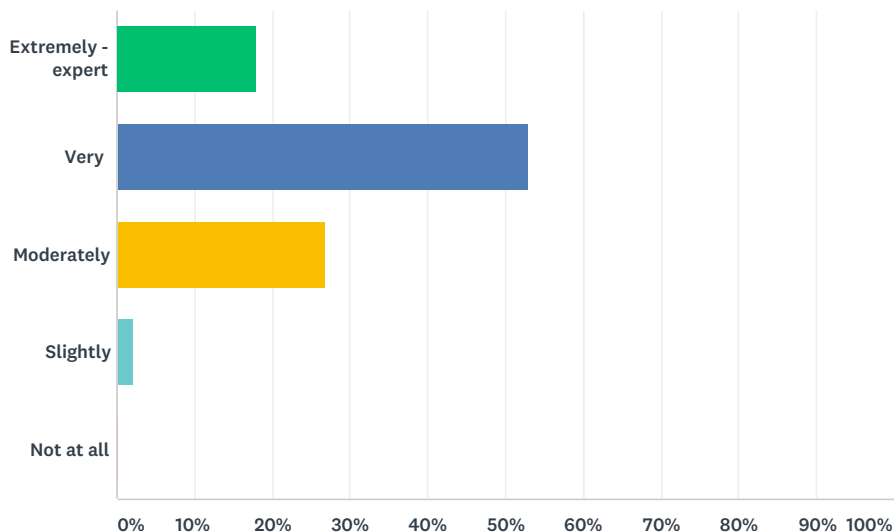


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	13.47%	83
No	86.53%	533
TOTAL		616

Early Childhood Survey

Q3 How knowledgeable do you feel you are about play based learning?

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

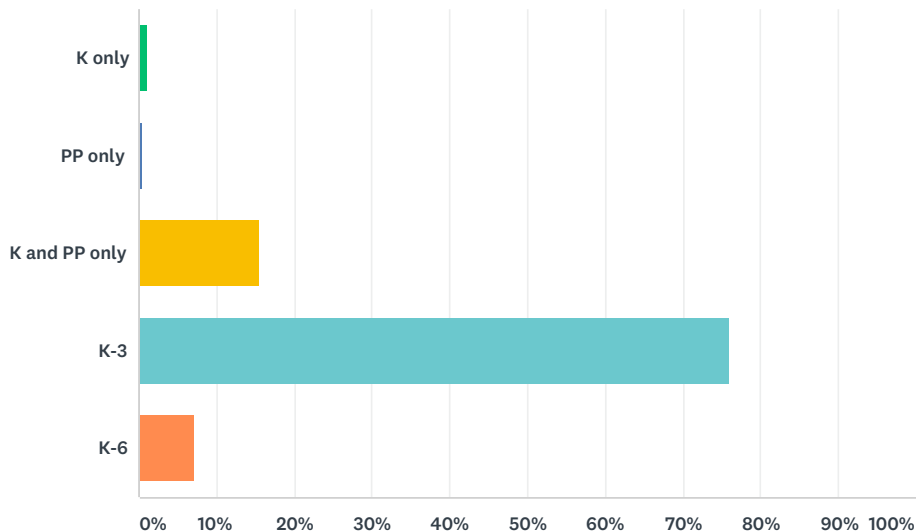


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Extremely - expert	17.99%	111
Very	53.00%	327
Moderately	26.74%	165
Slightly	2.11%	13
Not at all	0.16%	1
TOTAL		617

Early Childhood Survey

Q4 What do you consider to be Early Childhood in terms of the play-based pedagogical discussion?

