Abstract

Standardised testing in early childhood education has a direct impact on how teachers teach. In 2016, Western Australian early childhood teachers were invited to complete a questionnaire to provide feedback on their perceptions of standardised testing in the context of the *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) implementation. Findings from 365 teachers showed that standardised testing was not aligned with the EYLF, but rather with a government-mandated formal literacy assessment regime that overshadowed teachers’ implementation of the framework and diminished opportunities for children to learn literacy through play-based learning approaches.

**Keywords:** standardised testing, early childhood education, *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, EYLF, play-based learning, literacy, on-entry assessment

1.0 Introduction

Standardised testing in early childhood education for the purposes of demonstrating programme accountability (Freeman & Brown, 2008) and raising literacy standards is a growing phenomenon (National Academies Press, 2000). There is increasing pressure for
teachers to replace play-based curriculum with academic instruction to improve test scores (Leiding, 2012). This has resulted in less time, space and resources to scaffold children’s learning through play (Bassok, Latham & Rorem, 2016).

The demise of play in Western Australia (WA) early childhood education (ECE), particularly in the early years of schooling, is a concern shared by members of key WA early years advocacy organisations including Early Childhood Australia (ECA), World Organisation for Early Child Education (OMEP) WA, Early Years in Education Society (EYES), the State School Teachers’ Union WA (SSTUWA), the Perth Reggio Network, and the WA Early Childhood Teachers’ Association (ECTA). In 2014 and 2016, discussion papers written on behalf of the collective advocacy membership (aforementioned), called for high-quality ECE in WA. Both papers aimed to raise public awareness of the importance of play-based learning and challenged the necessity of collecting information or changing instruction for testing purposes (Jay, Hesterman & Knaus, 2014; Hesterman, Targowska & Howitt, 2016).

This groundswell of discontent was shared by WA higher education academics, who have observed a growing mismatch between the emphasis placed on the importance of play-based learning (as studied in ECE teacher education courses) and the limited opportunities pre-service teachers have to actually observe play-based curriculum in action (Hesterman, Targowska & Howitt, 2016). Despite the introduction of the federal government’s mandated Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace [DEEWR], 2009), which places a specific emphasis on play-based learning, there are barriers to its implementation in schools.
This research project examined the effect of standardised testing in WA ECE in the context of EYLF implementation (2010-2014) by exploring WA ECE teachers’ perceptions of On-Entry Assessment Literacy (OEAL) and Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS). The project examined three research questions:

1. What are the teachers’ perceptions of the OEAL or PIPS programme?
2. How do teachers use on-entry assessment data to guide their curriculum decisions?
3. How do teachers use on-entry assessment data in their implementation of the EYLF?

Data was collected through a teacher questionnaire administered from January to March 2015. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions (including Likert items and short-answer responses) and was designed to elicit feedback from teachers working in non-government, public and independent public schools’ early childhood classrooms.

The project enabled 365 in-service teacher participants to share their perceptions of on-entry-to-school assessment programmes in the context of EYLF implementation in WA and thus to contribute to the body of empirical research in this area.

2.0 Literature Review

Before proceeding to the findings of the teacher questionnaire, it is important that the reader is familiar with the WA ECE school context, the EYLF, and ECE standardised assessment (with specific reference to on-entry to school assessment programmes). Following this discussion, the dialogic intersection pertaining to the EYLF and standardised assessment are
examined to show how different perceptions of quality coexist and are relativistic in their interaction.

2.1 Western Australia and the EYLF

Internationally, early childhood is defined as the period from birth to 8 years of age. In WA, the ECE school years are defined as Kindergarten to Year 2 (children aged 3 ½ to 7 ½ years). “Kindergarten” (K) is the term used for educational programmes provided to children in the year before full-time schooling, and “Pre-Primary” (PP) is the term used for a child’s first year of full-time school, i.e. the pre-Year-1 year (Australian Bureau for Statistics, 2013). WA leads the country in universal access to K, with 97.5% of children accessing 15 hours a week of funded “school” education (Alderson & Martin, 2011).

Prior to the introduction of the EYLF, there was no nationally agreed position on “how early childhood programmes should look, how curriculum should be structured, or what values, learning experiences and outcomes could and should be expected and promoted” (Elliott, 2006, p. 3). In 2009, the EYLF reaffirmed that holistic approaches best serve children’s learning and development. Holistic approaches are those that educate the “whole” child (all parts of the child) and see the child as part of a “whole” community – a “whole” humanity (Forbes, 2003).

