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***Give Them Time* – an analysis of school readiness in Ireland’s early education system: a Steiner Waldorf Perspective**

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This paper examines a Steiner Waldorf Perspective to School Readiness and applies that international ideology to educational practice and curriculum policy in modern Ireland. The case for a later school start is championed with strong arguments underpinning the reasons why a later start is better in the long run for children’s formal learning capacity and enthusiasm. Current primary school curriculums for the early years are also analysed and catalogued against Steiner philosophical best practice in early learning to promote a child-centred early learning curriculum within the Irish primary educational system.

Keywords: school readiness; early years; primary education; Steiner Waldorf; Ireland

In a lecture given to teacher trainees in 1919, Austrian philosopher and social reformer Rudolf Steiner is recorded as saying:

What we wish to achieve will only be fully attained when some day parents will understand that the first years of education pose a special task for humankind today. (Steiner 1996)

Introduction

In this paper, we wish to both provide support for this statement and to expand it to include not only parents but educators, policy makers and society in general. And by educators we mean both practitioners in preschool settings and infant teachers within primary schools. This paper has two goals. The first is to present a sound argument for a play-based holistic educational approach to learning in the years from birth to 6 years. This is, in essence, an argument for delayed school entry until after completion of this six-year phase. The second goal is to demonstrate how we can approach the problem of an early school start in Ireland and work to achieve a better early learning approach for children in the transitional phase of four to six years despite the variety and the strength of external factors in Ireland today which combine to make this such a very difficult thing to achieve. These goals are in essence the why and the how of school readiness.

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Early learning and school readiness

In most of Europe, the average school entry age is six years of age. It is only in Britain and Ireland that it is four years of age. This anomaly triggers a lot of debate on the impact school readiness can have on a child's later educational and holistic development. The Steiner Waldorf educational philosophy emphatically promotes age 6 as the ideal school readiness age. The reasons for this relates to the child's learning methodologies prior to this age, contrasted with the structure of the school system and curriculum, which are deemed inappropriate to meet the needs of young children (Jaffke 1996).

The seven years from birth to the end of age 6 are an integrated learning phase where children learn primarily through play (Britz-Creelius 1996). With formal schooling starting in Ireland at age 4, the holistic and sacred first phase of life is compromised by a substantive educational division. Transitioning during this phase to a classroom environment, with high child/adult ratios and an academic approach, is an unnecessary and unhelpful disruption in a child's natural learning process (Bowlby 2009). Play-based early childhood care and education, where children learn in a free-flowing process from birth to 6 years, rather than being rushed into the scholastic approach that underpins formal learning within the primary school system, has been shown to be a more effective start of the educational cycle (Lundgren 2009).

The origins of the intellectual justification for an early start to academic training can be found in the work of educational theorists such as Carl Bereiter, Siegfried Engelmann and E.D. Hirsch, who introduced early academic programmes based on behaviourist learning theories (Elkind 1987). By starting with the assumption that learning follows the same principles at all age levels, and that the sooner a child masters critical thinking skills the better, a theory of early learning has evolved which ignores children's developing abilities while denying any special quality to childhood, a time where trustworthy impulses should rightly be allowed to develop and run their course (Hirsch 1996). These theories led to the development of an entire industry of books and other media to teach academic subjects at home, supposedly addressing educational requirements even within the first three years of life, which has had an unfortunate effect on early childhood education around the globe (House 2011).

This controversy rages across Europe. Whilst former English Education Minister Vernon Coaker opined that a starting age of 6 for formal education would be too late, and completely counter-productive (Curtis 2007), the Cambridge Primary Review found that children should not start formal learning before this age (Alexander 2009). The most comprehensive enquiry into English primary education since the Plowden report of 1967, this review asserts that the kind of play-based learning featured in nurseries and reception classes should continue until the 'school age' of 6. It found no evidence that an early introduction to formal learning has any benefit, but instead saw indications it can do some harm. In fact, there is a body of evidence to support the argument that an early introduction of didactic curricula may increase anxiety, and impact negatively on both self-esteem and longer-term motivation to learn (Elkind 1987; Elley 1994; Alexander 2009). Finland, which consistently ranks at the top of all OECD countries for educational attainment and one of the highest per capita number of PhDs in Europe (Bruton 2007), is currently among only six European countries (also including Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden) starting formal schooling at age 7 (National Foundation for Educational Research 2010).

