

Play Matters Narrative: Building Strong Foundations for Learning in Primary Schools

Play is not a break from learning. Play is learning in action.

When children play, they are curious, creative and motivated to explore their world. They ask questions, test ideas, negotiate with others, solve problems and discover new possibilities. Whether they are constructing a tower, inventing a game, investigating insects in the school garden, creating a pretend shop or designing an imaginary world, children are developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions that support lifelong learning.

In Western Australian primary schools, play is recognised as a valuable pedagogical approach that complements intentional teaching and supports children's academic, social, emotional, creative and physical development.

Play supports learning across the curriculum

Play creates meaningful opportunities for children to connect new learning with their existing knowledge, interests and experiences. Through purposeful play, children can explore mathematical concepts such as number, measurement, patterns and spatial relationships; develop oral language, storytelling and early literacy; investigate scientific questions; design and create; and explore relationships between people, places and the natural environment.

The SCSA's *Phases of Schooling* guidance recognises that children in the early years learn through play and experimentation, and benefit from opportunities to build, design, investigate, problem-solve, represent and reflect on their learning. These experiences naturally integrate literacy and numeracy with other curriculum areas in ways that are meaningful to children.

Play-based learning does not mean leaving children to learn to chance. Skilled teachers intentionally plan experiences, introduce resources, model language, ask thoughtful questions and extend children's thinking through playful and intrinsically motivated engagement. They recognise when to assist, when to scaffold a new skill and when to allow children the time and freedom to pursue their own investigations.

Play develops capable, confident and creative learners

Children learn through doing, trying, making mistakes, adapting their ideas and repeating actions. When a structure collapses, a game needs new rules or a scientific prediction proves incorrect, children have opportunities to practise persistence, flexible thinking and problem-solving.

Play also encourages children to take appropriate risks, exercise agency, make decisions and become active participants in their learning. These dispositions extend beyond the playground, helping children approach challenging classroom tasks with curiosity, confidence and a willingness to learn.

The SCSA's *Kindergarten and Pre-primary Statement* explicitly supports a blend of intentional play-based learning, intentional teaching and spontaneous experiences. Its *Years 1 and 2 Statement* continues this approach, recognising the value of play-based learning alongside inquiry and intentional teaching. Children are viewed as capable learners whose ideas, interests and contributions can inform teaching and learning.

Play nurtures wellbeing, relationships and belonging

Learning is not solely about academic achievement. Children also need to feel safe, connected, included and valued.

Through play, children practise communicating, cooperating, listening to different perspectives, managing disagreements and negotiating shared decisions. They learn to understand others, develop friendships and contribute to a group. Imaginative play can provide opportunities to explore emotions and experiences, while active outdoor play supports movement, physical confidence and enjoyment.

Play can also create more inclusive learning opportunities. When teachers offer varied materials, flexible spaces and different ways to participate, children with diverse strengths, abilities, languages, cultures and interests can contribute meaningfully. Observing children at play can help teachers recognise capabilities that are thriving and those that may not be evident in formal written tasks.

The SCSA's teaching and learning principles emphasise inclusivity, motivation, meaningful learning experiences, independence and collaboration. Play can bring these principles to life by giving children different ways to engage, express their thinking and learn with others.

Play remains important as children progress through primary school

As children move beyond Kindergarten and Pre-primary, play should not simply disappear from the learning environment. Rather, play-based approaches can evolve in response to children's developing interests, capabilities and curriculum needs.

In Years 1 and 2, children can engage in construction challenges, dramatic play, mathematical games, storytelling, collaborative design, outdoor investigations and inquiry projects. As children move through Years 3–6, playful learning can extend into more complex problem-solving, simulations, creative challenges, collaborative investigations and student-designed projects.

The balance between child-initiated play, teacher-guided playful experiences and explicit instruction will vary according to the children, the learning intentions and the curriculum content. The important consideration is that teaching approaches remain developmentally appropriate and provide meaningful opportunities for children to think, act, question, create and reflect.

The role of primary schools

High-quality play-based learning requires thoughtful planning, professional knowledge and a shared commitment across the school community. Teachers need time to observe children's learning, document their thinking, assess progress and use these insights to plan appropriate next steps.

School leaders can support this work by valuing play in curriculum planning, providing rich indoor and outdoor environments, ensuring access to varied and inclusive resources, and creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate and strengthen their pedagogical practice. Play-based learning underpins a rights-based education for all children in Western Australia.

Families also have an important role in understanding that play is purposeful, challenging and intellectually engaging. Sharing examples of children's learning through observations, photographs, conversations and work samples can make this learning visible.

Importantly, play complements rather than replaces intentional teaching, systematic literacy and numeracy instruction, and assessment. A balanced curriculum draws on a range of approaches to meet children's learning needs and aspirations.

A commitment to children's learning and wellbeing

The SCSA's guiding documents provide a clear foundation for recognising play as a legitimate and valuable part of early primary education. They emphasise child-centred learning, intentional teaching, curiosity, agency, inclusion, reflection and the importance of responding to children's development.

When primary schools make space for play, they make space for children to explore ideas, develop relationships, express their creativity and build confidence as learners.

Every child deserves opportunities to play, discover, create and belong. By valuing play as an essential part of teaching and learning, primary schools can help children develop not only the knowledge and skills they need today, but also the curiosity, resilience, creativity and confidence they will carry into the future.

References: SCSA Documents

Underpinning the above narrative is the Pre-primary to Year 10: Teaching, Assessing and Reporting Policy that references the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. The policy outline sets out the mandated knowledge, understandings, skills, values and attitudes that Pre-primary to Year 10 students are expected to acquire in the eight learning areas identified in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019), the Authority's Principles of Teaching, Learning and Assessment, expected standards of achievement, and requirements for reporting on student achievement.

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

It is important that primary school continues to understand, provide the right environment for, and respond to the needs of young learners to discover, explore, play, create and express themselves.

- [Phases of Schooling](#) — guidance on developmentally appropriate curriculum experiences across schooling.
- [Principles of Teaching, Learning and Assessment](#) — principles including meaningful learning, action and reflection, motivation, inclusion, independence and collaboration.
- [Kindergarten and Pre-primary Statement](#) — support for intentional play-based learning alongside deliberate teaching and spontaneous experiences.
- [Years 1 and 2 Statement](#) — support for play-based learning alongside inquiry and explicit teaching, with an emphasis on children's agency, wellbeing and integrated learning.

The SCSA reference documents above provide a strong basis for advocating that play, playful learning and play-based learning should continue beyond the early years, while acknowledging that its form and balance with other teaching approaches will evolve as children develop.

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