The EYLF guides educators in developing quality ECE programmes (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) by providing learning opportunities for all children to show their achievement of 5 observable learning outcomes. The learning outcomes, designed to capture the integrated and complex learning and development of children across the birth-to-5-years
age range, are as follows: children have a strong sense of identity; children are connected with and contribute to their world; children have a strong sense of wellbeing; children are confident and involved learners; and, children are effective communicators (DEEWR, 2009). These learning outcomes are intentionally broad-based, defining and reflecting what Australian society values – what the nation hopes young citizens will become (Reid, 2009).

In 2013, the WA Minister for Education advised schools (Department of Education WA, 2016) that early childhood programmes up to Year 2 were required to address the EYLF, thereby extending framework implementation to the early years of schooling.

Central to quality teaching and learning is teachers’ cultural competence and their commitment to equity as guiding principles for pedagogical practice (Sumison, Cheeseman, Kennedy, Barnes, Harrison & Stonehouse, 2009). The DEEWR notes that: “Educators who are culturally competent respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living, celebrate the benefits of diversity and have an ability to understand and honour difference” (2009, p. 18).

Relevant to this research project is teachers’ accommodation of the EYLF to support diverse children to be effective communicators. Whitehead (2010, p. 82) contends that: “…languages are always changing in subtle and complex ways in order to meet the evolving needs and circumstances of their speakers”. Clarke (2016) also observes how young children’s participation in 21st-century communications involve both informal and formal learning contexts utilising a range of multi-literacies. The discourse of diversity is integral to the EYLF (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011): children “bring their diverse experiences, perspectives, expectations, knowledge and skills to their learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9).
The EYLF adopts a broad definition of literacy and identifies varied knowledge, skills and dispositions that can be communicated utilising many modes of expression. It defines literacy as the capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms; that it incorporates a range of modes of communication including music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama (as well as talking, listening, viewing, reading and writing); and, that in an increasingly technological world, the ability to critically analyse texts (print-based, electronic and digital media) must be a key component of literacy (DEEWR, 2009, p. 40).

Despite efforts to broaden the definition of literacy and the EYLF’s specific emphasis on play-based learning, at the forefront of WA ECE curriculum development is the requirement by senior management and administration that teachers instruct children (3 ½–5 ½ years) on alphabetic literacy (i.e. “letter sounds in words in sentences in texts in literatures” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 3). Whether developmentally appropriate or not, young children participate in formal learning activities aimed at making connections between letters and sounds when reading and writing (phonics); blending phonemes (sounds) in a word that enables a child to read or spell it (synthetic phonics); and recognising and writing some high-frequency sight words and known words.

Here lies the challenge for WA teachers – how to find equitable ways to ensure all children become effective communicators, as guided by the EYLF, in a school culture where alphabetic literacy competency is most valued.
2.2 On-Entry-to-School Assessment Programmes

In recent years, the discourse surrounding quality ECE has led to a search for universal standards defined by experts (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) – specifically, how best to support the learning of early literacy. Australia’s high-stakes National Assessment Program – Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2010) has strongly influenced the teaching of literacy in the early years of schooling. The 2012 NAPLAN report (ACARA, 2012) identified children’s poor performance in literacy skills, and teachers were told that ‘there is still a lot of work ahead’ to raise literacy standards (Garrett, 2013). The federal government’s Smarter Schools National Partnerships initiative (which provides significant additional funding to the states and territories) now directs schools across the country to implement an on-entry-to-school assessment. This assessment necessitates a one-hour interview between the classroom teacher and individual child at the point of entry to measure the attainment of alphabetic literacy concepts and to measure literacy skills (Constable, 2010). In WA, two on-entry assessment programmes are available to schools. These are:

a) The Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) programme, first developed at Durham University (United Kingdom) during the 1990s and now administered in WA by the University of Western Australia. This programme is evident in non-government schools; and

b) The On-Entry Assessment Literacy (OEAL) programme, based on the Department of Education Victoria’s English Online Interview, is administered by the Department of Education WA and is implemented in non-government schools, public schools and independent public schools.
Both instruments provide the federal and state/territory governments with descriptive statistics (quantitative measures that show the number and percentages of students at each “progression” point). This data is now linked to primary schools’ Year 3 NAPLAN performance. In WA, schools have the option, at their own cost, to extend the OEAL to include Modules 2 and 3 for children in Years 1 and 2 respectively, and in 2017, Module 4 was introduced to assess Year 2 students with well-developed skills and understandings. The initial cost of approximately $50 per assessment provides part-payment towards the cost of employing a relief teacher to replace the PP teacher while he/she conducts the interviews. The data is used to hold schools to account and is included in school annual reports (Department of Education, 2015).