The Steiner Waldorf Perspective on school readiness

Steiner educators have articulated a compelling argument against this belief that education is a race, and provided a child-centred alternative to formal instruction for children less than six years of age (Oldfield 2002; Peck 2004). Steiner Kindergarten teachers specialise in non-academic education. Working out of an anthroposophical view of the developing human being, they do not consider attempts to begin teaching children literacy, mathematics and logic-based scientific knowledge before their seventh year to have pedagogical integrity. Instead, they advocate for the development of pre-literacy, pre-numeracy and pre-science learning that will ensure that when the appropriate time comes to engage in more formalised learning, they will embrace the new challenges with capacity and enthusiasm. The word curriculum stems from the Latin word for race course, and the first seven years may be looked at as training for the course ahead, rather than an actual joining in the race. This approach is also upheld by conventional research into early educational learning (Kiely 2012) where it is understood that early scientific and mathematical development is experienced through texture, shape, volume and weight of real living materials experienced in the natural environment through outdoor play. In this way, working with natural materials is important. Natural materials all feel texturally unique and weigh-differing amounts. This stimulates neurological development in a way that the limited textural pallet of plastics commonly found in children's toy products cannot (Wilson 1998). Similarly, making dough through mixing flour and water is the essence of early scientific learning; baking it to produce bread deepens the understanding of scientific processes within a young child's mind (Cohen 2008).

In relation to literacy, the focus in the first six years should be on the joy that storytelling brings. Fostering a love of stories and an appreciation of the magic that can be experienced through engagement with the wonderful world of literature will have lasting positive outcomes for children (Cherry-Cruz 2001). Focusing on oral language development until after the age of 6 will have two effects. The first is that reading will come quickly and without struggle, allowing each child to feel capable and self-confident (Soundy 1993). Secondly, fostering a love of stories through imaginative play and oral story construction will foster a desire to read, necessary to underpin the ability to read when the child is ready for a meaningful engagement with the world of literature in a way that will evolve throughout their whole lives (United States Department of Education 1986). Essentially, a play-based learning approach with opportunities to use natural materials and processes such as building, cooking and gardening most directly supports the acquisition of appropriate learning outcomes in the early years (Brennan 2012). Concentrating on numeracy and literacy through a focus on numbers and letters is potentially counter-productive and could damage a young child's natural love of learning (Sanders 1995; Lundgren 2009).

In the first years of life, children learn through directly experiencing their environment and through partaking in external memories of society, a vast depository accessed through storytelling, songs and rhymes, and the traditional games of childhood (Davidmann 2006). This is predominantly informal learning. The Steiner school movement has long held that any programme where abstracting of knowledge is carried out before the child has turned 6 is too early (Britz-Crelius 1996; Jaffke 1996; Steiner 1996). The soundness of this viewpoint of a later start to schooling was recently confirmed not only by the aforementioned Cambridge

Review (Alexander 2009) but is also borne out by recent studies. Suggatea, Schaughency, and Reese (2012) found no decoding and reading fluency distinction by age 10 between New Zealand children who had learned to read at age 5, in state schools, and a group who learned at age 7, in Steiner schools. In fact, they found that the later starters, who had spent more time learning language orally, had slightly better reading comprehension. In analysing the findings from the Terman Life Cycle Study that followed California children over an 80-year span, Kern and Friedman (2008) concluded that early school entry was associated with lower educational attainment.

