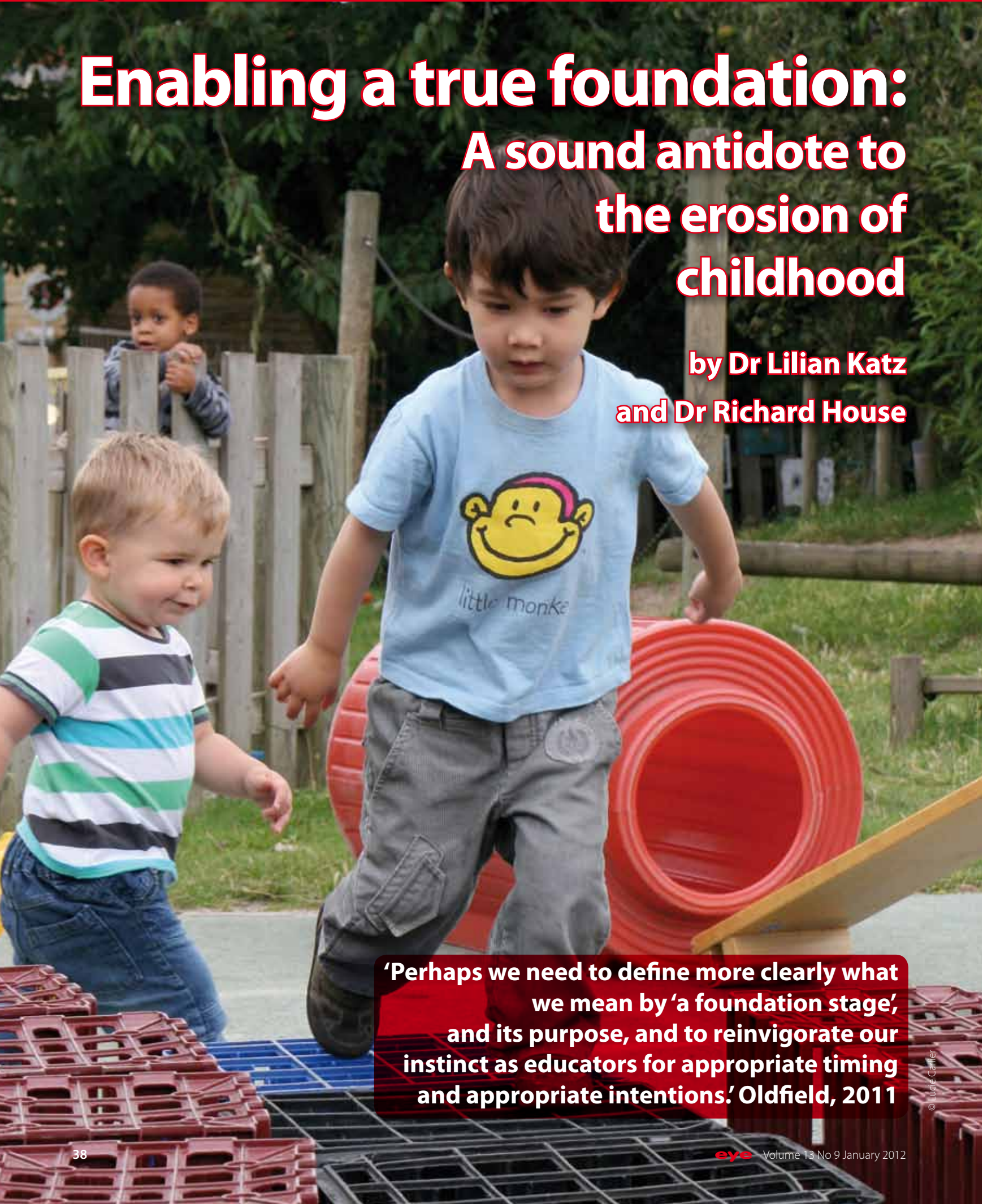


Enabling a true foundation: A sound antidote to the erosion of childhood

by Dr Lilian Katz
and Dr Richard House



'Perhaps we need to define more clearly what we mean by 'a foundation stage', and its purpose, and to reinvigorate our instinct as educators for appropriate timing and appropriate intentions.' Oldfield, 2011

© Lucie Camilleri

The recently published book, *Too Much, Too Soon?*, throws into question just how we should define an appropriate 'foundation' for early development and learning, and ideally what these should consist of.