Schools provide evidence that quality ECE is being delivered by showing students’ progress in English over time using progression/developmental points. OEAL/PIPS also assists whole-school planning to achieve school targets by providing baseline information about what children can do in terms of literacy (Wildy & Styles, 2008), and a literacy profile of a given class, from which an appropriate curriculum can be planned, and against which progress can be measured (Tymms & Merrel, 2009). It is envisaged by primary school administration that this data will guide teachers’ professional judgements on how best to prepare children for school-based literacy activities (Department of Education WA, 2015). The OEAL/PIPS is employed as a screening tool so that early intervention can be initiated for children deemed at risk in aspects of literacy learning (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2009). It is also used to predict future school performance (Salinger, 2003).
A review of the instruments shows many similarities. Both instruments: assess English foundation literacy skills to provide a baseline score to show where students “are at”; provide a user guide/manual; stipulate texts and downloadable resources for the literacy “interview”; require IT infrastructure; require data to be submitted by the teacher via an online system; and ensure that an online diagnostic standardised report providing data pertaining to student, class and school performance is readily available. The PIPS assessments can also be used to make comparisons between school, state and territory student cohorts (Northern Territory Government, 2010). The same methodology for NAPLAN is applied to OEAL: individual student progress from OEAL to Year 3 NAPLAN is reported.

A critical review of OEAL/PIPS highlights that they are norm-referenced (evaluating and grading the literacy learning of children by judging and ranking them against the performance of their peers) and devoid of opportunities for children to express cultural and linguistic diversity. Additional concerns reported in the literature include the fact that standardised testing of literacy in WA is focused on an outdated definition of literacy (Yelland, Lee, O’Rourke & Harrison, 2008). This is causing a narrowing and escalation of curricula (Reid, 2009), and is favouring a particular developmental pathway (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2008). Leiding (2012) also observes that young children’s skills are still developing rapidly and differently, and that to expect all children to have acquired the same skills and knowledge creates unrealistic expectations that lead to one-size-fits-all teaching. Notably, child-initiated “play” – considered a driving force in the development of literacy and a leading activity to explore agency in literacy learning – is not a measurable entity, and therefore is increasingly not used to support literacy learning (Dowling & O’Malley, 2009).
In addition, there is little transparency in the assessment process: it is not publicly advertised that the assessment is non-compulsory, and parents/guardians do not need to provide formal consent. Furthermore, parents/guardians do not attend the assessment sessions and are not necessarily informed of the results (Salinger, 2003). With the introduction of additional modules and correlation between PP and NAPLAN data (for tracking purposes and for generating school reports), there is significant concern that children are “over-tested”. Presently, there are no safeguards in place: it is at the direction of the primary school principal how the assessments are conducted. Relevant to this research project are findings that provide insight into teachers’ perceptions of OEAL/PIPS – perceptions that may not be shared with others at their school.

3.0 Methodology

This research is located within a constructionist framework, which emphasises the active participation of human beings to construct knowledge and meaning as they engage with the world that they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). Ethical permission to conduct the research project was granted through the Murdoch University Human Ethics Research Committee, and it adhered to National Guidelines for Human Research.

The project’s self-administered online teacher questionnaire enabled a large number of interested teachers with a range of perspectives to respond to pre-developed items (closed and open-ended) focused on the three research questions. The questionnaire design was based on the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) instrument (OECD, 2008). TALIS is the first international research study to focus on the learning environment and the working conditions of teachers in schools across the global context: its questionnaire instrument
offered teachers the opportunity to provide their perspectives on school education and policy matters. Relevant to this study, the TALIS instrument sought to provide data and analyses on the conditions needed for effective teaching and learning. While the TALIS focus was on lower secondary schools, many items were relevant to the early years of schooling. Hence, the TALIS-based questionnaire used in this study was tailored to the WA ECE context. It required 15-20 minutes to complete and covered 5 content sections of broad domain interest (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Domains of Interest**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domain 1</td>
<td>School background information, including the demographics of participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain 2</td>
<td>Participants’ appraisal and feedback in relation to on-entry assessment programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain 3</td>
<td>Participants’ practices, beliefs and attitudes towards on-entry assessments in the context of EYLF implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain 4</td>
<td>Participants’ perceptions of ECE literacy instruction with reference to OEAL/PIPS assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain 5</td>
<td>Participants’ perceptions of professional development aimed at developing skills and knowledge about on-entry-to-school assessments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importantly, this research intentionally sought the perceptions of all ECE teachers beyond the teacher assigned the responsibility of conducting the assessment in PP. Van Hemel and Snow (2008) assert that “Assessment should not be given without clear plans for follow-up steps that use the information productively and appropriately” (p. 7). It is, therefore, pertinent to examine how OEAL/PIPS were nested in the early learning phase of schooling – to consider their significance to those teaching on either side of the PP year level. Furthermore, it is not
uncommon that, over a 5-year period, teachers move between teaching levels in ECE, making the perceptions of a wide cohort of teachers valuable.