The position in Ireland

The Irish policy position on this debate is somewhat ambiguous. Children in Ireland can attend primary school from the age of 4, or from the age of 3, if from ‘disadvantaged’ areas (DES 2011b). A compulsory attendance is from six years of age until 16. The 1999 Primary Curriculum is contradictory on its stance towards an appropriate educational approach for children ages 4 and 5. On the one hand, infants classes are places where free play is permitted and even emphasised, and little formal learning is brought. On the other, learning outcomes of an academic nature are defined, and their achievement advocated, and determined through standards-based assessment.

Though not mandatory, the majority of four- and five-year olds have traditionally been enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (Coolahan 1981). Projections are for significant growth in early year’s education over the coming decades (DES 2011a). The Primary Curriculum recognises the ‘informality of the learning experience’ in the infant classes, yet calls for learning outcomes that can only arise from the formal teaching of basic literacy and numeracy skills (DES 1999). Anecdotally, it is said that infant teachers are often pressured by parents, school principals and the teachers of classes above them to introduce formal learning, even when it goes against their own judgement of how best to work with young children (Angus 2011).

There are many contributing factors to Ireland’s comparative early start in relation to formalised learning. As mentioned previously, age 4 as a starting age for school in the western world is unique to Ireland and Britain. As such, it is arguable that this is an inherently British policy stance that has been unconsciously adopted by Ireland through the process of colonisation. The Irish primary school system has much in common with the pre-independence British system. This is to be expected, of course, as it was the only level of education to be widespread in Ireland during British occupation, and therefore it is inevitable that it was shaped by the beliefs of the ruling forces during its development. It is therefore surmisable that it was Britain’s influence that children here start school at four years of age while six or seven years of age was and is the European norm. The development of social and educational policy is often incremental in approach (Quinn 1978); building bit by bit on top of what already exists rather than any revolutionary policy changes. This can result in anomalies that are throwbacks to an earlier system implemented within an entirely different context. Ireland has now internalised and culturally normalised age 4 as an appropriate age for the start of formal schooling. By implication, we have also normalised this as an appropriate age for free play, and perhaps even play more generally, to stop. Though not mandated by law to begin before the age of 6, the

commonality of this early start is upheld within the Irish educational policy framework through a variety of measures that both consciously and unconsciously steer families towards an earlier rather than a later school starting age (Pobal 2010; DES 2011b). An early start to formal education is also upheld within popular culture through toy design and children's television programmes aimed at early formalised numeracy and literacy forming an ever growing share of products aimed at the early years.

A further obstacle toward reassessing the appropriate age at which to start academics is the fundamental issue of finance. In Ireland, previous to 2010, early years services represented a significant expense, while school was free. Many parents could not afford to delay school entry beyond the minimum allowable age. Furthermore, the introduction of the free pre-school year in 2010 brought unforeseen negative outcomes for those in favour of delaying school entry. It is now possible to stop paying childcare fees when one's child turns three and still send them to school at age four. However, the parent who is committed to delaying school entry until the age of 6 is unable to avail of the free pre-school year, as it must be fully completed between the ages of 3 and 5 and a half.

Developing a child-centred early years curriculum within Irish primary schools

Given the breadth and depth of issues in Ireland that are currently both mitigating against a later and promoting an earlier school start, it is inevitable that the majority of children in Ireland will continue attending school nearer the age of 4 than 6. If we accept this as inevitable, measures to promote holistic early learning within the primary school sector take on great importance. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the body responsible for the creation of the Primary School Curriculum and Assessment, has recently developed an Early Childhood Curriculum Framework called *Aistear* (NCCA 2009). Representatives of many early childhood interest groups, including the Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association, were involved in the consultative process for this document, which perhaps had some bearing on the fact that the framework's philosophy, vision and aims are more closely aligned with those of Steiner education than are the ones set forth in the Primary School Curriculum. The authors note that early childhood refers to the period from birth to 6 years, while primary education caters for the period from 6 to 12 years, although in reality most five-year-olds and about half of the country's four-year-olds attend primary school. To meet this reality, the 1999 Curriculum lays out the educational approach to be taken with children age 4 through 12. Obviously, there is an overlap of two years, the time during which children are in infant classes in mainstream school settings, or 'kindergarten' in Steiner terminology.

