

An Open Eye on Early Education

Grethe Hooper Hansen

Grethe highlights a disturbing development in educational policy.

You may not know that in 2007, private as well as state-funded nurseries, were made to apply an educational curriculum including reading, writing, numbers and basic computing, designed by the government (with minimal consultation) and enforced by Ofsted¹ inspection. In 2009, 4 year-olds entered formal education, following the same programme but in classes of up to 30; learning is disguised as 'play', but teacher led. Practitioners are required to assess performance continuously, ticking boxes; results are fed into national computers to predict future competence and assign remedial measures.

Open Eye is a protest group of people directly or indirectly involved in early-years care (www.savechildhood.org), calling for repeal of the statutory aspect of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which imposes 69 compulsory learning goals emphasising cognitive skills. Launched in an open letter in the Times in December 2007, we presented a Downing Street petition with more than 10,000 signatories, followed in 2008 with an Early Day Motion in Parliament that attracted over 50 MP signatories and led to an investigatory sub-committee meeting, which resulted in changes to EYFS and an exemptions procedure, albeit deliberately labyrinthine to deter applicants.

Our major concern is that when practitioners are forced into 'delivery' of material and compulsory on-going assessment, their minds are in the wrong place, narrowly focussed, anxious, directive, looking for evidence of the 69 learning goals; they cannot at the same time be open, receptive, and deeply sensitive to individual children's needs (Iain McGilchrist might see this in terms of hemispheric dominance). While reading and maths are vital skills, forcing them at this early age is counterproductive. Small children naturally learn in an unselfconscious, unreflective way, through the whole organism; to 'wake them up' into self-conscious cognitive awareness of their learning experience is developmentally inappropriate and potentially harmful.

The new government has announced a review. But although thousands of carers resigned in protest to EYFS, and many newspapers, authors and academics have added their voice to ours, 70% of the profession are now said to be in favour of the status quo. How can that be? While some will be concerned about status or job, 70% is a lot of people. The real problem would seem to be that of paradigm shift: how people think. Many of you will remember the S&MN conference on education in 2000 with Chris Clarke's chart showing the intellectual shift that is in progress, every point of which neatly fits this situation (see below). Bureaucrats may be doing their best, but still thinking in exclusively

material terms of filling blank slates, 'the earlier the better', goals and targets, concrete results, on-going assessment.

The carers who resigned were used to working in tune with a multi-dimensional universe in which organic life is driven from within, and is in constant fluid, reciprocal relationship with everything else, adapting to a myriad subtle influences. New-paradigm thinking is evident in education outside the mainstream: Steiner and Montessori work *alongside* nature with processes that stimulate internal response and dovetail with self-regulation, helping children grow socially and emotionally, and constantly enriching and strengthening imagination, which builds the neural circuitry that can later be adapted for use in cognitive ways.

Play appears to the materially minded as dolls, blocks and trains. But to the late Susan Isaacs, a much revered developmental psychologist, it was 'the active dramatisation of the inner world of phantasy as a means for maintaining psychic equilibrium'² We interfere with this deep mystery at our peril. Those countries who perform better in the European literacy league, most notably Finland, allow children fully protected play until age 7, by which time the cognitive developmental window has usually opened. Albert Einstein did not read until after his 8th birthday; was it that long delay that helped him think 'outside the box'?

The bureaucrats who drew up EYFS evidently had no idea that the definition of play begins with the condition that it must be self-initiated, and that the point of it is in its *internal* effects, the subtle things that it achieves within the child's mind, rather than the external/cognitive. Nor perhaps did they realise the extraordinary sensitivity of small children, who absorb the implication of every detail of a process, shaping themselves in response: they know instantly what adults want and do their best to produce it. If they do not understand when expected to understand, they will infer that they are stupid and that learning is difficult. They strive to please, but however hard they try, their organism cannot respond meaningfully to a stimulus unless it is developmentally ready to do so. If the teacher divides a cake to demonstrate number, and they are not ready for numbers, they will comprehend only cake.

