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The failure of early learning

Starting formal education at the age of four doesn't seem to be benefiting children very much

Nikki Schreiber

theguardian.com, Saturday 9 February 2008 10.00 EST

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Education

Formal learning and testing from the age of four doesn't seem to be working, does it? First, there was the [PIRLS international study](#) published

at the end of last year showing that the UK had dropped in the literacy league tables despite the fact that our children start reading and writing at a much earlier age than most of the rest of the world. Then, if that wasn't enough, we now have the [Cambridge Primary Review](#) telling us that the government needs to take notice of the way children are taught in alternative (to the UK) settings like [Steiner schools](#) where children under the age of seven learn through play.

There are also all those children, 50,000 of them, who are being educated at home - a [growing number](#) because their parents object to the gruelling system of testing which necessarily constrains the curriculum; a teacher who has to meet testing targets is less likely to have the time to allow the class interest to guide lessons. And as anyone who's tried teaching children from an angle they're interested in will tell you, it's great, you don't have to do very much at all.

I wonder how it would be if the government had a look at that upsetting international literacy table and analysed how the countries that are achieving better results than the UK are doing it. If they take Sweden or Russia (which leads the table) they'll find that formal education doesn't start until around the age of seven and that when it does, the basics are assimilated quickly. I have first-hand experience of this. Both my children started their education in the Netherlands which has a similar system and since my return to the UK they have been attending a Steiner school.

Last summer my son's class of 10-11-year-olds travelled to Sussex for the Steiner Olympics; Steiner children of that age get together to re-enact the original Greek Olympics (wearing tunics for anyone who's worried). The parents were at the station to see the children off and of course they were very excitable at first but eventually they all found seats and settled down. It was then I saw a visual that will stay with me for ever; all the aforementioned 10-11-year-old boys - that's right, I said boys - getting their books out to read. There was Philip Pullman, Lemony Snickett, Zizou Corder and I think I saw a Tolkein but it might have been a hallucination. Apparently they read for a substantial amount of the journey from Edinburgh to London.

Now, when anyone gives me a hard time because my seven-year-old

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can't read yet, I replay that visual and don't get in the slightest bit panicked. My argument would be that we don't need so much testing and we don't need four-year-olds being forced to learn to read and write before they're ready. It's not just that it isn't a race, it doesn't seem to be achieving the desired result either.



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08 February 2008 3:14pm

And how does language play a part in all of this? It may not be age of starting but the increasing numbers of children in school in the UK who are coping with more than one language at a time.



Nunovalente

09 February 2008 3:20pm

Read "why gender matters" by Dr Leonard Sax.

<http://www.whygendermatters.com/>

Boys and girls learn different because they are made different. They hear different, see different and develop different.

This "neutural gender" academic agenda for the last few decades has made it worse for boys and not helped girls either.



J7Sue

09 February 2008 3:28pm

"Boys & girls learn different because they're made different"..

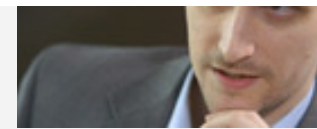
How essentialist. There couldn't be any impact on their behaviour from social expectations of gender, could there? they know which they are, and can see what adults of the same gender do. Different PEOPLE learn in different ways - applying sexist assumptions that all boys learn one way, and all girls another is stupid. Some boys may prefer particular learning styles, and some girls might like that too - and vice versa. Many different personality types, differences in many dimensions of mental, social ability... oh no, cram everyone into two mutually exclusive boxes. And, I suppose, bring up the girls to expect to do all the cooking, caring, and domestic labour while the boys get higher pay as the "breadwinners"? The world has moved on, I think.



MrDrMomJr

09 February 2008 3:35pm

I think we need to stop conflating two issues: learning and testing. Children are eager



I can live with that'
NSA whistleblower
talks to the Guardian

to learn at very early ages, so I cannot see how testing and learning are a problem for 4 year olds. It is testing that is the problem. Stop it. Full stop. Young children do not need nor should they have tests.

