

Too Much Too Soon: the case for extending informal play-based education

Parliamentary Lobby
Wed 30 October 2013

David Whitebread
Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

Early Childhood Education: Is earlier better?

- The issue: what is the best age to start formal teaching of literacy & numeracy?
- High performing countries (Finland, Japan, South Korea) start at age 6/7
- UK Government policy: the earlier the better
 - Introduction of phonics test for 6 year olds (end of Y1)
 - Present consultation on new 'baseline assessment' at entry to Reception class (4 year olds), replacing Foundation Stage profile: emphasis on accountability (Michael Wilshaw) rather than supporting the quality of young children's educational experience
- On-going concerns about 'schoolification' of early childhood education (OECD) and downward pressure to introduce formal teaching earlier.

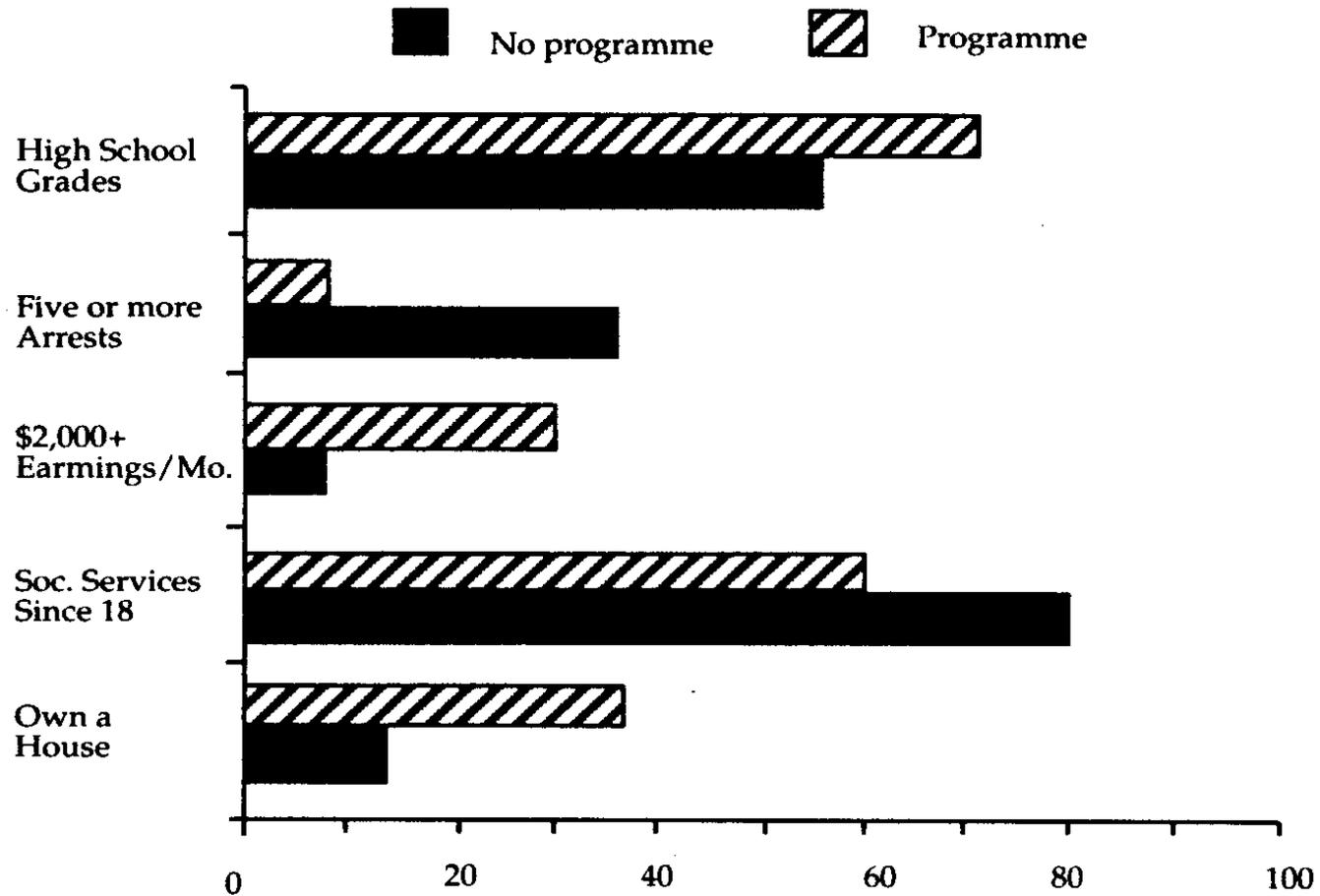
Why is the earlier introduction of formal literacy instruction likely to be counter-productive?