The online open questionnaire ran for 3 months (January to March 2015). A snowball sampling method was used: the questionnaire was endorsed by WA ECE advocacy organisations (aforementioned) and was circulated among their membership. Members were encouraged to share a weblink with colleagues. It was also promoted through two WA ECE Facebook Interest Groups. In 2015, these organisations collectively had 1000 members and therefore a targeted and accessible research population of 1000 WA ECE teachers. Internal surveys generally receive a 30-40% response rate or more on average. Therefore, a modest response rate of 365 (36.5%) with 100% completion was deemed by the researcher to be satisfactory. The researcher did not knowingly have prior personal or professional relationships with the participants. All participants were practising early childhood teachers working in WA primary schools (K–Year 2) (see Table 2). Participant response was voluntary and did not necessarily reflect the views of the school in which the participants worked.

Following a thorough initial reading of the data, the text was coded thematically using NVivo software. NVivo had no influence on the design of the research; however, it facilitated development of theme nodes that housed relevant excerpts or text from participants who had written extended answers. It also provided a simple-to-work-with structure that enabled understanding of how 365 teacher participants used on-entry assessment data to guide their curriculum decision-making.
Table 2: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Location</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent Public</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Government</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Teaching Level</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-Primary</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Ranges</td>
<td>Under 25</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60+</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*ECE Advocacy Membership</td>
<td>EYES</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OMEP</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SSTUWA</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reggio Network</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ECTA</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*There may be more than one response to these items
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4.0 Findings

The findings reported are based on dominant themes derived from responses to questionnaire items. These included short-answer responses, which extended the data scope. It is not within the reach of this paper to provide statistical analysis pertaining to each item; rather, the aim is to provide a summary of the themes in relation to the three research questions. The use of italics in the following writing identifies participants’ direct quotes.

What are teachers’ perceptions of the OEAL or PIPS programme?

There was diverse feedback pertaining to ECE teachers’ perceptions of OEAL/PIPS:

OEAL/PIPS has resulted in minimal change to teaching practice: *We believe that our literacy practice is of a high level and other than informing us as to where each child sat with their school entry knowledge and informing us where a good starting point for teaching was, the results of the test did not change our practice at all. We continue to value each child as individuals and plan accordingly which we see as “good practice”.*
The impact of OEAL/PIPS is perceived as variable: *The impact on my early childhood curriculum was minimal. However, several of my colleagues feel the need to prepare their students for the tests, and this has had an impact on what they are teaching and how.*

Implementation of OEAL/PIPS has caused a conflict of interest: *It has led to conflict between the need for literacy testing and teaching “the whole child” at Kindy and Pre-Primary. ECE has taken a long, long time to be recognised as a “specialist” area [phase of schooling] and not simply a step in the path to primary school. Developmental learning is hardly recognised in literacy direct instruction skill-and-drill type activities.*

Close to 70% of teacher participants were dissatisfied with the actual design of the OEAL and PIPS instruments, particularly in relation to narrow content; 26% engaged in informal dialogue with their ECE colleagues to discuss how to improve the assessment pertaining to:

The need for extension content: *The curriculum in my room is developed according to children's needs, but being a multi-age class, children have exposure to curriculum content above their year level – but they are not assessed on this content.*

Dominating ECE curricula: *Used as a guideline, it’s fine, but the pressure for 5-to 6-year-olds to gain specific and more formal content in English at the expense of other important developmental areas is frightening.*
Non-inclusivity: *This is NOT authentic assessment in any way, shape or form.*

The “Cup Cakes” and “Clever Max” books and activities aren’t great for kids whose life experiences aren’t the standard urban middle-class white – especially not appropriate for Indigenous students.

Almost 60% of respondents indicated that they did not receive any professional development (PD) related to OEAL/PIPS, due primarily to no suitable PD being offered. Other reasons included:

a) Irrelevancy to the school: *Not a school priority 2010-2014*; and, *Admin forgets!*

b) Irrelevancy to students: *I work with remote Aboriginal students. Just getting them in the class is most important – most are ESL [English as a Second Language] students*; and, *It’s very difficult to administer for special needs children.*

c) Irrelevancy to other ECE teachers: *The PD was completed only by the PP teacher or other staff nominated to oversee the assessment*; and, *I wasn’t offered the opportunity as I wasn’t teaching PP.*

d) Irrelevancy to ECE casual staff: *I am a contract teacher, and PD is rarely offered to us*; and, *I am in a DOTT [duties other than teaching] provider role and do not have to administer the test.*

e) Disinterest in PD: *Each PD was a repeat of the basic implementation technique so was a waste of time attending.*

f) Budget constraints: *I couldn’t afford it*; and, *The school wouldn’t cover relief [teacher] costs.*
g) Lack of school administration expertise: Principal and admin seem confused about “benchmarks” set, as we were repeatedly told that our students were underperforming from the initial test due to the targets they didn’t reach – such as not being able to read or write two weeks into Term 1!

h) Minimal school administration support: Principals and assistant principals often have a primary teaching background so have a lack of knowledge in ECE or interest in EYLF.

i) Considered a one-off event: I taught Pre-Primary for eight years and administered PIPS for five of those years and only did the PD once.

j) Distance barriers: Living 500 km from state capital makes it very difficult to access relevant PD; and, In remote schools, it’s hard to find relief [teachers].

k) Communication barriers: I was never sent information about it.