IN THIS article, we explore the notion of 'foundation' from various viewpoints. Counter-intuitively, these explorations suggest that it is perhaps the process of engaging reflectively and creatively with what 'foundation' might mean that is more important than defining it too concretely and mechanistically, filling it with procedural content – which can only narrow and limit the extent to which practitioners can respond with subtlety and creativity to the rich diversity and endless differences of young children in all their precious uniqueness.

'Perhaps we need to define more clearly what we mean by 'a foundation stage', and its purpose, and to reinvigorate our instinct as educators for appropriate timing and appropriate intentions. Let us prepare, and empower, our trainee teachers with a deep understanding of child development so that they can confidently, and freed from centralized, one-size-fits-all legislation, make meaningful decisions as to what is right at each phase of the child's journey towards full humanity.' [Lynne Oldfield, 2011]

WHAT IS THE NOTION OF 'FOUNDATION'?

The term 'foundation' is one that has become commonplace, if not taken for granted even, in the lexicon of early childhood discourse, and there are certainly positive aspects to this – not least, the way in which it gives a strong signal to everyone in the field, including policy-makers, that child development is a process in which early deprivations or distortions in a young child's early experience can jeopardise the extent to which later developments are 'healthy' and fully integrated in the child's being.

But from a more post-modern viewpoint, we also know that the way languages are used can be constraining and even dangerous, and that the 'take-for-granted' discourses into which we are all unavoidably inserted can have all manner of often unnoticed effects on what we are, and are not, able to think about.

George Orwell's chillingly brilliant invention of 'Newspeak' in his iconic novel *1984* is perhaps the paradigm case of the way in which people can be controlled, and their very consciousness limited, by the language they have available to use.

Thus, without us really being aware of it, the noun 'foundation' can all too easily imply a kind of fixity or fixture, and suggest that there is one and only one, clearly definable way in which to lay a foundation on which all subsequent development will stand. Yet not only is human development not nearly so linear,

predictable and 'normalisable' as this might imply, it can also distract us from the view that there exists a whole host of diverse ways in which a 'foundational experience' (note the shift in terminology) can be achieved.

There are surely very grave dangers of unwarranted normalisation and the narrowing of possibility, as soon as the government takes it upon itself to define in statutory legislation what a 'foundation' for young children should consist in. Yet, this is precisely what has happened in England since 2008 with the state-legislated *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS), and it constitutes one of the major misgivings that many practitioners and academics have voiced about the framework.

HOW MANY FORMS CAN HEALTHY FOUNDATIONS TAKE?

Let us look a little more closely at the argument that a 'foundational experience' can take many diverse forms – and not least, depending upon the assumptions one is making about the nature of child development itself, and the deep nature of the young child.

In the book, *Too Much, Too Soon?*, for example, Lynne Oldfield [*The Steiner Waldorf Foundation Stage – To Everything There is a Season*] shows how a Steiner Waldorf-informed view of the young child generates a highly distinctive 'Waldorf foundation stage', whose characteristics vary substantially from that legislated by the government (and from which it has proved exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for different early years approaches to gain principled exemptions).

[For other examples, see chapters 3 to 5 inclusive, *Too Much, Too Soon?* – respectively, John Dougherty, *Against the government's grain: the experience of forging a path to EYFS exemption*; Arthur and Pat Adams, *The impact of the EYFS on childminders*; and Frances Laing, *A parent's challenge to New Labour's Early Years Foundation Stage*].

Thus, in her chapter, Oldfield writes that: 'The progressive stages of human development require educators to have not only a sense of "what" the curriculum should deliver, but also why, when and how, so that we develop a pedagogy which will acknowledge and enhance each stage of development, recognizing its specific characteristics and needs – a sense of what is truly appropriate at each age.' Touching on a theme that Penelope Leach develops in her own contribution to the book [*The EYFS and the real foundations of children's early years* – 'In the



Dr Lilian Katz (top); Dr Richard House

Lilian is Professor Emerita of Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) and is Co-Director of the Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting (CEEP) at the University of Illinois;

Richard is Senior Lecturer in Psychotherapy and Counselling, University of Roehampton



Practitioners must get to know the children they care for if they are to understand how best to support their development and learning

earliest years, valuable though the input of teachers may be, children are not pupils, but apprentices in the business of growing up as human beings.’] Oldfield continues: ‘This approach to building a foundation does not directly, or narrowly, concern itself with “school readiness”, but a general readiness for life, and a meeting of the specific challenges inherent in the first seven years of human development.’

