# Standing for the Children in Our Care

~ Ruth Ker

How do we, as early childhood educators, rise to meet the discouraging compromises of our current educational systems? How do we stand for the healthy development of the children in our care, as they undergo the transformations of the six/seven-year change? Do we ascribe to the current push for acceleration, or do we advocate for the possibilities inherent in the young child's ability to develop through child-directed play? Is there a middle ground? It is my hope that this article will offer a glimpse into research that can fortify those of us who wish to stand for the rights of the young children who are on this endangered threshold.

When I was involved in my Waldorf early childhood training I was greatly inspired by an article published in 1977 in *Der Spiegel*,[1] a prominent German news magazine. This article, brought to us by Joan Almon, who now is involved with the Alliance for Childhood,[2] discussed a longitudinal research project conducted by two universities in the North Rhine-Westphalia district when the German Educational Council was advocating the introduction of "early learning programs." This study followed the progress of children "in their total development" from the age of five to ten in fifty play-based kindergartens and fifty early learning programs. Information about it was later published under the title "The Kindergarten Year," showing that "the children initiated early into the 'ABC's,' later ranked not only in 'mathematics, writing, and spelling' but also in 'industry' and 'oral expression' behind those who, as five-year-olds, had only played" in their kindergarten settings. The report on the study, which was characterized as extraordinarily careful, had immediate consequences for German educational policy—to cancel plans to lower the age of mandatory schooling by a year and to discontinue early learning programs the following year. Needless to say, this study was very supportive of Waldorf pedagogy as well.

Over the years since I became aware of this research, there have been many more published studies that have come to the same conclusions: that children in a play-based program progress with more stamina long-term and also tend to have the capacity to have continued interest in learning in their later years. As well, there is a body of evidence to support the argument that an early introduction of didactic curricula may increase anxiety and impact negatively on the child's self-esteem, contributing to a lack of motivation to learn, and may even contribute to higher risk of attempted suicide (Uphoff and Gilmore, 1986 ; Elkind 1987; Brenitz & Teltsch, 1989; Crossner, 1991; Thompson, Barnsley, & Dyck, 1999; Gagne & Gagnier, 2004; and many more).

I have felt supported by these mainstream studies while I continue to benefit from the spiritual insights that Rudolf Steiner has shared with us (a collection of these was published this year by WECAN under the title of *From Kindergarten into the Grades: Insights from Rudolf Steiner*). And yet, there is still much pressure from policy-makers, licensing authorities and government agencies to "make the children ready for school."

It's interesting that Finland, which consistently ranks at the top of all OECD[3] countries for educational attainment and has one of the highest per capita numbers of PhDs in Europe, is currently among only six European countries (also including Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden) that starts formal schooling at age seven.

We all have probably heard of the example of the spring bulb that is forced into flowering in mid-winter. How often have we seen the evidence of this phenomenon of the plant shooting up and then toppling over after a brief period of flowering? Many longitudinal studies, such as the 2005 HighScope Perry Preschool Project and the 2007 Suggate research into early reading, have shown that this phenomenon exists for young children as well. In general, children who have been exposed to early math and reading curriculums and to early school entrance tend to "droop" by the time they reach grade four and over. Did you know that the word "curriculum" stems from the Latin word for race course? Is our culture advocating racing our

children to the finish line?

Another longitudinal study, "The Longevity Project," was based on a group of over 1000 California children born early in the last century. Lead researcher, Dr Howard S. Friedman, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and his colleague Margaret L. Kern "gathered follow-up data from the Terman Life Cycle Study to examine how age at first reading and age at school entry relate to grade school academic performance, lifelong educational attainment, midlife health and mental adjustment, and longevity across eight decades. Early reading was associated with early academic success, but less lifelong educational attainment and worse midlife adjustment. Early school entry was associated with less educational attainment, worse midlife adjustment, and most importantly, increased mortality risk." Dr. Friedman was quoted as saying in a May 16, 2012 press release in England,

> *In our work on The Longevity Project, an eight-decade study of healthy aging, we were amazed to discover that starting formal schooling too early often led to problems throughout life, and shockingly was a predictor of dying at a younger age. This was true even though the children in the study were intelligent and good learners. I'm very glad that I did not push to have my own children start formal schooling at too young an age, even though they were early readers. Most children under age six need lots of time to play and to develop social skills and to learn to control their impulses. An over-emphasis on formal classroom instruction—that is, 'studies instead of buddies,' or 'staying in' instead of 'playing out'—can leave serious effects that might not be apparent until years later.*

Another document submitted to TACTYC, the Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators, was written by Dr. David Whitebread and Dr. Sue Bingham, researchers from the department of education of the University of Cambridge in England. In their conclusion, they say "The model of 'readiness for school' is attractive to governments as it seemingly delivers children into primary school ready to conform to classroom procedures and even able to perform basic reading and writing skills. However, from a pedagogical perspective this approach fuels an increasingly dominant notion of education as 'transmission and reproduction' and of early childhood as preparation for school rather than for 'life.' " They go on to say that, in their extensive research, "the curriculum centered approach" and "the idea that rushing young children into formal learning of literacy, mathematics etc. as young as possible" is misguided. This leads to a situation where children's basic emotional and cognitive needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and the opportunity to develop their metacognitive and self-regulation skills, are not being met. Of course, mention is made in this article of the value of play, indoors as well as outdoors. Some studies show that children, especially boys, are able to learn better after exposure to outdoor play.

