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Young Children's Adjustment to Primary School

Some Recent Evidence from Britain,
Spain and the USA in Support of
Play in Early Learning

PAMELA SHARPE

Introduction

The emphasis on the importance of a stimulating environment for young children is central to a debate currently raging in Britain, about the priority of Nursery Education (Pre-School) on the political agenda. It is claimed that only a quarter of the nation's young children have access to some kind of provision, and a recently published report, (Ball, 1994), summarizes some evidence for the lasting effects of quality pre-school provision including evidence for an improved chance of primary school attainment for socially disadvantaged children. However, the report seems to suggest that the British Government is reluctant to commit public funding to extended and compulsory pre-school provision, appearing instead to favour relaxing the minimum school entry age, and to admit children to formal schooling at 4 years. There is also support for the less expensive solution of upgrading a diversity of non-compulsory current provision which largely comprises voluntary play groups and private nurseries. The focus of this paper is on the merits of this latter provision for children's adjustment to formal schooling.

Appropriate practice in Spain

In Spain, a more favourable and supportive picture is emerging for children's involvement in play-centred pre-school programmes and the relationship to later school adjustment. In Spain's new

democratic climate, the educational reforms are set to provide for non-compulsory infant education as the first stage in the new education system. The aims of such reforms, are designed to extend the opportunities for children to develop ideas and work creatively in pre-school. Here, the children are guided into finding satisfaction from meeting the challenges set, and discovering solutions to problems incidentally through the provision of play experiences.

A stress on some kind of theory of learning and development through play though, is central to this provision, and has historical precedents. The Montessori and Froebelian models of educating young children have always been, and remain, influential in preparing young children for the rigours of the primary school. The focus of these two models is on providing challenges which result in self directed activity and satisfaction through play, rather than motivating children through the provision of external rewards so typical of highly structured teacher directed programmes.

Such a focus was observed in the pre-schools of Spain, where the Monessori influence is manifest in their approach to appreciation and understanding of nature, of art, of music, and their methods of teaching reading and writing. The emphasis is on play enabling children to observe, reflect, discuss and make informed and independent choices from teacher guided activity, where concepts arise incidentally from the play experiences. The product is knowledgeable, artistic and skilful children, who, in the primary classes were observed to be able to converse with enthusiasm about the music of Ravel and the paintings of Goya.

It seems then that given the freedom to develop such programmes without political and ideological constraints, the future augers well for pre-schoolers and primary school children in Spain. What though of British children?

Appropriate practice in Britain

Central to issues about pre-school provision in Britain is the desirability of pre-school education for all, based on the one hand on the "must have" view of the lasting effects evidence, and, on the other

hand, on the "good to have view", that whatever the type and duration of the provision, its nature and content is crucial. For the purposes of this paper attention is drawn to a comparison between the highly structured programmes for lasting effects, as emphasised by Sylva and Wiltsher (1993), and the informally structured child-centred programmes which focus on the importance of play, the "good to have view."

Part of the opposition to Sylva's "lasting effects" view is concerned with commentaries on the neglect of an emphasis of the beneficial role of play and play groups in the education of young children.

In a series of peer commentaries published in the British Psychological Society Education Section Review, (1994), in response to Sylva, (ibid), particular reference is made to her tendency to view playgroups as second best because of the lack of publically funded nurseries. Furthermore, it is claimed that the educational potential of play as a learning tool, whilst widely researched, is ignored by Sylva, and replaced by an emphasis on the merits of highly structured programmes. This critique proposes that early education is much more complex and goes beyond the "good tool user behaviours" and includes providing for children to become "thinkers" and "tool makers" as well as "tool users". (Whitehead, 1994).

Whitehead further proposes that a highly structured programme often provides a narrow academic focus at the expense of purposeful and complex play, where its exploratory, exploitative and rehearsal-like attributes are disguised by the constraints imposed by time-tabling and adult control. She points out that children don't play all the time, but when and wherever they do play, this is spontaneous, purposeful, and involves a number of features such as role taking and forming relationships, using body space and force.