Oldfield goes on to show with great clarity just what is at stake when what is construed as an appropriate foundation is fundamentally contested: ‘The *Early Years Foundation Stage* (England) goals for literacy belong to the next phases of development, according to the Waldorf understanding of child development. The ambition to have children reading and writing before they enter school represents an acceleration of intellectuality, self-consciousness and awakefulness, and does not allow sufficient time to establish a physiological foundation for reading and writing.’

Thus, we can see how different understandings of child development yield quite different views about

both the content and the process of what needs to occur (and not occur) in early childhood, in order for healthy development to occur.

The very existence of these principled and long-standing differences surely makes it totally unjustifiable that the government firstly defines and prescribes what counts as a valid ‘foundation’ for young children (with its often implicit, unthought-through assumptions about ‘normal’ child development), and then erects an unsurmountable obstacle course for anyone daring to take a different view on child development and who, therefore, understandably seeks exemption from the imposed statutory framework.

WHAT ARE THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES?

Some time ago, one of us [Lilian Katz] was invited to address a group of teachers at a conference for which the theme was ‘Building a Good Foundation’.

As I thought about how to approach the theme I asked my husband, who had practised structural engineering for more than 40 years, for his ideas.

I asked him: 'What principles do you use when you design the foundation for a building?' He responded at some length by outlining four basic principles that seem to me to be – at least analogically – very useful to those of us whose work involves building the foundation stage of early child development.

What are you building on?

The first principle is that you have to find out everything you can about the soil you are building on. How deep do you have to go until you reach solid rock? Is the soil sandy, slushy? – and so on and so forth. This first principle seems to relate to the importance of not only knowing as much information as you can discover about a child, but also the importance of knowing the child – and that both are important in deciding how best to support a child's growth, development and learning.

What structure do you want to build?

The second principle he offered was that you have to be very clear about what kind of structure you want to put on the soil. Do we want the structure to be tall and thin, or wide and low, or round or square – and on and on! This principle reminds us to take opportunities among ourselves and alongside our colleagues to become clear about what kinds of long-lasting qualities and characteristics we wish to foster and support in those for whom we care.

What forces will come to bear?

The third principle was that you have to find out everything you can about what forces will be likely to act upon that structure in years to come. Will there be earthquakes, typhoons, hurricanes, tornadoes, heavy snow? – and so on.

One key implication of this principle is that practitioners not only need to have a deep understanding of the subtleties and complexities of early human development, but they also need to be fully grounded in real-world realities and experience – and not least, the so-called 'commercialisation of childhood', and the relentless march of information and communication technologies and their impact in young children's lives.

Thus, we should take every opportunity to come together, to examine each other's ideas, and read about each other's experiences, insights and practices in publications like this one.

Get the foundation right!

The fourth and final point he made was that if you do not build the foundation soundly, the building could become very dangerous, and extremely expensive to repair! In other words, it is essential that we get the foundation as right as we can – though it

might be at this point that our productive building analogy begins to falter somewhat.

For while the laying of a foundation for a building will typically involve proactively pouring in huge amounts of concrete with which we need to set absolutely rigidly and unmovingly, the human soul is surely very different in nature – we maintain that it is perhaps far more important to be clear about what we should not be doing with, and to, young children, and to embrace the subtleties and often unconscious intangibilities of 'less is more', than it is (to continue the analogy) to turn up with endless truck-loads of concrete and 'fill the child up' with a pre-defined content, that has already been pre-decided and planned by adults, like ourselves.

The question 'Too much, too soon?' that is addressed in the collection to which we have both contributed is intended to remind us to think in terms of building a strong foundation, and to resist the strong pressures that come from so many quarters to start the building on the third floor – it can indeed be dangerous for overall development, and very expensive to repair.

As we put it on the dust cover of the book in relation to England's compulsory EYFS (and extending a metaphor suggested by Sue Palmer), 'the compulsory literacy targets were politically driven, imposed too young, and ignored research and children's development paths. In this respect, aspects of the EYFS were like building a house from the roof downwards before laying the proper foundations.'