The short-answer responses identified issues related to cost, pressure, duration, and ethics surrounding the assessment process. These issues were perceived as significant concerns:

We get two days’ relief to administer 30 hours of testing. Teachers test before school, after school, lunch hour, DOTT time to complete the testing. The whole assessment is rushed due to lack of funding for relief teachers.

Obviously “on-entry” means the testing was done at the start of the year – just when I should have spent time WITH the students, not them having a relief teacher some days and me testing them. As there was no rapport with them – I [PP teacher] was a relative stranger – many students were so wary they didn’t verbally respond to questioning. Testing was rushed to meet the deadline and no more relief is given.
I am under pressure to “prepare” children – “teach to the test” – so that when my Kindy children are in Pre-Primary the following year they may do better when the test is administered.

If children are not reading and writing fluently on entrance into Year 1, our Pre-Primary teacher is made to feel she has failed.

Notably, 42% of teachers indicated that the assessment procedure had a negative impact on students’ wellbeing; however, 30% recorded that there was no discussion at their school about the impact of the assessment on children:

From observations and discussions with staff members, the test appears to cause stress to children at a vulnerable time in their education and yet appears to have little value within the school.

Members of WA ECE advocacy organisations are cognisant that when children are pressured to perform beyond their current capabilities and are unable to meet adult expectation, a sense of low level of achievement prevails (Jay, Hesterman & Knaus, 2014; King & Jansen, 2009):

The test itself is not a bad thing – it is an opportunity to sit with students and talk with them and gain data. It is what is done with the information that is inappropriate. It puts undue pressure on students and teachers. It limits the curriculum and tells children they are failing.
Some children have the ability to meet these demands and progress rapidly with learning of concepts, while others progress at slower rates – nevertheless, they are progressing and should not be thought of as “failing”!

A prominent theme in participants’ responses was that OEAL/PIPS data could be collected through more age-appropriate and alternative means of assessment, including play activities:

The school mandated we attend the PD for PIPS. However, I did not find it particularly useful. I collected the same data as the PIPS testing through hands-on play-based activities and anecdotal notes.

The testing is used to satisfy school needs to track children’s learning in a standardised score. Everything that is tested on the PIPS and shown in the results I had recorded, assessed and made professional judgements on through play-based curriculum and activities in my classroom.

Module 1 PP OEAL/PIPS results are now linked to Year 3 NAPLAN high-stakes testing. This has had a significant impact on the nature of teaching (Thompson, 2012), with more time spent on direct instruction (Barret-Pugh, 2015; Hesterman, Targowska & Howitt, 2016). Many teacher participants indicated that administration feedback related to on-entry assessment data directly led to a reduction in their provision of a play-based curriculum.

How do teachers use on-entry assessment data to guide their curriculum decisions?

The on-entry assessment was undertaken in isolation from other school business, with only 50% of teachers involved in a debriefing meeting to discuss the data with the principal or
other administration personnel. This meeting usually occurred once a year and focused predominantly on five topics (ranked accordingly): usefulness as a diagnostic tool; students’ individual test scores; judgement of teachers’ ability to support the learning of literacy; overall assessment pass rate of the class; and suitability for students with special learning needs.

In response to administration feedback, these teachers made the following changes to practice:

30% Increase in direction instruction.
30% Increase in the development of Individual Education Programs (IEP) for students who were deemed to have failed the assessment.
29% Increase in the preparation of Kindergarten students for on-entry assessment.
27% Increase in the emphasis placed on improving student literacy test scores.

