

A Playful Foundation for Academics

We have all the time in the world to teach facts, but only this very limited window to develop the will and integrate the senses through the imagination, so that when children come to the classroom, they are capable of concentrating.

School readiness is increasingly becoming a topic of discussion amongst parents of pre-school age children; and not necessarily in concern to benchmarking this capacity or that. Play is finally having its time.

Over the past 12 months many column-inches have reported the controversy muddying SNSAs in the fledgling year of a pupil's academic career. Edinburgh parents persevering through the gruelling application process to defer their 4-year-old's entry to P1 got news the Council would honour all deferral applications from 2021, ahead of the pivotal 2023 law change that will end the birthday discrimination for all in Scotland. The obstructing effects of the pandemic that account for almost half the lifespan of children starting school in August continues to receive regular coverage.

In the same year, a landmark Scottish parliament motion proposed a kindergarten stage for all children under 7. Why? On paper Curriculum for Excellence has a profound understanding of child development, encouraging a play-based start for children in P2 and below. Yet for most young children this will not be what meets them.

A 12-minute documentary by award-winning education filmmaker, Saskia Anley-McCallum, *Now We Are Six*, delves into why Scotland has failed to turn the CfE's play principles for 3 - 7s into practice over the last decade. Viewed over 30,000 times in the first week of release (NowWeAreSix.org), Moray House School of Education described it as 'an informative and engaging film, with impact.'

Many nursery settings are no longer impervious to the stresses the literacy and numeracy tests put on children and teachers, with evidence of play being side-lined in favour of activities that furnish children for the assessments. In light of pupils spending significantly more time in pre-school - latest government figures showing an almost universal uptake of free early learning and childcare, and 97% of 2- to 4-year-olds accessing 600 - 1,140 hours at the end of August 2021 - do we need to clarify what is truly necessary as a 'foundation' for school entry?

"Really, if our goal is for children to become educated and to become creative learners and doers, then it is all the more important that they take the time, that they build and grow their bodies, before they start sitting at a desk, looking at worksheets and writing, without playing as much as they



need to" says Steiner Waldorf Teacher, Lisa Gordon, interviewed for NWA6.

"It takes them away from the work that they cannot go back and do later. They have to do this in these Early Years: building their brain, building their organs, building their bodies; integrating all their senses, so that when they come and actually are ready for desk work, they are not still

struggling with distractions and difficulties and inability to be still and listen and focus; which is really a setback actually... in the bigger picture."

Both free- and structured play are essential planks of a child's work. Likewise, learning gains meaning when it bears relevance to real life, underpinned by a child's natural biological predisposition to imitate. They unconsciously look for the human example to model. The active, repetitive, habit-forming ecosystem of a Waldorf kindergarten, together with the trained example of the teacher, enables children to acquire the beginnings of divergent thought, the ability to listen, sustain attentiveness, self-regulate, develop large and fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination, creatively problem-solve, build emotional resilience and reasoning skills, strengthen physical agility, develop attachment, communicate, be flexible to change, and employ the will - capacities requiring to be developed before the intellect takes hold.

Once a child is 6½ or 7 they will be ready for academics. But if we don't resist moves to prematurely intellectualise, over-stimulate, and introduce notions of failure, achievement, and success, authentic play is disabled. Primary Head Teacher Wille French says: "It is not that children are not able, it is that they are not ready." Speaking publicly for the first time in NWA6 about the changes that critically need to happen to bring about a shift in our 'distorted' cultural values around education, he adds: "I have been in the game so long, so I feel happy to talk, I am not saying anything that teachers would find controversial. I'm just speaking common sense."

Kindergarten, by contrast, is in many ways a cultivation of internal over external motivation, which many studies have shown is key to later academic success. "It is not an understatement to say that [play] is as important as sleep, and nutrition and connection with nature, not just in childhood but from what happens thereafter", stresses author Julia Whitaker. A child development approach leads not only to better long-term educational outcomes, but is also linked to higher levels of childhood well-being. Through being the instigator of their learning, an empowered learner emerges, as the child understand that 'I can do it!'

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