There have been many such studies, which have confirmed that the "earlier is better" approach in relation to young children *is misguided and will not make a difference in the long term*. As caregivers and educators of children from birth to seven, we must not be swayed by the tide of opinion that children must enter school at an earlier age. We must take a stand for the sake of the children in our care. In order to protect childhood in our time, we are being asked for much more than we were in the earlier years of our practices. Now, in order to protect the children from the acceleration of our times, it's imperative that we know about at least some of the important research that is available to us. The Waldorf movement has many resources and understandings that can inform our practice, and there is also much mainstream research that can corroborate this.

In many ways, the pedagogical understandings of Rudolf Steiner are just coming of age. It seems that the pendulum has had to swing the other way in order for humanity to concretely experience how children *do not* learn, and now it's time to re-inform ourselves about how young children *do* learn.

So, as professionals active in this pivotal time for young children, it's important that we prepare ourselves to influence the future of childhood in the best possible way. In order to offer our sound understandings it behooves us to also learn some of the modern way of speaking about early childhood. Knowing words like the ones below helps us to be understood by the people outside of Waldorf circles with whom we need to be in conversation:

- *Self-efficacy* (needs for feelings of competence)
- *Self-agency* (autonomy)
- *Relatedness* (warm and loving relationships)
- *Metacognitive* (knowing about knowing—knowledge about when and how to use particular strategies for problem solving, as in learning through play)
- *Multi-sensory learning* ("Neuroscience research

shows that all learning depends on neural networks distributed across many regions of the brain. Consequently, the wider the range of types of experience, repeated practice, activity with progressively increasing challenge, the deeper and more secure the learning"—again, qualities demonstrated in self-directed play. See Goswami and Bryant, *Children's Cognitive Development and Learning*.)

In 2011 in British Columbia, Canada, where I live, the government decided that all kindergarten children would be going to school for full-day programs. At first many of the independent schools and Waldorf schools thought they had no choice but to comply. Then we began a conversation that was augmented by providing research, advocating the rights of parents to choose, and most importantly, having individual conversations with government officials and advocacy groups and amongst ourselves. A common language was necessary. As a result, the right of parents to place their children in half-day programs was granted. By taking the time to learn this common language and speak up for the needs of the children and their parents, we were able to protect the early childhood environments of many children.

Below are listed the studies referenced above as well as a few more studies on the topic of school readiness. These could be particularly helpful with your kindergarten/first grade placement considerations. Rather than placing the references below alphabetically, I have placed them by year because I'm hoping that you will see that there has been a steady stream of advocates that support Waldorf/Steiner perspectives on the healthy development of young children. (I encountered research dating back to the 1930s, but for the sake of brevity I have selected just some of the works available from the 1980s onward.) These resources can help us to champion the thought that we can work together to protect childhood. Together, we can advocate for the recognition that the healthy consideration of the educator is not "earlier is better," but rather, "better late than early"!


Elkind, D. (1981) *The Hurried Child: Growing up Too Fast Too Soon.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Uphoff, J.K. & Gilmore, J. (1986). Pupil age at school entrance: How many are ready for success. *Young Children,* 41(2), 11-16.

Warren, C.W., Levin, M.L., & Tyler, C.W. (1986). Season of birth and academic achievement. *Educational and Psychological Research,* 6(2), 111-124.

Elkind, D. (1987). *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk.* New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Brenitz Z, Teltsch T. (1989). The effect of school entrance age on academic achievement and social-emotional adjustment of children: Follow-up study of fourth graders. *Psychology in the Schools*, 26:62–68.

Crossner, S.L. (1991). Summer birthdate children: Kindergarten entrance age and academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Research,* 84 (3), 140-146

Wilgosh, L., Meyer, M., & Mueller, H.H. (1995). Longitudinal study of effects on academic achievement for early and late age of school entry. *Canadian journal of Social Psychology,* 11(1), 43-51.

Hirsch, E.D. (1996). *The Schools we Need and Why we Don't Have Them.* New York: Anchor Books.

Mayer, S.E., & Knutson, D. (1999). Does the timing of school affect how much children learn? In S. Mayer and P. Peterson (Eds.), *Earning and Learning: How School Matters*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Thompson A.H., Barnsley R.H., Dyck R.J. (1999). A new factor in youth suicide: The relative age effect. Canadian *Journal of Psychiatry* 44(1), 82-85.

Stipek, D., & Byler, P. (2001). Academic achievement and social behaviors associated with age of entry into kindergarten. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology,* 22(2), 175-189.