Overall, 44% of the respondents indicated that the assessment had made no change to the way they taught literacy; 33% indicated there had been no change in their knowledge and understanding of literacy required by students for the 21st century (i.e. multimodal communications that include visual, audio, gestural, spatial and tactile modes of meaning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Teachers who used OEAL/PIPS to guide their curriculum decisions provided positive feedback, commenting that the data was used to structure activities to suit students’ individual needs and gave focus and direction to their teacher-directed literacy programme.
In 52% of schools represented, the OEAL Module 1 was repeated at the end of the PP to collect additional information for teacher and school accountability purposes:

*The principal uses the data to monitor teachers, which puts pressure on them – particularly if they have a weak cohort; and, Somehow we felt defensive – we had to justify the results.*

*Due to funding, our school never retested [OEAL] at the end of the year. This year we have become an Independent Public School, and funding has been set aside for a retest to use in the school performance evaluations.*

Some teachers were pleased that they were able to demonstrate positive gains (with repeat Module 1 data) while maintaining principles they believed underpin play-based learning:

*I chose to exit-test [repeat Module 1] my PPs last year. I had been their teacher for two years and wanted cold hard data to back my child-directed play-based approach in the light of constant push-down. The children all showed strong growth and most achieved well beyond the on-entry guidelines, and I have found this very useful in defending my approach now I’m back in Kindy this year.*

Other teachers lamented that the assessment (and the direct instruction that followed) infringed on what they believed to be quality ECE:

*From many informal discussions, we generally believe that the testing is a lengthy, boring and tedious process for the children and the teacher. The test is narrow and*
for many children frightening, as they are withdrawn in the first weeks of school with a new adult in an unusual location and are expected to perform at their best!

Admin do not appear to understand the data, except to say that the children are not performing and must be subjected to direct instruction – one-hour literacy blocks, guided reading, less outdoor play, etc. Trying to retain a developmental play-based programme is becoming increasingly difficult.

Several teachers questioned the ulterior motives of administration related to collecting data:

Apparently, our data helps us get funding? At my last school, when we did PIPS beginning and end of the year, it was used to show how well teachers “value-added” to each student, which greatly concerned me, as of course, it doesn’t show the equally important “value-adding” of learning dispositions – perseverance, patience etc.!

Once the test is submitted, nothing is done. It was discussed once in a general staff meeting – not one member of the staff was interested.

Though OEAL/PIPS were never designed to be a summative assessment, there was participant feedback that the results were included in school reports to parents:

It gives me a starting point for my planning and programming and greatly helps with assessment and reporting in both semesters.

In 2015, the introduction of a new school report structure was mandated for primary school students (including PP) to assess academic merit. It employs a 5-point scale (A–E metric, or
using language representative of a five-tiered achievement classification). Increasingly, OEAL/PIPS data collected during the early weeks of PP Term 1 is used to determine academic merit in literacy learning: the starting point is not the child’s interests.

**How do teachers use on-entry assessment data in their implementation of the EYLF?**

While the EYLF should be considered when designing an ECE programme (K–Year 2), teacher participants indicated that framework implementation (2010-2014) was at best, minimal, and at worst, outright non-existent:

- 14% EYLF is not implemented in the early years classrooms at this school.
- 80% EYLF pedagogy is seldom or never discussed at whole-school meetings with teachers.
- 74% ECE teachers are seldom or never informed about possibilities for updating their knowledge and skills related to the EYLF.
- 76% ECE teachers are seldom or never given suggestions on how they can improve students’ achievement of the EYLF outcomes.
- 61% ECE teachers seldom or never contribute to a school development plan that includes the EYLF outcomes.
- 81% There is seldom or never school acknowledgement for ECE teachers’ special effort or accomplishments using the EYLF.
- 48% ECE goals to be accomplished by teachers at this school are seldom or never consistent with the EYLF principles and practices.
- 64% In this school, ECE teachers and school administration seldom or never view EYLF quality issues as a collective responsibility.
Overall, teachers perceived the EYLF as a document that supported a play-based curriculum. Teachers commented that the information sought in the OEAL/PIPS assessment programmes could be gathered during play activities, noting that:

_Some children are intimidated by testing at the beginning of their schooling, and there are other less obtrusive ways of finding out what they know._

Short-answer responses confirmed that there were many instances where the EYLF was not valued by school administration, which impeded its effective implementation:

- Not used with any conviction.
- We are directed to teach Australian Curriculum [AC] Foundation Level. I do my best to use EYLF, but we have a lot of testing with AC, so it is difficult.
- Never been discussed.
- Year 1/2 teacher was unaware of the EYLF until I mentioned it and printed the document off for her.
- Only by certain teachers keen to do so – individual choice – depends on teacher.
- EYLF is given an incredibly low priority and staff are given NO support in its implementation.
- Not encouraged by the principal.
- Not all Kindergarten and Pre-Primary teachers use it.

The following observations were made regarding standardised testing in the context of EYLF implementation. They illustrate Australian Curriculum dominance in the ECE space:
The principal at our school has determined that EYLF can only be called upon for Kindy. Pre-Primary is now classed as a primary grade, and PP students are now required to perform and be tested as primary students whether they are ready to or not. Sadly, many of them are not. Our principal is not willing to listen to the expertise of her ECE staff. The focus is on-entry testing and the Australian Curriculum as well as targets each term for literacy and numeracy.