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

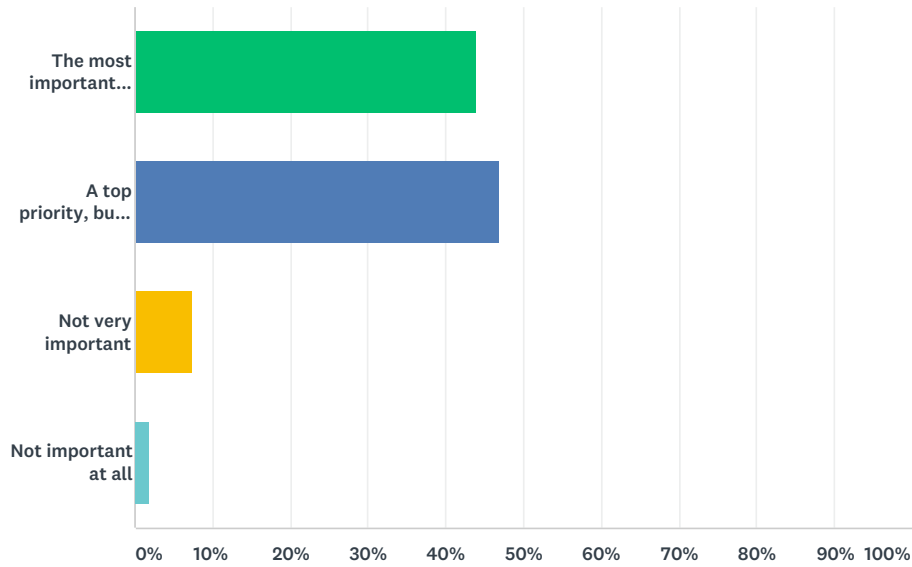


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
K only	1.13%	7
PP only	0.49%	3
K and PP only	15.40%	95
K-3	75.85%	468
K-6	7.13%	44
TOTAL		617

Early Childhood Survey

Q6 How important is play-based learning to children in your class environment?

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

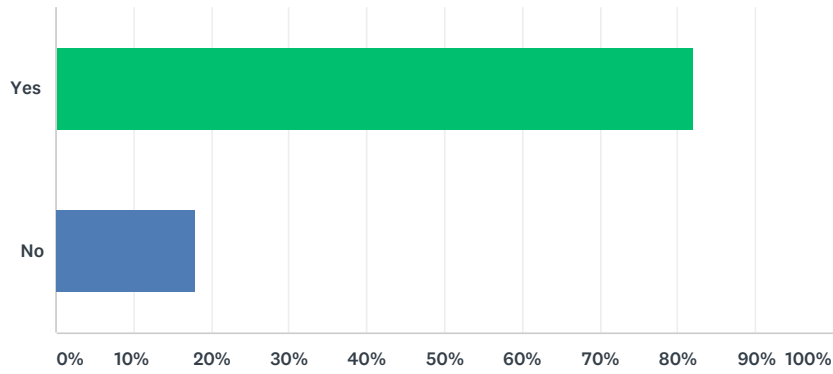


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
The most important priority	43.92%	271
A top priority, but not the most important	46.84%	289
Not very important	7.29%	45
Not important at all	1.94%	12
TOTAL		617

Early Childhood Survey

Q7 Do you believe there should be more play based learning in your class?

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

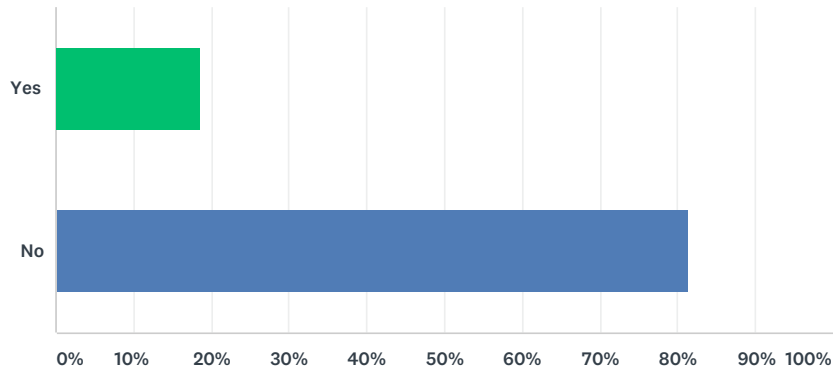


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	82.01%	506
No	17.99%	111
TOTAL		617

Early Childhood Survey

Q8 Do you believe there should be more explicit instruction in your class?