In a second critique, (Osborn, 1994), references are made to the danger of using conclusions from experimental programmes conducted elsewhere as reliable justifications for good practice in Britain. Additionally, it is claimed that whilst the data on "lasting effects" may be impressive, it is misleading to apply such arguments in attempting to influence policy implications in Britain.

A further critique of the "lasting effects" view mentions the interaction of mediating variables with pre-school programmes. These would include such effects as the influence of peer groups and the divisiveness of the elementary school system in the USA. More specifically, this refers to the mistake of confusing the needs of a specific disadvantaged minority with the needs of pre-schoolers in general. For example it is suggested that the success of protective programmes designed to reduce the risk of failure in some children and thus minimising the effects of labels, should not be generalized to a wider cohort of children who would not in any case be at risk of failure. Relatedly, it is suggested that the effects of reforms designed to maximise teaching and learning opportunities for the disadvantaged, in the elementary school system, would in any case diminish many of the earlier effects of pre-school. (Woodhead, 1994).

What evidence is available then to indicate any lasting effects of the type of pre-school experiences for later adjustment to and attainment in primary school?

Research evidence for the appropriate programme

A British study (Osborn, 1987), examined the effects of children's attendance at pre-school on their later progress in primary school. Osborn found that when effects of the home and other background factors were taken into account, children who had attended playgroup or informal nursery classes, performed significantly better on tests of reading, maths, and language at 10 years of age, than those who had started formal schooling early instead of attending an informal nursery programme.

Some more recent evidence of the short term effects of the type and duration of children's early learning experiences has revealed some interesting findings. The research in question, (Sharp, et al. 1994), concerns children's season of birth and age at entry into the British Primary School System, which usually accepts children in the year in which they will be 5 years of age, and, the effects on National Curriculum assessment scores at age 7 years.

Part of the findings of this research indicate that children who

had not been to any pre-school programme before starting school at 5 years, did slightly better at age 7 years than those who had experienced pre-school. It was also found that when children's scores at aged 7 were analysed in relation to sex, season of birth, and length of formal schooling, season of birth and length of formal schooling were significantly related to children's higher performance in maths, science, and english and especially for girls. Furthermore it was found that those children who were born in the season at the beginning of the school year, in the term when they would be 5 years, did better than those who were born in the later season, even if these children had been longer in school by starting when they were younger, at 4 years.

The findings from this research seem to show that it is the season of birth, rather than length of time in the formal school setting which emerges as the best performance predictor at age 7 years. Furthermore children who are late school starters and youngest in the age group also appear to perform less well. In relation to this finding, a further analysis compared late season children with late season children who were youngest in class and little differences in scores were found except in Science, where the youngest children fared less well.

Thus it apperas that age position in class is important, in addition to season of birth, and age on entry, and it was also noted that younger children who begin formal schooling early, do not do as well as those born at the same time who start later. Equalising lengths of schoolign then for late season chilren appears to have little effect.

Research reported in USA has also indicated that when season of birth and length of schooling were held constant, being the youngest in an age cohort was disadvantageous to school performance later on. (Davis and Trimble, 1978, mentioned in Sharp et al., 1994).

In accounting for these results, the British researchers claim that many teachers may be insufficiently prepared for the educational and management needs of the youngest children when taught alongside older children in a formal setting. They cite a study, Cleave and Brown, (1991), which suggets that more attention needs to be

paid to factors which may facilitate children's adjustment to school, and includes a proposal to adopt a play-based approach to the curriculum for the youngest children. Cleave and Brown point out that encouraging the entry of 4 year olds into formal schooling narrows the range of activities available and inappropriate attention is given to the language, social and emotional milestones of very young children.