There is a huge push for Kindy teachers to have children working towards the Foundation Stage of the Australian Curriculum to ensure the best possible results in the plethora of compulsory assessments that need to be administered. The school will use EYLF outcomes in their policies to make the school look good, but the truth of it is that once a teacher has completed a full literacy block and numeracy block every day and covered Science, Health and SOSE [Studies of Society and Environment] outcomes and squeezed in some FMS [Fundamental Movement Skills], there is little time left over for genuine play opportunities.

While 73% of respondents had a positive attitude towards the EYLF, the Australian Curriculum (Foundation Stage) aligned with Year 3 NAPLAN essentially determined their teaching priorities. The knowledge, skills, and beliefs (integral to the EYLF) were proving difficult to sustain:

It is very hard to continue teaching and listening to the children for their interests, theories etc. when children in K in other schools have started making books, learning sounds and writing letters – it’s like when I taught Year 1 in the 1980s – after children had completed a “readiness” programme.
We have the pressure of Australian Curriculum as well as EYLF – it feels difficult to satisfy both.

As evident in this research project, the Australian Curriculum overshadows the implementation of the EYLF, impeding recommended pedagogy, practices, and principles.

5.0 Discussion

High-quality ECE has many features open to wide interpretation, and “concepts of quality can be nebulous and difficult to assess” (Elliott, 2006, p. 3). In Australia, however, the EYLF clearly describes features that underpin high-quality ECE for children aged from birth to 5 years of age, including their transition to school (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014). In WA, the Department of Education has endeavoured to extend the relevance of the framework (its pedagogy, practices and principles) to the early years of schooling.

Immediately following the release of the EYLF (2009), there was an expectation that the holistic teaching and learning approaches (including play-based learning) would be strengthened and that the framework would “inspire conversations, improve communication and provide a common language about young children’s learning…” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 8). In reality, the ad hoc implementation of the EYLF in WA schools (2010–2012) coupled with school focus on the first phase of the Australian Curriculum (2010–2012) worked against “quality assurance” EYLF practices in early years classrooms. In many schools, ECE teachers were directed to engage students in formalised education with intensification of academic content (Hesterman, 2014).
As highlighted in this research project, the contrasting particulars of policy and curricula documents are most pronounced in the “classroom” learning of early literacy. While it was envisaged that the EYLF would establish a solid foundation for students’ successful engagement with the Australian Curriculum (ECA & ACARA, 2011), the mandatory reporting of on-entry and Year 3 NAPLAN has contributed to a pedagogical shift away from “understanding play and playfulness and the significance of these in relation to embodied, empathetic literacy learning” (McArdle & Wright, 2014, p. 32).

The empirical-based research findings presented in this paper support the anecdotal reports provided to WA advocacy organisations by their members, who teach in the early years of schooling (Hesterman, Targowska & Howitt, 2016), that standardised tests do not measure “diverse ways of knowing, thinking, doing and being” (O’Rourke, 2005, p. 10). A child’s performance in OEAL/PIPS during the early weeks of PP Term 1 (Weeks 3–6) will be determined by parental input during the years prior to commencing school or a K teacher’s targeted teaching of its content. There are reports of misconduct when stakes are high; when school integrity and teacher performance are at stake (The Age Victoria, 2013). In this study, incidences undermining the validity of OEAL/PIPS results were related to poor assessment environments, inexperienced or unqualified assessors, preparing children in K for on-entry to school assessments, and changing assessment instructions to ensure “better” results. There were problems with fairness when judgements based on students’ test scores involved different students at two points in time: at the beginning of Week 3 for some students and at the end of Week 6 for others – children can overhear and learn a lot in a four-week period. Cognitively-oriented standardised assessments, particularly in the early years, are fraught with errors and low reliability (Ellingson, 2016). Diverting scarce instructional dollars from the enhancement of holistic approaches to ECE must be challenged (Viruru, 2006).
Research has identified the transition to school as a time of potential challenge and stress for children and families, particularly regarding learning expectations (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo & Cavanagh, 2011). This was verified in this study when teachers commented on the stress some children experienced during test conditions when required to perform (or not) “on-the-spot”. School readiness in alphabetic literacy cannot be assumed and preparing children for on-entry assessment diverts from a holistic focus on the child (Melbourne Graduate School of Education, 2008). Noteworthy in this context is research involving a meta-analysis of 70 longitudinal studies, which confirms that there is little data on the effectiveness of school readiness (including alphabetic knowledge) and that the data that exists is unreliable and inconclusive (La Paro & Pianata, 2001).