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

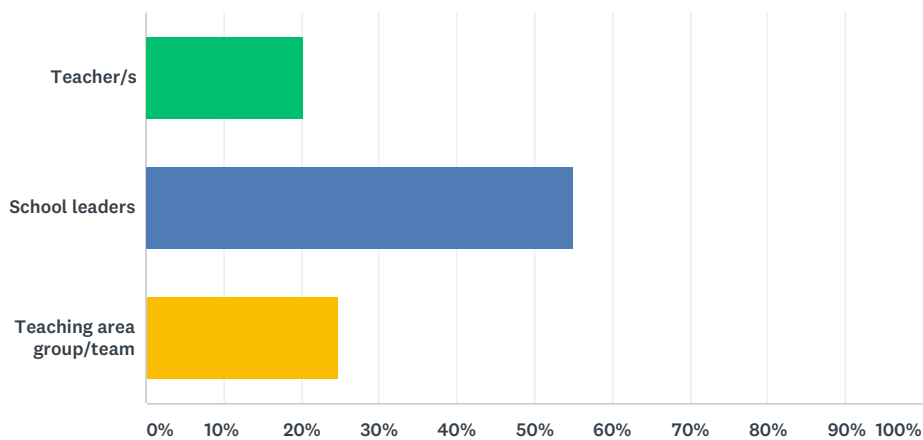


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	18.64%	115
No	81.36%	502
TOTAL		617

Early Childhood Survey

Q12 Who makes pedagogical decisions at your school?

Answered: 533 Skipped: 84

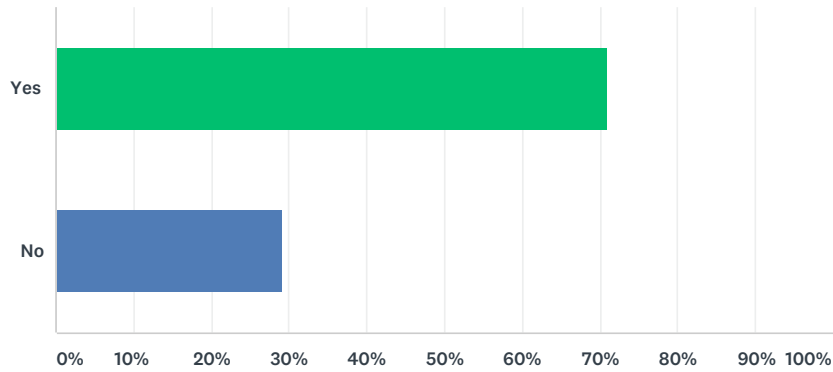


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Teacher/s	20.26% 108
School leaders	54.97% 293
Teaching area group/team	24.77% 132
TOTAL	533

Early Childhood Survey

Q13 Are there any barriers to implementing a play based curriculum in your early childhood classroom?

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

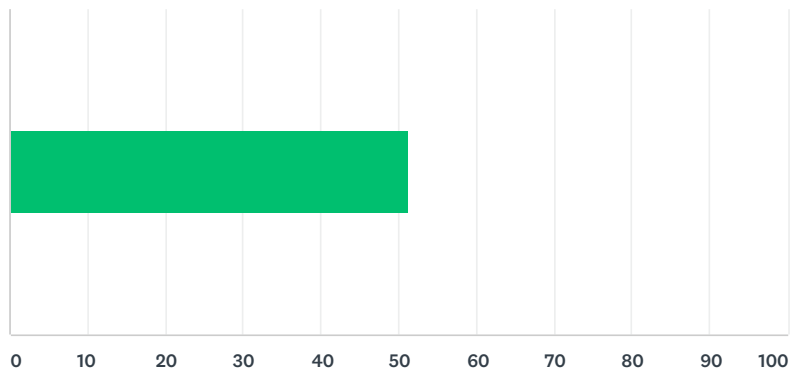


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	70.83%	437
No	29.17%	180
TOTAL		617

Early Childhood Survey

Q14 What percentage of your classroom program is play based learning?

