

Time to Trust the Teacher

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The arena of early years practice has, over the past decade, been pitched into a situation where we seem to constantly swim against a relentless tide of inappropriate policy ‘initiatives’. This situation appears to have developed because those charged with policy development are not child development specialists. They have learned the lessons of [the impact of early environments upon neuronal development](#), but appear to think that the way to respond to this is a fast pace of adult-directed activity at the earliest possible age. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no evidence to support the ‘earlier is better’ approach. In fact, research in the fields of anthropology, neuroscience, psychology and education tells us that [play-based learning is far more effective in developing the core skills upon which later academic achievements are based](#). However, the orientation of government policy is relentlessly ‘top down’- what is expected in later development dominates the input in earlier development; skills that used to be constructed as ‘milestones’ instead become ‘goals.’

The government’s assessment agenda relentlessly carries their mission ‘top down’ into earlier and earlier stages of development. [The early years sector is currently resisting an effort to bring in ‘baseline assessment’](#)- formal assessments of children’s competency in literacy and numeracy- on their entry to the Reception year of schooling, which for some children arrives shortly after their fourth birthday. The drive towards children’s ‘performance’ in these assessments drives teachers and head teachers towards highly adult-directed, target-focused pedagogy, which inevitably curtails the extent of free exploration and peer collaboration required for the levels of deep neuronal connection that are made in open-ended activity.

The current English school entry age of four-and-a half is already one of the earliest in the world. In 2014, the Chief OFSTED inspector, [Michael Wilshaw, called for two year olds to be taught in schools](#) 'to improve their education', primarily through a closely adult-directed agenda. [The Early Years Foundation Stage](#), a statutory national framework for children from birth to five currently stipulates seventeen early learning goals against which a progress report must be made at two, and a summative assessment must be made at five. In 2012, the government added a compulsory phonics test to this list, which children are required to take shortly after their fifth birthday, [despite evidence that a heavy reliance on phonics can actually impede later reading fluency](#). The EYFS document refers to 'planned, purposeful play', further cementing the dominant role of the adult in young children's activities.

Young parents, as the first generation to be schooled within the National Curriculum's 'transmit and test' culture, now increasingly experience their parenting role within a similar climate of fear, in which the key concern at each stage is that their young child will somehow be judged as 'substandard' For example, consider this posting on '[Netmums](#)' in 2011:

My 2 year old failed his assessment today completely. She wanted him to build a tower of 5 blocks and draw a circle and match up shapes. None of which he would do. He just ate everything including taking a chunk out of the crayon and eating that.... his older brother is autistic.... what if he is autistic too? I'm really worried now I don't think I could cope with 2 of them on a bad day.

As an academic who specialises in the psychology of early years development and history of childhood, I have to confess utter bafflement at this increasingly draconian policy for the nation's infants. Children's development typically occurs in uneven bursts during the early years; some children, particularly boys, take a slower trajectory into both language and literacy. This would not be seen as remarkable in Finland, where children would not be expected to begin formal education until after their seventh birthday. Those children whose language and literacy trajectory is more rapid are also catered for within Finnish early years settings. The result is less children labelled too early as 'Special Needs' or labouring under the self-fulfilling prophecy that such a diagnosis can create. It should also be noted here that, in the English education system, [summer born children are more likely to be diagnosed with special needs](#).

The irony is that the available evidence overwhelmingly points to the probability that our obsession with direct teaching and 'earlier is better' approaches simply do not work. [Nations in which children start formal education later](#) (up to the age of seven) achieve [better results on average](#) than those where they start formal education earlier. For example, Finland, where children start formal schooling at seven, are allocated a substantial amount of time for play, and not formally assessed at all throughout the entire primary school period [is ranked fourteen places higher than the United Kingdom](#) in the most recent PISA comparisons.

Additionally, evidence from mental health research indicates that juvenile psychiatric problems are increasing in nations which place their children in formal education systems at an early age. [By 2004, one in ten British children had a clinically diagnosed mental disorder](#). The Children's Society and the University of York subsequently estimated that in 2012 about '[half a million children in the UK in the eight to 15 age range have low well-being at any point in time](#)' Correspondingly, two successive Unicef reports focusing upon the richer nations, in [2007](#) and [2013](#), have found British children to have very low levels of 'well-being.' UNICEF suggests that some of the feedback collected from British children in particular indicates a feeling of isolation connected to the pressure of being continually assessed in situations in which they perceive themselves to be in competition with each other.

So what is the evidence for the requirement for learning through play in early childhood, birth to seven years? Internationally renowned psychologist [Alison Gopnik's research](#) indicates that direct

instruction from adults at such an early stage in a child's development 'leads children to narrow in, and to consider just the specific information a teacher provides'. Without didactic input from an adult however, 'children look for a much wider range of information and consider a greater range of options.'