I keep hearing that the tests are actually to test the teachers and make them prove they are doing their job. Well, no, such a system puts the onerous on the child to prove that the teacher is doing his/her job. Bad idea. Go back to classroom monitoring if what you to know how a teacher is doing. Go into the classroom and watch the teacher teach, see what goes on, see how children react and perform in the classroom. Even mandate and pay for continual teacher training, if that needs to be done. But stop forcing the children to pay this price.

Stop the testing, keep the learning.



jarrah

09 February 2008 3:47pm

Agreed. Britain's education system is a disaster which brutalises children and teachers alike.

People are beginning to wake up to this reality, which some of us, (ahem) have been saying for years.

Abolish the DfES!(or whatever it calls itself these days) Abolish Ofsted! Abolish all local authority control! Free the children! Free the teachers! Revolt against New Labour tyranny! Remember, they're OUR children, not the government's.

However, if you can afford Steiner, you're lucky. At 7 - 8,000 a year, it's beyond most people.



Burp

09 February 2008 3:48pm

Its a fine thing. It only took my grandson two weeks to learn to say "piss off granny."
;o)

Oldexpat

09 February 2008 4:02pm

creativity and play rather than rote learning.



Ephemera

09 February 2008 4:04pm

The countries which achieve the best results (literacy, numeracy, attendance, eventual qualifications) are those where funding for primary education is higher than that of secondary education (all other things being equal, of course). By engaging children with learning at the right age, making it interesting and rewarding, you build with them a positive environment and attitude towards education which continues on through to secondary and tertiary education.

I think, for all its sins, the Labour government has tried to get this right, even if they have not been successful.

Oh yes, and testing. I guess as long as parents wish to know which school is better, the reasons for testing will remain. Of course, disallowing parents to pick the 'best' school, could be a good reason in itself to end testing, but that's another debate.



gavinbullock

09 February 2008 4:30pm

Potty training has something to tell us about this. Babies, like dogs, will become continent at a certain age, regardless. It isn't about 'training' but further maturation of the central nervous system. Strategies to deal with the more unpleasant aspects of the temporary problem should be to work with the natural processes. Sitting babies on potties until they perform or rubbing dogs' noses in 'it' won't help.

So it is with education. A few exceptional 4-year olds may read but the majority will not. Children learn by play and other countries work with the grain of normal brain development, allowing the natural socialising processes provided by evolution to run their course. I think our system derives from Victorian attitudes - children should be seen but not heard. Thunderous reactionaries will complain that they don't pay their taxes to supply endless Plasticine to over-indulged little horrors. Instead, they should do some 'proper' work. The Dame School is not such a distant echo, with the three Rs drummed relentlessly into brains whose development is hardly able to cope with the concepts needed.

Forcing young children to do things they are physiologically not competent to do will, at best, waste some years or, at worst, do some harm. Educators and government

government should be much more in touch with the rich sources of knowledge available in this country and elsewhere. Then they might develop policies which actually work - and work for decades. They should abandon the bunker mentality that leads to the delusion that all wisdom emanates from the No.10 policy unit and a few select ideologues brought in from the outside.



daffyddw

09 February 2008 4:35pm

Although I think testing, as it stands, is over worrisky and that an un-integrated attitude to the three R's will never achieve the results the government wants (not that government desires should have much to do with the upbringing of children!) don't go looking for help from Rudolf Steiner. Rudolf Steiner believed in some things that would make the fundamentalist right blush. Blond haired people are more intelligent than dark haired, anyone? Women should wear skirts and have long hair so the kids don't get confused? Although I've got a great deal of admiration for the get-things-done attitude of many Steiner people I have met and worked with I think the ideology smells quite iffy.



jeremyjames

09 February 2008 4:43pm

"Stop the testing, keep the learning."

Seems about right.

Why can't our educationalists see what they do abroad (oh, sorry, they're foreigners and British is Best) or in Steiner schools, learn the lessons and apply them in Britain?