ICT skills are a major focus of EYFS, but computers introduced at too early an age can have a disastrous effect on mind. Since the small child learns by mirroring, how will consciousness take shape in response to *binary functioning*? Our future rests on the formation of those small heads. It also rests on the rehabilitation of the legions of 'disadvantaged' children - who were probably the real target of Labour legislation. Sadly, it is precisely these

children who will be most damaged by premature focus on cognitive skills, bringing an earlier experience of failure and an earlier hatred of school.

However, if the government does decide to remove the compulsory aspect, EYFS could perform this task of rehabilitation, but only if practitioners can deeply think and act in accordance with the ideas of developmental psychology, embracing the subtlety of the infant world. Thus, our next step will be to press for the establishment of an advisory body independent of both government and education to help establish the means to more appropriate attitudes and curriculum - which could be the beginning of a new world.

CC 2000
 ('Implications' modified to clarify the early-years focus)

Old	New	Implications
Determinism	Indeterminism	Each moment is open to discovery/opportunity
Machine	Organism	Learning in every moment of interaction
Separate units	Interconnection	Empathy, relationship, togetherness
Atoms	Fields	Why we do what we do
Exact quantities	Articulated structure	Understanding involves sensitivity to patterns
Observation	Interaction	I accept being changed by what I encounter
Control	Participation	I learn to engage with the world
Competition	Co-operation	I look for mutual benefit
Freedom is illusory	Creativity	I find new ways of being and perceiving

1. Office for Standards in Education
2. "The Psychological Aspects of Child Development", Section II of the 1935 Volume of the The Year Book of Education



A Dog Session

Ulrich Kramer

We picked him up from the animals' home, because he looked ever so sad and friendly. He is a low hunting dog slightly resembling a Hush Puppy shoe advertisement. His name is Antonio. Because he is from Spain. Caught on the street he was kept in a Spanish dogs' kennel for three months, and when nobody came to pick him up, he was handed over to the killing station. From there a friendly German organisation rescued him and transferred him to the animals' home in Germany where we, another three months later, found him. He was estimated to be two years old.

Antonio turns out to be a difficult dog, a bundle of fear and panic. Any sharp noise, any rushed gesture makes him jump backwards. When he eats from his bowl the movement of the bowl on the floor and the noise produced by that, make him shy away. Unseen dangers lurk everywhere, in particular in connection with food.

As he is absolutely non-dominant it is easy to train him. Soon he follows the basic commands needed to take him for walks in town. Yet out in the forest you can't keep him from running away. Any animal track distracts him. He is gone for hours. In our house and garden he prefers to remain unseen. He takes his food, permits us to cuddle him, respects us as senior animals. But we aren't his home, his pack, his family. We remain strangers to him.

This went on for three years. Finally, after he had run away for two full days, I got tired of it and decided to give him a session. For this sort of thing I need my mindwalker (a galvanic skin response potentiometer). Its readings signify that I'm picking up sensible stuff, am not projecting or phantasising. I sit down at my desk, and mentally tune in to Antonio who is somewhere out in the garden. I see a noisy street with lots of traffic. A park. The legs of men, the snap of whips. His dog friends are rounded up and caught. He escapes. Then he sees food. And is caught in a net. Now he is in a box. The lid is shut with a loud bang. The box is crowded with yapping dogs, no space, they are mad, bump into each other. He is the smallest. Ferociously a hierarchy is established. Now the Spanish kennel. He gets mobbed, he is the last to get food, gets bitten. Loud metallic noises of food bowls.

Earlier scenes: his dog mama, warmth, friendliness. Then a human family, a child, food. Then he is thrown out on the street, he's amongst wild street dogs, big ones, gets chased any time he finds food in the rubbish. Eventually the images start thinning out, begin to fade away. Antonio feels released to me yet unlike a human client he can't generate a new life orientation by himself. I have to provide it for him, install a positive program in him. With us he is safe, I tell him telepathically, we are his pack, with us there is no danger, there is always food. This feels fine, I leave it there.

But no change came over Antonio. And so I forgot the session. Yet two months later I noticed differences. No running away in the forest. Being greeted at the gate with wagging tail. Fewer and fewer reactions to sudden household noises. Food being eaten without worry about unseen competitors .

Antonio has become quite a normal dog.

EARTH News, the official newsletter of the European Association of Regression Therapy, July 2009, Vol. 4, Issue 3