Answered: 612 Skipped: 5

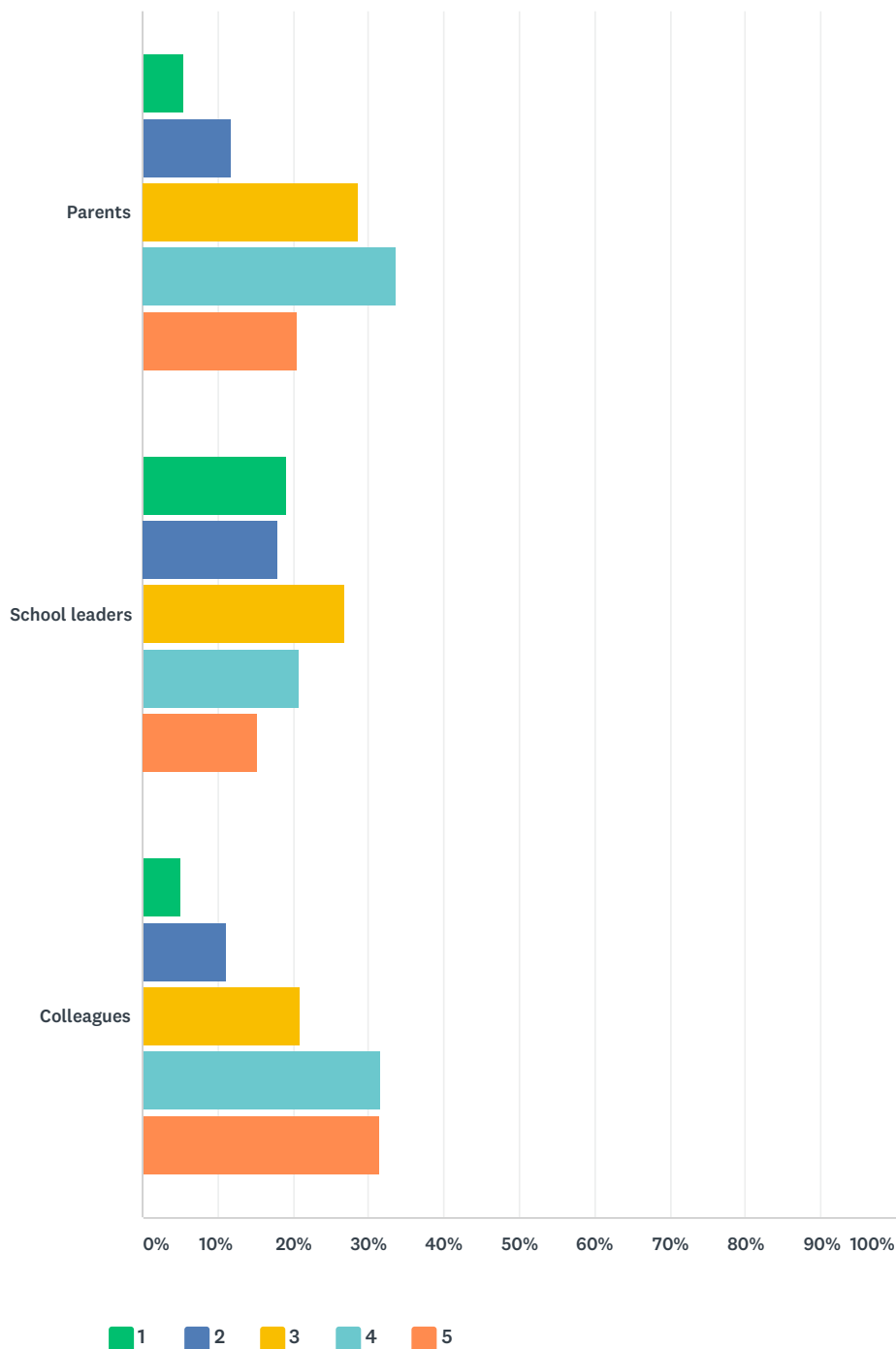


ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	51	31,317	612
Total Respondents: 612			