- Reduction in extent of crucial preparatory play-based informal experiences
- Requirement for young children to learn through formal instruction before they have the mental equipment to do so – leading to early experience of failure and disengagement from the educational process

Learning through play: What's the evidence?

- Human playfulness is ubiquitous and underpins highest scientific and cultural achievements
- In early years supports healthy brain development (Pellis & Pellis, 2009: *The Playful Brain*)
- Supports key developmental abilities:
 - symbolic representation (language development: Christie & Roskos , 2006)
 - self-regulation (cognitive control; Hyson, Copple & Jones, 2007; Ponitz, McClelland, Matthews and Morrison, 2009; Whitebread, 2010)
- Lack of playfulness associated with weak cognitive development (Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 1989) and low levels of emotional well-being (Berk, Mann, & Ogan, 2006)

The High / Scope study: Weikart et al (1993): follow-up at 27 years



All findings are significant at $p < .05$ based on chi-square statistics.

From Schweinhart and Weikart (1993).

Other longitudinal studies on impact of early extended play-based educational experience

1. Playful learning in pre-school associated with better short and long-term academic, motivational and well-being outcomes by end of primary school (Marcon, 2002)
2. Extended play-based pre-school experience (i.e. 3 years) advantageous to children from disadvantaged households (Sylva et al, 2004)

What is informal play-based learning and why is it most appropriate for children aged 0-6?

- Early brain development and achievement of 'cognitive control' (self-regulation), supported by playful experience (Whitebread et al, 2007)
- Learning from direct experience; ideas, events etc directly experienced and related to existing knowledge
- Tasks are always meaningful to the child and set at the right level of difficulty
- Trial and error learning: child can try out new behaviours, endlessly repeat slight variations, exaggerate,, modify, abbreviate or change the sequence of behaviours: 'flexible thinking' (Bruner, 1072)
- Importance of adults as 'co-players'
 - The child sets the agenda (the adult as 'attention-follower' rather than 'attention-shifter': relation to improved language development)
 - The adult models strategies and ways of thinking, using wide vocabulary
 - Episodes of 'joint attention'

Studies of long-term impact of early start to formal instruction

- Summer-born children: (Sykes, Bell & Rodeiro, 2009)
 - 25 % lower academic attainment at Key Stage 1
 - 20% less likely to go to university
 - 50% more likely to be diagnosed as having SEN (Gledhill, Ford & Goodman, 2002)
 - Comparison of 19 OECD countries with different start dates: starting formal education later helps to reduce birthdate effects Bedard and Dhuey (2006)
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- An early start to formal literacy teaching (age 5), does not lead to improved reading by age 11 (compared to start at 7 years). Children who start later read more for pleasure and have better text comprehension by age 11 (Suggate, 2009; Suggate et al, 2012)

Why is direct instruction inappropriate for children aged 0-6?

- In contrast to playful learning:
- Relies upon ability to extract information from symbolic representation of an idea or event or experience rather than from the experience directly
- Adult agenda rather than that of the child
- Tasks are set by adult and therefore not always meaningful to the child (rely on child's ability to relate to own previous experience)
- Tasks not always set at the right level of difficulty
- Lack of flexibility: child required to learn in order set by adult curriculum, and in ways defined by the adult

So, what about baseline assessment?

- If we want to assess abilities which :
 - predict academic achievement/school readiness, emotional well-being and life success
 - support effective and appropriate practice in early childhood education
- Then what we should assess is as follows:
- Cognitive control / executive functioning:
 - inhibitory/ effortful control (marshmallow test)
 - working memory
 - attention
- Self-regulation: skill and will – ability and motivation to use mental strategies to solve problems (cognitive, emotional & social)
- Language development (vocabulary)
- Playfulness



Please support the Too Much Too Soon campaign

Stand up for evidence-based, high
quality early childhood education
that works