WHAT ARE THE PRESSURES FACING EDUCATORS?

One of the major pressures faced by early years educators in many countries is to start children too soon and too intensely on instruction of formal academic skills that had previously been delayed until later years. The big issue here is not whether children should receive assistance and instruction in acquiring formal academic skills, but rather when such instruction is developmentally appropriate.

However, to avoid excessive premature quasi-formal academic instruction and adult-led cognitive learning (for example, explicit literacy learning) does not imply that the only other option is unlimited spontaneous play. The latter does indeed have a centrally important contribution to make to all aspects of early development (Elkind, 2011).

Providers for young children do not need to be caught between either quasi-formal instruction or spontaneous play and activities. These choices represent a misleading dichotomy – a very important element of early education (as well as later) is to engage children in a holistic, experiential way – which crucially includes 'emotionally, socially and intellectually' – and to address the life of the whole child in mind, body and spirit (if we may make those

To acquire any skills without also acquiring the disposition to use them is wasteful at best



© Lucie Carlier

Genuine living contexts in which to make sense of their environments and experiences

distinctions) in the fullest sense, including a range of aesthetic and moral sensibilities.

The formal definition of the concept of ‘intellect’ emphasises reasoning, hypothesising, predicting, the development and analysis of ideas and the quest for understanding. We have good reason to assume that the potential for all of these mental processes is inborn in all humans – granted, though, being stronger in some than in others. To compel very young children to participate in academic exercises or adult-imposed cognitive activities seems very likely to undermine, rather than strengthen, these inborn intellectual dispositions.

Therefore, we suggest that an appropriate curriculum for young children is one that focuses on supporting (which is crucially different from actively developing) their inborn intellectual dispositions – for example, the disposition to make the best sense they can of their own experience and environment – with adult concepts being perhaps potentially available for

them to freely choose to use if they so wish, but never in any circumstances ‘force-fed’ or imposed.

Furthermore, an appropriate ‘curriculum’ in the early years is one that encourages and motivates children to aspire towards the later mastery of foundational academic skills – for example, beginning writing skills via freely chosen mark-making, in the service of their intellectual pursuits. The children should be able to sense the purposefulness of their activities and efforts.

There are two points to emphasise in connection with the importance of supporting and strengthening young children’s intellectual development. The first is that it is easy to mistakenly assume that, because some young children have not been exposed to the knowledge and skills associated with ‘school readiness’, they necessarily lack the basic intellectual dispositions compared to their peers from more affluent backgrounds.

Children of very low-income families may not have been read to or had opportunities to hold a pencil at home. But it is still entirely reasonable to assume that they too have lively minds. Indeed, the specifically intellectual challenges that many children are likely to face in coping with precarious neighbourhood environments are likely to be substantial and often complex.

A second point is that while intellectual dispositions may be weakened or even damaged by excessive and premature formal instruction – too much too soon – they are also not likely to be strengthened by many of the trivial, if not banal, activities frequently offered in childcare, nursery and kindergarten environments.

Not long ago, [Lilian Katz] visited a school district in one of the western US states in which the kindergartens classes had adopted ‘Teddy Bears’ as a theme for the year. In the classroom visited, the children were expected to ‘show and tell’ about their own teddy bears, to count a collection, to measure their lengths and obtain their weights, and to make up stories with them as main characters.

While such activities are not necessarily harmful and may even be somewhat enjoyable for the children (though there is always the question of what might be being displaced by a lower-grade activity or experience), they are not sufficiently intellectually engaging or stimulating. By contrast, when young children engage in projects in which they conduct investigations of significant activities, objects and events around them, they have genuine living contexts in which to exercise their inborn dispositions to make sense of their environments, observations and experiences.

When engaged in investigative projects the children, with the support of their teachers, develop a list of the questions to which they will be seeking answers. In the early years, these questions typically concern issues, such as ‘what people around them do’, ‘what things are made of’, ‘how things work’, ‘what things

are made of', and many other observable phenomena that serve to deepen and clarify their understanding of what others do to contribute to their wellbeing, as can be seen in many reports of project work in the early years (see Useful resources).