Standardised assessments such as OEAL/PIPS only measure a miniscule sample of young children’s knowledge and skills and raise questions related to content-validity bias: whereby the content of the assessment (reflecting middle-class culture) is comparatively more difficult for students who have not been given the same opportunity to learn the material being assessed, and whereby questions are worded in ways that are unfamiliar to certain students because of cultural or linguistic differences. Despite teacher dissatisfaction with OEAL/PIPS, the content and procedures are unlikely to change, as historical data for “tracking” purposes would be made redundant. Until such time that new government sensibilities prevail, the assessment agenda will remain system-driven rather than purpose-fit for the individual child.

There is no single internationally accepted definition of literacy: the definition has evolved over time to reflect changes in society and is subject to different perspectives, contexts and purposes. However, the existing narrow focus on alphabetic literacy (evident in high-stakes testing of OEAL/PIPS) threatens to undermine the broad intention of the EYLF, which
acknowledges that literacy needs to be defined broadly and integrate diverse knowledge, skills and dispositions. This continuing narrow focus also threatens to undermine teachers’ cultural competence to adopt a strength-based approach that views learning to *read the world* (Freire, 1987) as being just as important as learning to *read the word*; an approach that respects multiple cultural and linguistic ways of communicating.

The promotion of OEAL/PIPS also obstructs the expansion of different curricular, pedagogical, and classroom designs that can accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity by utilising twenty-first century communications (New London Group, 1996). These data sets cradle biases that work against minority populations and represent political or corporate interests rather than child-centred agendas (Viruru, 2006). Presently, the PD offered aligns with a train-the-trainer model that does not include critical debate on the appropriateness of standardised assessment in ECE nor on how to expand the definition of literacy to include the diverse “multi-literacies” that children bring to school (Cope & Kalantzis, 2013). This raises the question: whose interests are being served?

Teacher participants confirmed that the synthetic phonics approach to literacy is receiving more attention *in extremis* (Wyse & Goswa, 2013). This has had a significant impact on how they teach, whereby inappropriate demands on young children (including direct instruction and premature expectations around symbolic and metacognitive thinking) have become the norm (Cooper, Capo, Mathes & Gray, 2007). Demands for increased formalised instruction also affect the wellbeing of teachers who are uncomfortable administrating assessment procedures they perceive as an affront to their knowledge of best practice. Tensions are most evident when teachers, seeking a paradigm shift from focusing on individualistic developmental programming of literacy instruction to recognising the socially constructed nature of learning literacy, do so in an education system unreceptive to broadening the
definition of literacy. If best ECE practice for young children across the State aligns with the National EYLF, then it follows that authentic assessment will align with the principles embedded in holistic approaches to education.

Mandatory standardised testing infringes on the child’s rights: specifically, the child’s right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them, and their right to have their opinions taken into account (United Nations, 1989). Children do not have the right to question what is on a standardised test or the right to refuse to sit the test. Ethical issues related to these forms of assessment also arise when mandatory practices (i.e. direct instruction) have potential to harm children: the testing situation can undermine children’s confidence and cause them unwarranted stress by lowing self-concept and levels of academic aspiration (Feeney & Freeman, 2014). Furthermore, in WA, the child’s right to playtime has decreased as more ECE activities are directed towards preparing for formalised assessment.

6.0 Conclusion

This research project investigated teacher perceptions of OEAL/PIPS programmes: how teachers used the assessment data to guide their curriculum decisions. When defined within an educational setting, assessment and testing are used to measure how well children are meeting intended targets: testing measures the level of skill or knowledge that has been reached, while assessment involves a more “holistic” process of documenting knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs – the goal is to make improvements as opposed to simply being judged (Teaching and Learning with Technology, 2014). It is important to note that while this questionnaire specifically referred to OEAL/PIPS as “assessment”, respondents used the word “test” in their open-ended responses. The on-entry programmes were perceived primarily as a “test” through
which student, teacher and school were judged for system accountability purposes. Looking forward, the dialogic intersection of conflicting discourses surrounding EYLF and high-stakes testing now associated with WA ECE curriculum can provide a space for different narratives to converge and reconsider the definition of literacy in the 21st century. Recommendations for future research are twofold: investigation of alternative designs for assessing early years’ literacy through holistic approaches that include play-based learning; and establishment of a culture of critical reflection and analysis with a special emphasis given to how teachers can broaden the definition of literacy to respect children’s cultural and linguistic diversities.

The School Curriculum and Standards Authority of WA (responsible for school curriculum, assessment, standards and reporting); the Director General of Education and the Office of Early Childhood and Learning (overseeing the quality of ECE programmes in the public education system); and the Director General of the Department of Education Services (overseeing the quality of ECE programmes in non-government and independent public schools) all have important roles to perform in ensuring the rights of the child are enshrined in government education policies: to safeguard the child’s right to be a unique individual – who is too young to fail.

References