Just asking.



robjmckinney

09 February 2008 4:54pm

Nothing will change unless the fundamental problem of poor quality teachers is accepted and resolved!



pike

09 February 2008 4:58pm

SUE 17 - your feminist hangups blind you to the obvious. While individuals differ, there are significant differences between genders that anyone with eyes can see. The old argument (totally irrational) that to acknowledge these differences leads to bad sexist outcomes needs to be buried as a serious hinderance to real studies and policies.



Nunovalente

09 February 2008 5:23pm

J7sue **

I am stating scientific fact. Young boys hearing is not as good as girls. Also girls see things differently. Girls are drawn to what things look like, boys to what things do. The brains of girls and boys are wired different and in certain types of learning use different parts of the brain! Fact.

Until you grasp that there are fundamental gender differences in learning then you will continue blindly leading the blind.

I am not saying boys and girls cannot learn the same things, but boys at an early age are not yet able to learn some of the things that come easily to girls, because they have not yet developed in areas girls may be more advanced.

It is the way boys and girls are taught that is key, there needs to be a recognition of what is good for boys and girls and their needs met depending at what stage they are at. With "neutural gender" teaching this is not working.



jeremyjames

09 February 2008 5:30pm

@ J7Sue

Purely as a matter of interest, do you have any children or nieces and nephews whom you see often?

Children's sex is fundamental and obvious (forget sexual organs) from the day they

are born. Believe what you like about social constructs - they are wrong. You can change the behaviour of a child but not its nature.

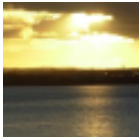
And yes, little girls are as capable of being as malevolent and horrible as little boys.



steg

09 February 2008 9:27pm

In Scotland children have to be 4 by the end of February in the year in which they go to school, but they don't have to start unless they are 5 by mid August. So lots of parents whose children have birthdays in December to February defer for a year, starting their children at 5 and a half instead of 4 and a half. Are there any studies to see if this makes a difference in the long term?



Urism

09 February 2008 9:50pm

You don't know much about school do you Nikki? - "we don't need four-year-olds being forced to learn to read and write before they're ready."

Children aren't 'forced' to do anything but some are definitely ready for the basics at five. Delaying this until 7 will just create a lot of bored or naughty kids. Go and visit a Foundation class and see how bored some children are with sandpits and painting even now. We need a flexible system tailored to the child. 'Individual learning' as they are now calling it. When that doesn't work however, as it won't, (not enough hours in the day, or adults available, to pander to the individual), all will change again. I wonder who Labour will blame for children's failure then, as this has to be the last resort surely? Or will we see yet another upheaval in a couple of years time?



nocarsgo

10 February 2008 1:32am

freewoman

"And how does language play a part in all of this? It may not be age of starting but the increasing numbers of children in school in the UK who are coping with more than one language at a time."

Children are more than capable of learning two, or more, languages simultaneously,

from the earliest age. All the best performing pupils in my English classes were brought up bilingually. Learning a romance language, or Latin itself, helps to widen your English vocabulary and the more rigid application of grammar is also invaluable.

Pupils of Chinese origin outperform all other ethnic groups in English tests up to the age of 11, and in GCSEs and A-levels. They are followed by pupils of Indian origin. Most of these children will have learned at least two languages from birth.

But presumably you were just trying to have a dig at immigrants, so the truth would be pretty irrelevant to you.



RameshN

10 February 2008 6:22am

To pick up on nocarsgo's point and amend it slightly, one of the reasons for the high performance of East Asians in formal education, and to a lesser extent South Asians of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain background, is the involvement of parents in the child's education under the age of 10, the cultural importance of learning, and the general subordination of organised religion to education in the 'three Rs'. [Memorising a Holy book is no substitute for proper critical reading.] THIS is a major reason why many East Asian children do well in formal tests of learning, irrespective of the quality of the teachers. However, there is no evidence that East Asian children have more creative or independent thinking-- if anything, this tends to be more conformist. I don't think it has to do with bilingualism, since East Asians do disproportionately well in terms of computational mathematics, which is a different cognitive ability to language learning. The importance of a learning environment at home can't be overstated. I wasn't a particularly bright child, but I managed to read all of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' when I was nine or ten years old. [My parents didn't encourage this-- but they gave me a book voucher for my birthday and the Penguin Classics translation was what I bought with it. The saleswoman thought I was buying it for my dad!]