The Department of Education has something of a quandary with infant education, in that the approach needed to properly educate children of this age is so fundamentally different from later primary years. *Aistear* appears to be a valid attempt to address this. However, it is not yet clear whether *Aistear* is meant to replace the 1999 Curriculum, as regards this age group. In an audit of the similarities and differences between the two, *Aistear* is characterised as a modifying initiative rather than a successor to the infant sections of the Primary School Curriculum, and they are 'seen as complementing each other' (NCCA 2009). The authors seem to say something entirely different, though, when later in the same document they are described as 'two curriculum approaches', and in the conclusion of the report it

states ‘a critical question remains to be answered concerning the status of Aistear vis-à-vis the Curriculum’ (NCCA 2009). One respondent to an INTO Education Committee survey of teachers’ views on implementation of the Curriculum spoke of her frustration with the Government’s unclear expectations on caring for young children. Referring to required child/adult ratios, she said, ‘This week in play school it can be 1:10 (sic) and next week, let’s face it, in primary school it can be 30:1 and they still have the same needs’ (Nic Craith and Fay 2007). If the two are to exist side by side for some time to come, then the similarities are superfluous, and the differences are crucial, for they will need to be engaged and rectified.

There are six key distinctions between Aistear and the 1999 Primary School Curriculum. These distinctions show Aistear to be more in line with both general European pedagogy and Steiner philosophy on early learning. They are represented below in Table 1.

Because its priorities are less detailed and more descriptive in nature, Aistear appears to leave greater room for interpretation and consequently allow more freedom of approach. An example of this can be found within Aistear’s theme of Exploring and Thinking, where it states, ‘In partnership with the adult, children will use letters, words, sentences, numbers, signs, pictures, colour, and shapes to give and record information, to describe and to make sense of their own and others’ experiences’ (A3, LG5). There remains a question of interpretation. If by ‘use letters, words, sentences and numbers’, the authors intend that children be instructed in literacy, this goal would be counter to the Steiner ethos of delaying print symbol systems until after the age of 6. Gardner (1991) supports the philosophical underpinning here by stating that it is no accident that in most societies children do not begin statutory schooling until the age of 6 or 7, since it is only at that stage that

Table 1. Six key distinctions between Aistear and the 1999 Primary School Curriculum.

1.	Aistear uses a practice-oriented approach. In contrast, the Curriculum uses a theory-oriented approach
2.	Although both prioritise knowledge skills and attitudes, Aistear makes explicit additional reference to developing children’s dispositions. Aistear emphasises holistic and integrated learning, while the Curriculum presents the content of children’s learning through divided curriculum areas, and suggests theme-based units of work combining elements from various subjects
3.	As part of a more analytical approach, the Curriculum calls for specific time allotments for the various subject areas. Aistear does not deem this necessary or beneficial
4.	Aistear takes significant steps to de-emphasise literacy and numeracy expectations, both of which are significant components of the primary curriculum
5.	While the Curriculum gives limited attention to learning through play, Aistear endorses the centrality of play and activity in children’s early learning
6.	Although the aims articulated by each are similar, the Curriculum places importance on laying foundations for the ‘next’ stage of learning, while Aistear ‘celebrate(s) early childhood . . . as a time of being rather than becoming’ (DES 1999; NCCA 2009). Therefore, while there is nothing wrong with having an awareness of next steps, and the audit of the two is at pains to point out that Aistear, too, emphasises the importance of laying foundations, the problem arises when ‘laying foundations’ is interpreted to mean bringing academic abstractions into the educational life of the young child. The Curriculum suggests that interpretation, whilst Aistear does not

they can usefully deal with symbol systems such as print. Therefore within the flexibility of the Aistear approach, the use of letters, words and sentences, etc. could be limited to oral rather than written representation, and then there is no conflict within the learning approaches. It then would be possible to adopt this aim in a Steiner setting, while still working in such a way as to curtail the advancement of academisation into early years' experience.

