

# Looking back, not forwards

In a bid to put our education system at the top of the league tables, ministers are ignoring the majority of research and evidence, and are harking back to a time most of us thought we had moved on from.



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*Imagine a country where children do nothing but play until they start compulsory schooling at age seven. Then, without exception, they attend comprehensives until the age of 16. Charging school fees is illegal, and so is sorting pupils into ability groups by streaming or setting. There are no inspectors, no exams until the age of 18, no school league tables, no private tuition industry, no school uniforms. Children address teachers by their first names. Even 15-year-olds do no more than 30 minutes' homework a night. [The Guardian, July 1, 2013; Finland]*

**W**HAT AN alarming last few months it has been with Sir Michael Wilshaw's pronouncements on early childhood assessments and now the government's rejection of the call for more emphasis on play-based learning. It seems that the powers that be are determined to maintain and even more rigidly enforce some of the systems that have kept children in the UK among the most pressurised and tested in the world.

Nearly 90 percent of the world's 205 countries have a school starting age of six or seven-years, and there is considerable international evidence to show that starting formal learning too early (at four, England has one of the lowest starting ages in the world) can be detrimental to later achievement and feelings of self-worth. One of the most worrying aspects is that children perceived as falling behind in the UK now have a far greater likelihood of being labelled as 'special needs' with all the subsequent life-long consequences.

No doubt, the people pushing through these systems believe they are doing the right thing. After all, they all went to 'good' schools and received an education that taught them that academic achievement is the road to success. But we live in a world where we know that people process information differently, where they have multiple intelligences and where developing positive attitudes and dispositions to learning are more important than simple academic attainment.

What does it do to the personal meaning systems and self-theories of a child when we ask him or her to succeed at a task for which they are not neurologically or developmentally ready? Especially if we then make it clear that they are in some way failing?

Psychologist Carol Dweck talks of the difference between performance goals and learning goals, and has discovered that very young children confuse personal 'goodness' with their mistakes and failures. In other words, they cannot separate their sense of self from the things that we ask them to do. This is profoundly

important if we want to nurture people with a lifelong love of learning. She reports that children who see learning as something related to personal performance goals are more likely to show helpless patterns in response to difficulty, whereas children responding to learning goals are more likely to show mastery-oriented responses. A performance goal is, therefore, all about measuring personal ability, whereas a learning goal is about finding strategies to master new challenges.

One mindset creates a continual need to play safe and validate, the other a desire to explore and learn. There are dangers in setting any externally prescribed targets and goals for pre-school children because it changes the nature of, what should be, a free-flowing, creative environment to one where both teachers and children are under pressure to 'perform'. Surely, what has been called England's 'long-term under-achievement' is more likely to be the result of the developmentally inappropriate pressures of the system, and particularly the demands of school 'readiness', than the actual abilities of the children themselves.

What we need is more focus on what underpins child wellbeing and positive learning dispositions, rather than less. The sector is constantly being told what to do by people who clearly have no knowledge and understanding of child development and this has now reached a point where it is both inexcusable and unacceptable. Rather than constantly dragging education back into the past we should, instead, be focused on the needs of the future. And that is going to be all about self-expression, creative thinking and value systems, based upon sustainable and meaningful living, rather than purely externally validated success.

Ministers and policy-makers who think that sitting quietly on a mat, being able to tie your shoelaces and do your numbers and letters is the measure of success, need to understand this is now both an obsolete and developmentally discredited model that harks back to the 19th century and that will do nothing to improve overall levels of wellbeing and achievement in the UK. Young children are extraordinarily creative and competent learners and we will be letting down an entire generation if we do not join in the fight for their freedoms and natural developmental rights. **eye**

## Useful resources

- For more information on Carol Dweck, and her research, visit: [www.stanford.edu/dept/psychology/cgi-bin/drupal/cdweck](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/psychology/cgi-bin/drupal/cdweck)