Play provision as appropriate practice

That such a play-based informal approach is desirable for young children before they are able to handle the demands of formal schooling is evident in the research which indicates that pre-school children's thinking is very much dominated by perception, symbolism, and an egocentric management of understanding. Cleave and Brown's study highlights the need for attention to young children's natural curiosity, and their need to discover and explore and see relationships for themselves in a concrete rather than an abstract way. These researchers conclude that the egocentric nature of 4 year olds prevents them from benefitting from the more formal experiences and expectations of the primary school. As such they need special adult guidance and appropriate provision for play in an informal setting in order to free themselves from the limitations of their perception-bound world.

In this regard studies have confirmed that young children pass through this stage of perception-bound thought before they are able to reason and form judgements in a logical way, as with the primary school child. For this to happen, the child must be sufficiently stimulated and rewarded by the challenge of the task or experience, and to be able to adapt independently to the requirements. Play experiences with real life objects permit this process to occur. (Demetriou, 1992; Wood, 1988; Sylva et al, 1976).

It is clear that unlike the primary school child, the pre-school child needs to rely on counting, and opportunities to represent reality through role play and other imaginative activities. The logical thought so characteristic of the primary school child only develops when children are given opportunities to be able to think out, reflect, make

inferences, and generalize previously successful solutions to new and more complex challenges. (Donaldson 1978, Hughes 1986)

If young children are given the opportunity to play in an environment designed for play as exemplified by Cleave and Brown (ibid), such provision might well serve to develop in children the necessary and well motivated attitudes and task orientated responses which Rutter (1985) suggests are so necessary for successful adjustment to primary school.

In assessing the contribution of the discussion and debates about play and appropriate pre-school provision for young children in Singapore, a number of issues have been highlighted and their relevance is expanded in the final part of this paper.

Appropriate practice in Singapore

Formal schooling in Singapore begins in the year in which children are 7 years of age. Early entry is not encouraged and a wide provision of pre-school programmes are available and affordable for all parents of pre-schoolers. There is also an absence of ideological and political constraints on pre-school provision with women actively encouraged to join the work force, supported by the provision of subsidised and quality regulated full-day care. Such provision for all also serves to minimise any disadvantages which may be experienced by children from low income families, given that good quality care and education is affordable and available. The wide availability of provision in terms of cost to parents means that many are spoilt for choice. However, in the meritocratic climate of Singapore, parents of pre-schoolers are very chosey and anxious about quality in pre-school care, and education, especially in terms of preparation for primary school.

The tightly monitored child care curriculum makes provision for an informal approach with some focus on play as part of the balanced curriculum. In Kindergartens with their 3 and 4 hour programmes, the focus is on preparation for primary one and bilingualism, and a study conducted by the author, Sharpe (1992), indicated that parents were anxious about the content of the

programme especially when there was perceived to be insufficient attention to "numbers" and their mother tongue, and many indicated a desire for a more formal programme.

Given the short -term benefits of the informal pre-school programmes in Britain for children at age 7 years, one note of caution for pre-schoolers in Singapore is implicit in the finding that younger children in the year group fared less well in assessment at age 7 years. It may be that, given there is no staggered entry to school in Singapore, some children may be at a disadvantage in primary one. This may be especially so for those children who are younger in the age group in terms of season of birth, and who have not been exposed to informal play- based experiences, be these at home or pre-school. Research has yet to confirm this finding however in Singapore.

Some final comments

This paper has attempted to point to the research evidence from Britain and the USA which indicates that some young children are more likely to have fewer adjustment problems and are better prepared for primary one when they attend pre-school programmes which (i) are matched to their developmental levels (ii) are flexible enough to account for individual differences in abilities and (iii) permit children to proceed at their own pace and level in both group and individual activities. One implication for pre-schoolers in Singapore then concerns the kinds of pre-school experiences they are exposed to before they start school at 7 years. It may be that attendance at an informal play -based programme would be appropriate for some children, especially those born in the latter part of the year.

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