To demonstrate the gulf between some Asian and white British attitudes to education, here's an anecdote. Once when visiting the UK, I was involved in a conversation with some British medics. The talk turned to education, and an eminent London physician sighed and remarked that he had to work extra hours in private practice, as he needed the money for his children's school fees. Apparently one of his kids wasn't doing well academically, so he and his wife decided to shift the child to a very expensive private school, and shell out more dosh for private tuition. He said he spent so much time working he rarely saw his kids.

An Asian medic and I discussed this afterwards. Both of us couldn't work out why, if his kid was struggling, why didn't he cut down on his hours at work and spend more



kikichan

10 February 2008 9:01am

Nunovalente, jeremyjames, Sue, et. al.,

I don't think gender is really the key issue. The point is that we have a one-size-fits-nobody education system that fails to provide for individual children full stop, regardless of gender, ability, maturity, or any other factor you care to mention. My father (an archetypical monosyllabic boy) read at age 2, I read at age 3; every child goes at a different rate, and there's no way, really, of predicting how fast that will be. To design any educational system with monolithic, pre-conceived ideas about gender or developmental stages will always be unwise, given the sheer variety of abilities out there.

In fact, I went backwards when I hit school, because other kids' parents hadn't bothered to teach them to read; in fact, I was actively told to slow down, because I was going ahead of the class and this was a nuisance. It clearly wasn't the right place or the right atmosphere, and clearly 'feminization' did nothing for me as a girl. In fact, at junior level I mostly preferred male teachers - found them less conformist, more creative, more humorous, more willing to accept difference.

But state education in Britain was never designed to bring out the best in anybody. It was designed primarily to stifle social dissent and to teach very basic skills to the workers in the cheapest possible way (but to make sure that their literacy didn't encourage them to read too much). It has an ethos of mediocrity and conformity that hangs over from then.

It'd do the whole system a world of good if the government just stopped meddling around with testing and targets, and if it let the best teachers free to be a bit more creative in their approach. We need a variety of different types of schools, and a real choice so that a child can be in an environment suited to them as an individual. And more male teachers. Many, many more male teachers. Particularly at primary level.



timalmond

10 February 2008 9:07am

"Different PEOPLE learn in different ways - applying sexist assumptions that all boys learn one way, and all girls another is stupid."

thinking, and boys another way.

There's research to back this up. Levels of foetal testosterone have been shown to be inversely proportional to a child's social behaviour in childhood.



boredinrome

10 February 2008 9:52am

Hi - I'm now going to be very anecdotal which I know is naughty on CIF but here goes:

@JeremyJames - your posts are always so measured and yes, broadly speaking, girls and boys clearly act in different ways. Some is likely to be due to gender expectations but by no means all. I think the point Sue was trying to make is not that these differences don't exist, but rather, concentrating on a single divide is rather dangerous as it is then tempting to say 'ok, boys learn and develop in this way, girls in this way' without taking account of the individual.

My expartner's mum taught him to read when he was around 3 years old. Note the young age - yet he was not forced into it; his mum was teaching some Nigerian kids to read in preparation for English prep school and, like most children, he was keen to do what the big boys were doing. He learnt by a mix of some phonics (sounding out) and flash cards (learning by heart a number of 'key' words. This worked for him and he went to school - at five in those days - reading successfully.

Little bro - just as bright - was a lot slower with the reading and it turned out that the flash card method just didn't work for him. He persevered with a phonic focused method and reads well (despite one teacher trying to make out that he was 'special needs' and should be held back a year).