Moreover, a [facts-and-skills transmission factory is a highly unnatural environment for human beings](#). We are, at base, members of a highly evolved, linguistic primate species, born with a highly plastic neuronal architecture which subsequently undergoes a huge amount of development in interaction with the environment. In common with other, non-human animals, children principally achieve such development through collaborative play activity, spontaneously engaging with both peers and adults. Many biological studies have found that [physically active, collaborative free play creates important neuronal connections in both human beings and non-human animals](#). 'A growing body of experimental evidence (suggests) that play appears to provide young animals the opportunity to finely tune their behaviour in a contextually relevant manner with peers and so modify the brain mechanisms that underpin social skills' (Pellis and Pellis, 2012).¹ With regard to human beings, Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000) concluded that, for five year old boys, the amount of time spent in active social play with other boys directly predicts their level of success in social problem-solving one year later.²

The way in which human beings naturally 'boot' their social cognition system in childhood is in spontaneous free play with others, both peers and adults, where communication is open and flexible. Human beings also differ from other animals in the role that narrative- a cohesive story- plays within their development of communication skills; consider for example the everyday example of a group of small boys engaged in rough and tumble play pretending to be superheroes. In the early 21st century, bio-psychologists discovered '[mirror neurons](#)' which fire when we simply *imagine* ourselves taking part in an activity. A practical example of this process can be found in the narrative that a child, or group of children may construct in making a towel 'stand for' Superman's cape and consequently the child or children concerned for Superman and other 'superheroes'. In this way, children become able to flexibly view the world from a number of different positions and perspectives, a key human skill which most importantly underlies creative thinking. Where such play is collaborative, the child additionally has to independently engage in complex negotiation with others relating to who should play each role, and how each role is to be played.

In summary, the combined research evidence suggests the following:

- Free play provides essential practice experience for young animals
- It is observed in young animals across the range of mammalian species
- In human beings, physical styles of free play that can also be observed in non-human animals are enhanced with linguistic communication that develops into narrative (e.g., rough and tumble evolves into superhero play)
- Free play develops skills that human beings use to become more competent, confident children in the 'now' and subsequently build upon to become skilled adults in the future

The over-riding quality of free play- play in which the child chooses his/ her activity freely from the surrounding environment- is that children exercise their natural ability to use ideas and objects flexibly. The narratives that unfold are open-ended, as are the uses of objects within them. Lyle

¹ Pellis, S., and Pellis, V. (2012). Play-fighting during early childhood and its role in preventing later chronic aggression. In R.E. Tremblay, M. Boivin, and R.DeV. Peters (Eds.) Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development; 2012:1-4.

² Pellegrini, A., and Blatchford, P. (2000). The Child at School. London: Arnold.

(2000) proposes that human beings are a 'storying animal' making sense of thoughts and events via narratives initially learned in early childhood³. The only way that we are able to make these human narratives truly our own is to spontaneously engage with both adults and peers in intersubjective interaction, independently constructing the narratives that we then embed within our own thinking patterns or 'schemas.' In conclusion, the birth to seven stage of human development is most naturally spent in building the skills of 'learning to learn' from both adults and from each other. Parents and practitioners should be acutely aware of this issue, in particular the current danger that, within state education environments, children may be systematically deprived in this respect; and if we deprive our children of sufficient free, interactive play during this stage of development, we risk producing young people with fragile mental and physical health.

The [DFE document](#) relating to baseline assessment refers to an 'accountability system', a worrying indication of a deeply dysfunctional nation, which lacks a sense of trust in the teaching profession. The strain of working in a culture of such deep suspicion inevitably creates unhappy, defensive adults. Evidence for this aspect of the situation can be demonstrated by the fact that, in England, [four in ten NQTs quit in the first year](#), and a [shrinking pool of candidates for head teacher roles](#). The unhappiness of teachers within their profession is exposed by the Guardian blog '[Secret Teacher](#)', which makes harrowing reading for all with Qualified Teacher Status. Parents are encouraged by the government and the media to project their fears for their children onto teachers and head teachers, a 'divide and conquer' strategy which is not only condoned by the [current Secretary of State for Education](#), but also [by her Labour Shadow](#).

We need to make it very clear to the government that as a profession we are not 'against assessment' and that indeed, trained teachers are able to use a vast range of informal assessment techniques to understand where each of our pupils are located in their learning journey, and to consider a range of inputs that might most effectively trigger their 'next steps'. What we are against is a monolithic national surveillance system that simplistically 'rates' children at earlier and earlier ages. The fear of having their child labelled as 'sub-standard' thence pitches parents against teachers, and the fear of being judged as incompetent based upon a spreadsheet of pupil 'performance' against imposed targets turns teachers into transmit and assessment automatons rather than educators. We are also against an education system [that hires and fires head teachers like football managers](#) based on a statistics-obsessed inspection process. Domination of State education by the political manoeuvrings of ministers must cease. Teachers, children and parents must no longer be left to the blundering manipulations of people who have no inkling of the skill, art and above all, vocation and humanity involved in teaching.

Please visit the '[Better without Baseline](#)' and '[Too Much, Too Soon](#)' web pages to receive more information about how we as a profession can collectively respond to the increasingly dysfunctional environments in which we are expected to work.

³ Lyle, S. (2000) Narrative Understanding: Developing a Theoretical Context for Understanding how Children Make Meaning in Classroom Settings, [Journal of Curriculum Studies](#), 32, (1), pp.45-63.