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R.M. and Eyer, D. (2003) *Einstein Never Used Flashcards: How our Children Really Learn.* Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books.

Gagne, F., & Gagnier, N. (2004). The socio-affective and academic impact of early entrance to school. *Roeper Review,* 26 (3), 128-138.

Schweinhart, L.J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W.S., Belfield, C.R. & Nores, M. (2005). Lifetime effects:The HighScope Perry Preschool study through age 40. *Monographs of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation*, 14. Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.

*The HighScope Perry Pre-school Project compares the outcomes of children who participated in different types of early years provision. Researchers found that although direct instruction methods of teaching seemed to give some children initial advantages in*

*terms of their early reading and numeracy, the High-Scope children who had been in "social constructivist" learning environments showed significantly more positive results over the long term. By age fifteen, the direct instruction group participants were showing signs of having become "disaffected" with learning, presenting more psychological and social problems than other groups and reading only half as many books.*

Pellegrini, A.D. (2005). *Recess: Its role in development in education.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc.

Goswami, U. and Bryant, P. (2007). *Children's Cognitive Development and Learning* (Primary Review Research Survey 2/1a). Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

Suggate, S. (2007). Research into Early Reading Instruction and linked effects in the development of reading. *Journal for Waldorf/Rudolf.Steiner Education,* 11 (2), p.17.

*A recent study that compared the abilities of children from schools in which children do not start learning to read until they are seven, with children who start at the age of five found that by the age of eleven there was no difference in reading ability level.*

Hirsh-Pasek, K. & Golinkoff, R.M. (2008). "Why Play=Learning." In R.E. Tremblay, R. G. Barr, R. DeV. Peters & M. Boivin (Eds). *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development.* Montreal: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development Press.

*This promotes play as a central vehicle for learning, allowing children to imitate adult behaviors, practice motor skills, process emotional events and develop understandings about their world.*

Sykes, E., Bell, J. and Rodeiro, C. (2009). *Birthdate effects: a review of the literature from 1990-on.* University of Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment.

Kern, M.L. & Friedman, H.S. (2009). Early educational milestones as predictors of lifelong academic achievement, midlife adjustment and longevity. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology,* 30, 419-430.

House, R., ed. (2011). *Too Much, Too Soon: Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood.* Stroud, UK: Hawthorn Press.

Almon, Joan and Miller, Edward. (2011). *The Crisis in Early Education: A research-based case for more play and less pressure.* Alliance for Childhood, NY, November, 2011.

O'Connor, D. and Angus, J. (2012). Give Them Time – an analysis of school readiness in Ireland's early education system. *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education.*

Bingham, S. and Whitebread, D. (2012). TACTYC Occasional Paper No. 2. *School Readiness: a critical review of perspectives and evidence.*

Friedman, H. S. & Martin, L. R. (2011). *The Longevity Project: Surprising Discoveries for Health and Long Life from the Landmark Eight-Decade Study*. New York: Hudson Street Press.

Suggate, S., Schaghency, E. and Reese, E. (2012) Children learning to read later catch up to children reading earlier. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 28(1), 33-48.

Ker, Ruth, ed. (2014) *From Kindergarten into the Grades: Insights from Rudolf Steiner*. Spring Valley, NY: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America.

This list is by no means complete. Please forgive any and all omissions. I would be most grateful to hear of any research in your knowledge that advocates giving children the time they need for play and for an unpressured childhood.

In the face of all of this research, what puzzles me is that there is still such a strong push to accelerate children into capacities that are not resonant with basic developmental milestones. Some people make arguments that this is economy-driven and others that this is based on decisions made by policy makers who haven't done their research. The United States' "No Child Left Behind" document has many counter-reactive impulses in many countries worldwide. In spite of the PISA[4] research showing that children who enter school at age seven have a better success rate than those who enter earlier, even the Scandinavian countries, who in the past have honored this age seven entrance, are having to face government legislation that encourages earlier entry into formal schooling. Many European Waldorf schools have introduced the practice of having a "zero class" where children can have play and limited focused creative learning activities from as early as five, in some countries, and six in others. So it's obvious that we have our work cut out for us *and* that we have a huge body of research that supports us in the doing. We are fortunate to stand beside each other in the task of supporting the children who come toward us in these times.

In closing, this verse attributed to Herbert Hahn, comes to mind:

*Remember daily,*
*you are continuing*
*the work of the spiritual worlds*
*with the children.*
*You are the preparers of the path*
*for these young souls,*
*who wish to form their lives*
*in these difficult times.*
*The spiritual worlds will always*
*stand by you in this task.*
*This is the wellspring of strength*
*which you so need.* ◆

## Notes

1. See *Der Spiegel*, Number 20, 1977, pp. 89-90.
2. For information on the Alliance for Childhood, visit www.allianceforchildhood.org.
3. OECD is an international organization of 34 countries that helps governments tackle the economic, social and governance challenges of a globalized economy.
4. PISA is an international study that was launched by OECD in 1997. It aims to evaluate education systems worldwide every three years.