While participating in such project investigations, children's young minds are typically fully engaged, and the indissoluble totality of the experience nourishes them socially and physically, as well as intellectually. Furthermore, the usefulness and importance of being able to read, write, measure and count, and so on, become self-evident to children through their immersion in real-world practical activity, such that these capacities are fully grounded in and emerge organically from real-world experience (Katz and Sylvie, 2000; Katz and Helm, 2001).

To return to the 'too much, too soon' theme, another important developmental question related to the timing of curriculum content regards what we are learning concerning the differences between the short and the long-term effects of early years education. Certainly, we all agree with the proposition that learning to read is a major educational goal. But we must be sure to add to this the importance of developing the 'disposition' to be a reader. To acquire any skills without also acquiring the disposition to use them is wasteful at best, but in the long-term, harmful as well (Simpson, 2011; Ellyatt 2011).

A key, and little discussed, factor in the increasing pressure to which young children are being subjected today is the pervasive (and seemingly mounting) cultural, political and parental anxiety about children being 'left behind', if we fail to intrude into their early development and learning experience, and make them reach the normalising 'learning goals' that adults believe they should be achieving (Honoré, 2009; House, 2011).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, until such anxieties are consciously 'owned', addressed and worked through in a mature way, and adults' unconscious projections on to their children withdrawn, it seems almost inevitable that the 'cultural madness' of 'too much too soon' will continue unchecked – with all manner of 'collateral damage' being done to young children's foundational developmental experience in the process.

Another central factor accounting for increasing pressure to start children on quasi-formal instruction early is the extent to which formal, often high-stakes testing of young children has also been introduced by government agencies in increasing numbers of countries, the pressures from which then typically cascade down the schooling system right into the early years – with potentially catastrophic consequences for the quality of young children's experience.

There is also recent and growing recognition of the role of stimulation in early brain development. However, Clancy Blair's analysis of the neurological research does not imply that formal academic

instruction is the way to optimise early brain development. On the contrary, Blair (2002) proposes a neurobiological model of school readiness based on his analysis of recent neurological data, the implications of which are that early years programmes work best when they focus on social, emotional and intellectual development together, rather than on narrow quasi-formal academics.

On the basis of his model, a more subtly intellectual, rather than a cognitively quasi-academic, approach is more likely to yield desirable 'school readiness' as well as important longer-term benefits – but, crucially, not because 'school readiness' has been actively and programmatically sought and cultivated. Blair's analysis, then, emphasises the positive role of early experiences of what he calls synchronous and continuous interaction in which the child is relationally interactive with others, rather than a mere passive recipient of stimulation and isolated bits of information.

Furthermore, as is argued throughout *Too Much, Too Soon?* by a host of authors, the common sense notion that 'earlier is better' is not supported by longitudinal studies of the effects of different kinds of curriculum models. On the contrary, a number of longitudinal follow-up studies indicate that while formal instruction can produce good test results in the short-term, early years teaching methods emphasising children's interactive roles and initiative, while not so impressive in the short-term and in terms of early test results, yield better school achievement in the longer run (Golbeck, 2001; Marcon, 2002).

Thus, it is mainly in the long-term that the disadvantages of early formal instruction become apparent (Palmer, 2011); and the disadvantages are not usually observable in the short-term. What we are arguing, then, is that the anxiety-driven 'short-termism' that is dominating current early childhood practices is at best problematic, and at worst potentially catastrophic for children's healthy longer-term development and wellbeing.

To some unknowable extent, the apparent short-term benefits of quasi-formal instruction are presumably directly related to the extent to which the early years curriculum covers the items on the early years tests. Obviously, children who do not receive any (or little) quasi-formal academic instruction on the items in the tests are unlikely to perform well on them.

Yet, in a competitive system that, at worst, measures and compares statistically measurable 'outcomes'

Begin writing skills via freely chosen mark making, in the service of intellectual pursuits; children should be able to sense the purpose of their activities and efforts

The negative effects of 'too much too soon' are more likely to be seen during the later primary school years than when it is actually happening

between schools and early years settings, and which makes a virtue of high outcome scores and concomitantly denigrates settings with low(er) scores, the relentless pressure on all teachers and practitioners to succumb to the noxious 'too much too soon' ideology can be well nigh impossible to resist.