The NCCA is engaged in a review (no announced completion target date) informed by Aistear, of the Infant Level of the Primary School Curriculum starting with the language area. There is reason to hope that the more child-centred and developmentally appropriate perspectives voiced in Aistear will be influential toward a new way of looking at early childhood education in Ireland, including the time up to first class. It heralds a more enlightened approach to early childhood education that respects the integrity of childhood. However, equally importantly, it heralds a policy direction in Irish education that demonstrates a greater leaning towards less formalised early learning and a veiled recognition that formal, academics-based learning is much more effective for children after six years of age.

The case for raising the minimum school age

While a shift in educational policy away from formalised early learning within primary schools is a positive move, it does not diminish the argument for raising the minimum school age from where it currently resides at age 4 upwards to be more in line with the standard European evidenced-based practice of age 6. Our practice of sending four-year olds into the primary school system is based on post-colonial cultural memory combined with flawed early behavioural theories centred on the premise that all ages of people follow the same learning process, a premise which we now know to be faulty (Hirsch 1996). Before the age of six, children learn in an integrated manner through experiential play (Alexander 2009). Play is their educational vehicle; through quality play experiences they achieve real educational goals in relation to pre-maths, pre-science and pre-literacy. Giving them time to develop these pre-stages greatly enriches the learning stages that come after age 6 (Lundgren 2009).

Introducing formal structures to early learning in non-integrated and non-play-based models is not just unproductive, but can actually cause harm (Elkind 1981, 1987; Elley 1994; Alexander 2009). Raising the minimum age to the current compulsory age of 6 requires a strong policy commitment to underpin what would ultimately amount to a cultural change. However, taking this step could be hugely beneficial to both the Early Childhood Education and Care sector as well as the Primary School sector. The resultant expansion of the ECEC sector would have to be accompanied by much needed training and education changes for practitioners, as well as the consolidation of their sectoral identity, something that is evidently a current issue (Moloney 2010).

This move would also solve a problem for the Primary School Sector. So-called 'infant' (children from age 4 to 6) educational needs are vastly different from those of older children. Integrating their needs into the school environment is a big challenge for the primary sector. The mismatch in the status of educators on both sides of this divide is perhaps the biggest stumbling block to achieving an integrated system, where children under six years could be educated in fully play-based environments and children over six years could be educated in classroom-based environments. If

this is not possible in the Ireland of today, then at the very least we require clarity on the meaningful implementation of Aistear within primary schools.

Conclusion

A school starting age of 6 years is much more effective for children's lifelong learning potential and enjoyment. An early start has been shown to be of no long-term benefit and to be more likely to be harmful to a child's learning journey than helpful (Sanders 1995; Kern and Friedman 2008; Alexander 2009; Landgren 2009; Suggate, Schaughency, and Reece 2012). Children under the age of 6 learn specifically through play, oral, imaginative, experiential and textural learning. Any curriculum which does not fully recognise the special learning requirements of this age group is counter-productive. As the Irish policy situation is ambiguous and more likely to continue to steer children into an early primary school start at age 4 or 5, then the primary school curriculum for this age group becomes the most important applied vehicle for learning. Aistear with its early years focus and knowledge is a more enlightened approach to the education of children aged 6 and under. It is a high-quality curriculum closely aligned to the Steiner ethos of education. Its flexibility is a great strength, but also leaves it open to misapplication in the hands of educators who lack commitment to the integrated, experiential, play-based learning that children under six require. It is also vastly different to the 1999 Primary School Curriculum. If Ireland, as a nation, chooses to leave its four- and five-year olds within the formalised, classroom-based, high child: adult ratio structure of its Primary School sector, then the very least it should do is formally adopt Aistear, train teachers in its implementation and use it to replace the infants sections of the 1999 Primary Curriculum, rather than attempting the integration of two practice-guiding documents whose underpinning philosophies are so fundamentally incompatible.

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