Early Childhood Survey

Q15 How supported are you in your classroom to provide a play based program? (1 least supported - 5 most supported)

Answered: 613 Skipped: 4



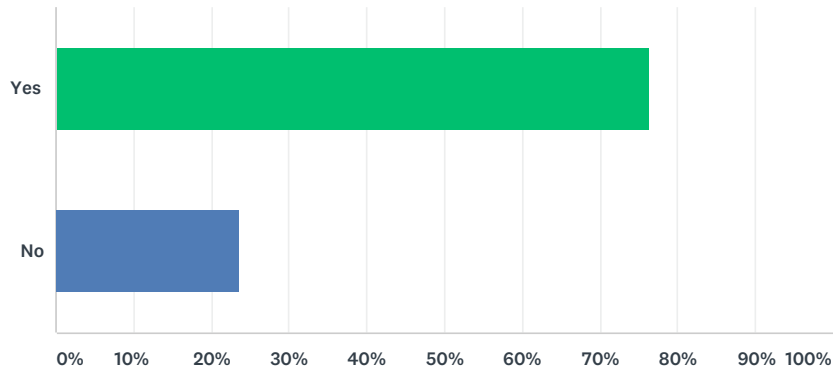
	1	2	3	4	5	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Parents	5.43% 33	11.68% 71	28.62% 174	33.72% 205	20.56% 125	608	3.52
School leaders	19.08% 116	18.09% 110	26.81% 163	20.72% 126	15.30% 93	608	2.95
Colleagues	5.10% 31	11.02% 67	20.89% 127	31.58% 192	31.41% 191	608	3.73

*Pages 15 and 16 of the survey have been combined, keeping results of question 15 together.

Early Childhood Survey

Q16 Do assessment expectations affect the level of play based learning provision in your classroom?

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

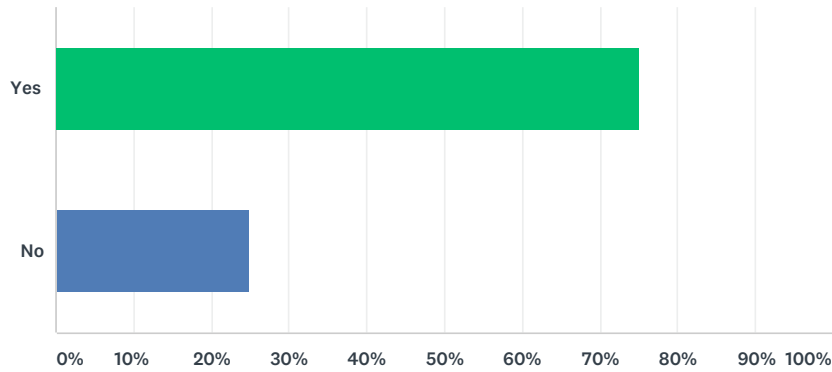


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	76.34%	471
No	23.66%	146
TOTAL		617

Early Childhood Survey

Q17 Do you think NAPLAN affects play based decisions in the ECE classrooms at your school?

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	75.04%	463
No	24.96%	154
TOTAL		617

Open-ended questions

Responses are not included due to space restrictions.

Q5 Without using the word 'play', define what you describe as play-based learning pedagogy.

Answered: 603 Skipped: 14

Q9 What do you consider are the long term benefits of play based learning?

Answered: 607 Skipped: 10

Q10 Finish this sentence: When play based learning is not implemented in my K-2 class, the results are

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

Q11 Finish this sentence: When explicit instruction is not implemented in my K-2 class, the results are

Answered: 617 Skipped: 0

Q18 In your understanding of the Early Years Learning Framework, National Quality Standards and other Department of Education documents, what would be your number one message to the Education Department or the Minister to ensure your students thrive?

Answered: 587 Skipped: 30