The second point to make here is that early quasi-formal instruction, in the long-term, appears to be more damaging to boys than to girls (Biddulph, 1998; Palmer, 2009; Hoise, 2009). Explanations for this finding are not entirely clear. One may be that girls generally learn to accept a passive role early and accept it more easily than boys. On the whole, boys appear to prefer active, assertive and interactive experiences. Another is the well-known fact that girls mature neurologically slightly earlier than boys, though they catch up with each other at, approximately, eight-years-old.

Taken together, these sets of distinctions – between quasi-formal academic instruction and intellectual engagement – suggest that the early introduction of formal academic instruction is very likely not in the best interests of many of our children and, in fact, it may well be damaging in the longer run. However, early childhood curriculum and teaching methods are best when they address children's lively bodies and minds so that they are fully engaged, including (and never exclusively) intellectually.

Conclusion

In short – and this is surely a highly sobering conclusion for all of us, whether parent, policy-maker or practitioner – the negative effects of 'too much too soon' are more likely to be seen during the later primary school years than when it is actually happening.

There is, therefore, an urgent need for reputable, long-term longitudinal research to be carried out (qualitative as well as quantitative), recent examples of which have been provided by Sebastian Suggate (2011), before we can begin to know with any confidence whether the routine early childhood practices that governments are increasingly imposing on early childhood environments are helpful, neutral or positively harmful.

Certainly, the argument coming from perennial wisdom, practitioner experience and anecdotal

observation is that we would do well to adopt a strict precautionary principle of 'less is more' in early childhood – except, of course, in the case of exceptionally deprived children, where we would all agree that more active and direct intervention is sometimes unambiguously indicated. eye

Useful resources

- Regular reports of project work in the early years, are carried in each issue of *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, which can be found at: <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu>

References

- Adams A, Adams P (2011) The impact of the EYFS on childminders, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Biddulph S (1998) *Raising Boys: Why Boys are Different – and How to Help Them Become Happy and Well-Balanced Men*. Thorsons: London
- Blair C (2002) School readiness: integrating cognition and emotion in a neurobiological conceptualization of children's functioning at school entry, in *American Psychologist* 57 (2) pp 111–27
- Dougherty J (2011) Against the government's grain: the experience of forging a path to EYFS exemption, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Elkind D (2011) Can we play, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Ellyat W (2011) The democratization of learning, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Golbeck S (ed) (2001) *Psychological Perspectives on Early Childhood Education: Reframing Dilemmas in Research and Practice*. Erlbaum: Mahwah, New Jersey, USA
- Helm J, Katz L (2001) *Young Investigators: The Project Approach in the Early Years*. Teachers College Press, New York, USA
- Honoré C (2009) *Under Pressure: Putting the Child Back In Childhood*. Orion, London
- House R (2011) Psychoanalytic ideas for early childhood, in *The Mother Magazine* 45 pp 30-2
- House R (2009) The Problem with Boys. Or with us..., in *June* 19 pp 54–5
- House R (ed) (2011) *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Katz L, Chard S (2000) *Engaging Children's Minds: A Project Approach*, 2nd edn. Ablex: New York, USA
- Laing F (2011) A parent's challenge to New Labour's Early Years Foundation Stage, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Leach P (2011) The EYFS and the real foundations of children's early years, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Marcon R (2002) Moving up the grades: relationship between preschool model and later school success, in *Early Childhood Research and Practice* 4 (1). Downloaded at: <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/marcon.html> (retrieved 25 October 2011).
- Oldfield L (2011) The Steiner Waldorf Foundation Stage – To Everything There is a Season, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Palmer S (2009) *21st Century Boys: How Modern Life Can Drive Them off the Rails and How to Get Them Back on Track*. Orion: London
- Palmer S (2011) If I wanted my child to learn to read and write, I wouldn't start from here, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Simpson K (2011) The unfolding self – the essence of personality, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud
- Suggate S (2011) Viewing the long-term effects of early reading with an open eye, in *Too Much, Too Soon? – Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*. Hawthorn Press: Stroud

Key points

- There is an urgent need for reputable, long-term longitudinal research to be carried out (qualitative as well as quantitative) before we can begin to know whether the early childhood practices that governments are increasingly imposing on childhood environments are helpful, neutral or positively harmful
- Certainly, there is a good argument for suggesting that we would do well to adopt a strict precautionary principle of 'less is more' in early childhood – except, of course, in the case of exceptionally deprived children