Before conceding that Rob JMckinney is right and all teachers are rubbish, I think the fault lies more with teacher training and way in which a certain method is feted above all others as the magic solution.

My mum works at a private nursery and has always been responsible for teaching the children a little reading (strictly on a can-do basis; no targets or testing). This has always gone down well with the parents and many of the children who have reached an age when they naturally want to learn. Recently one of the senior staff has discovered a new method of teaching children to read. It is actually developed specifically for 8-10 yearolds who are unable to read and has been extremely successful. My mum must now teach this method, and this method only to the children. It has had very limited success - primarily because it is for an older age group who presumably learn in a different way. My mum is frustrated that she is not

ALLOWED TO WORK ON AN INDIVIDUAL BY INDIVIDUAL BASIS AND I GUESS THIS IS THE KIND OF THING THAT ALSO HAPPENS IN SCHOOLS.

One more point - the author is astounded by the Steiner kids reading for enjoyment and puts that down to the Steiner method. Maybe in part it is, but surely it has more to do with the kind of parents who are interested enough in their children's education to pay for private schooling? Whilst the Steiner environment may be very pleasant and encourage this kind of activity, I'm guessing these kids would probably be successful in any school?



kikichan

10 February 2008 10:00am

timalmond:

'True, but it does mean that in general, girls are "wired" more towards certain ways of thinking, and boys another way.'

In general maybe, but that doesn't mean there aren't huge discrepancies within the genders, and a good deal of crossover between the two. Look at work on the autistic spectrum if you want to see some of the picture on that.

This is why a 50-50 ratio of male to female teachers in mixed primary schools is essential - so that each child can find a teacher with an approach he or she feels comfortable with, regardless of whether that child fits gender 'norms' or not.

If I'd been brought up according to supposedly 'female' priorities in a girls' school, I'd be certifiable by now, I really would.



nocarsgo

10 February 2008 5:24pm

RameshN

I wasn't suggesting that bilingualism is essential to learning a first language to a high standard, merely that it is certainly not a hindrance to learning a first language, as intimated by 'free'woman, and that it can also be a facilitator. This is particularly the case in the UK, where formal grammatical instruction is virtually exclusive to foreign language classes.

Cultural considerations would certainly be the primary reason Chinese and Indian

has something to do with it. Among the best performing Asians are those who came here via Kenya and Uganda. Many of them are successful entrepreneurs (as are many Chinese, many of who came from Hong Kong) and they have the resources, the discipline and the foresight to educate their children to a high standard.

The results of white English children are dragged down by the enormous social inequality that exists in the country, whereas many Pakistani children are from families from rural backgrounds who came to work in factories in the North OF England. Afro-Caribbean children are also largely the product of families (often broken) who worked in poorly paid service sector jobs.

The UK's disgracefully inconsistent and inegalitarian education system means that parental factors are infrequently levelled out, unlike the education systems in certain European states.



RameshN

10 February 2008 7:24pm

@nocarsgo. Thanks for the clarification. I wasn't aware that UK education was that unequal in primary school. I enjoy reading the detailed educational articles in the nytimes.com, and it seemed to me that educational inequality was far more entrenched in the USA compared to Canada or the UK.



jaded1

10 February 2008 9:32pm

RameshN "An Asian medic and I discussed this afterwards. Both of us couldn't work out why, if his kid was struggling, why didn't he cut down on his hours at work and spend more time with his kid, supervising the homework, etc."

At a guess I'd say he'd been privately educated, minor public school if I was pressed.



nocarsgo

11 February 2008 12:06am

RamneshN

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6989177.stm>

"Report author Donald Hirsch said it was "amazing" the way the gap in achievement got wider and wider as children got older.

"Our ambition for the education system is that it compensates for an unequal start.

"In primary education in particular, you might hope that the education gap would start to narrow."

But the report claims that far from reducing the differences between children from different social backgrounds, the education system allows it to grow."

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