Standing for the Children in Our Care

Ruth Ker

How can Waldorf early childhood educators, fortified by current research, face the trend toward accelerated academic instruction and advocate instead for healthy, child-directed play as the essence of age-appropriate education? Even a glimpse into research on this topic over the past four decades will fortify those who wish to stand for the needs of young children who are crossing the transformational threshold of the six/seven year change.

During my Waldorf early childhood training, I was greatly inspired by an article published in 1977 in the influential news magazine *Der Spiegel*.[1] This article, brought to our attention by Joan Almon at the Alliance for Childhood,[2] discussed a longitudinal research project conducted by two universities in the North Rhine-Westphalia district at a time when the German Educational Council was advocating for 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 50 play-based kindergartens and 50 early learning programs. A comparison of these two groups was later published under the title "The Kindergarten Year," showing that "the children initiated early into the ABCs 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: The German authorities canceled plans to lower the age of mandatory schooling by a year and discontinued early learning programs the following year. Needless to say, this study is very supportive of Waldorf pedagogy.

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Since then many more published studies have come to the same conclusion: 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 have a negative impact on the child's self-esteem, may contribute to a lack of motivation to learn, and may even contribute to higher risk of attempted suicide (Uphoff & Gilmore 1986; Elkind 1987; Brenitz & Teltsch 1989; Crossner 1991; Thompson, Barnsley, & Dyck 1999; Gagne & Gagnier 2004, among others). And yet, early childhood educators still feel 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 mandates the start of formal schooling for children aged seven.

We all know what happens to a spring bulb that is forced to flower in mid-winter. How often have we seen a plant of this kind shoot up and then topple 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 of "hot-housing"

exists also in the education of young children. In general, children who have been exposed to early math and reading curricula and to early school entrance tend to "droop" by the time they reach grade four and beyond. Indeed, the very word *curriculum* stems from a Latin word for *race course*? Is our culture compelling our children to race 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. 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, the lead researcher of this project, was quoted as saying in a May 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 overemphasis 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.

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Another document submitted to 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" are 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 meta-cognitive 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.

In short, a broad array of studies confirms that an earlier-is-better approach to the academic instruction of young children is misguided and will not make a positive 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 insisting that children 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. For their sake, it's imperative that we know about mainstream research that corroborates the practices of Waldorf education.

In many ways, the pedagogical understandings of Rudolf Steiner are just coming of age. As professionals working with young children at this pivotal time, it's important that we prepare ourselves to influence the future of childhood in the best possible way. In order to bridge and offer our sound understandings, it behooves us to also learn some of the modern ways of speaking about early childhood. Familiarity with words like these will help us to be understood in the mainstream debate:

- Self-efficacy (need for feelings of competence)
- Self-agency (autonomy)
- Relatedness (warm and loving relationships)
- Meta-cognitive (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, and 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*)

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In 2011 the provincial government of British Columbia decided that all kindergarten children should go to school for full-day programs. At first many of us in the independent schools and Waldorf schools thought we had no choice but to comply. Then we began a conversation, bolstered by research, with government officials and advocacy groups to press for the rights of parents to choose between full-day and part-day programs. As a result, the right of parents to place their children in half-day programs was granted. By taking the time to learn mainstream 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 earlier as well as a few more studies on the topic of school readiness. These could be particularly helpful when considering kindergarten/first grade placement. Rather than listing the references below alphabetically, I have ordered them chronologically to demonstrate a steady stream of support for Waldorf perspectives on the healthy development of young children. (I encountered research dating as far back as the 1930s, but for the sake of brevity I have selected only some of the works available from the 1980s onward.) This work can help us to champion the thought that, when it comes to early childhood education, better late than early!

The HighScope Perry Pre-school project (listed below), for instance, 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 HighScope children who had been in "social constructivist" learning environments showed significantly more positive results over the long term. By age 15, 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.

A partial list of studies on the topic of school readiness

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

Uphoff, J.K. and 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., and 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. and 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., and 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. and 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* (pp. 79–102), Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

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

Stipek, D., and 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.* Rodale Books.

Gagne, F., and 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. and 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.

Pellegrini, A.D. (2005) *Recess: Its Role in Development in Education.* Malwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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. (This study, comparing children who did not start learning to read until they were seven with children who started at the age of five, found that by the age of 11 there was no difference in reading ability between the two groups.)

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

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. and 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.

By age 15, the direct instruction participants were showing signs of being "disaffected" with learning, presenting more psychological and social problems, and reading only half as many books.

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

Almon, J. and Miller, E. (2011). *The Crisis in Early Education: A Research-Based Case for More Play and Less Pressure*. Alliance for Childhood, NY.

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. and 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. And despite all of this research, there is still a strong push to accelerate children into capacities that are not resonant with basic developmental milestones. Some critics argue that this pressure is economy-driven, while others say it is based on decisions made by policy makers who haven't done their research. 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.

In brief, we have a huge body of research that supports the practices of Waldorf early childhood education. Let this closing verse, attributed to the celebrated Waldorf teacher Herbert Hahn, have the final word:

> 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.

Endnotes

1 *Der Spiegel*, Number 20, 1977, pp. 89 –90.

2 Alliance for Childhood, www.allianceforchildhood.org.

3 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an international body of 34 countries that helps governments tackle economic, social, and governance challenges of a globalized economy.

4 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international study launched by OECD in 1997. It aims to evaluate education systems worldwide every three years.

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