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Stop Stealing Childhood in the Name of Education: A plea to ask WHY?

Adapted from a submission originally made on 11 October 2013 to office of the Federal
Education Minister, The Hon Christopher Pyne MP and the Assistant Minister for
Education, The Hon Sussan Ley MP

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1 November 2013

Note: The original submission contained copies of full letters and emails from parents and educators. This adaptation includes only extracts for purposes of brevity and illustration of key points.

Introduction

As one of Australia's leading parenting educators I regularly travel the length and breadth of this country including remote communities and rural communities and the cities. The distress I hear of children struggling — with anxiety, serious behavioural concerns, mental health including depression in children as young as four, aggressive or violent behaviour — and a deep sadness in both parents and children as children have been unable to have a childhood with freedom, with moments of joy and delight, in the company of passionate experienced educators, is quite frankly heartbreaking for me.

As an author I am constantly researching best practice in early years and adolescence. It staggers me to see the push down towards formalised learning that is happening across Australia when there is absolutely no evidence or research that validates that this can have a positive influence on young children's lives.

In short, there is no evidence that pressuring children to read at five improves their later reading, and much concern that it is damaging. There is now a call for more rigorous education for young children. This implies additional hours of didactic instruction and testing. What we really need is a more vigorous education that meets young children's needs and prepares them for the 21st century, which is often described as a century of imagination and creativity. The children are ready. Are we?

— Joan Almon (Co-founder, Alliance for Childhood), *Reading at five: Why?*, 2013.

It also staggers me to see that the people who are making these decisions have no educational background in the early years. As a former high school teacher, I knew nothing about the vital importance of the first six years of life until I began researching for my books. Quickly I became an advocate when I realised the critical window that those early years represent in a child's life trajectory.

The cost of lack of play

Cambridge University psychology and education researcher Dr David Whitebread is one of the signatories of the UK campaign "Too much Too soon" against early formalised learning in the UK. He is an expert in the cognitive development of young children and in early childhood education and his latest report documents the damage that lack of play has on young children — the 'push down' into early childhood of formal schooling at the cost of play is well documented.

Neuroscientific studies have shown that playful activity leads to sign up to growth, particularly in the frontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for the uniquely human higher mental functions. In my own area of experimental and developmental psychology, studies have also consistently demonstrated the superior learning and motivation arising from playful, as opposed to instructional, approaches to learning in children. Pretence play supports children's early development of symbolic representational skills, including those of literacy, more powerfully than direct instruction. Physical, constructional and social play supports children in developing their skills of intellectual and emotional 'self-regulation', skills which have been shown to be crucial in early learning and development. Perhaps most worrying, a number of studies have documented the loss of play opportunities to children over the second half of the 20th century and demonstrated a clear link with increased indicators of stress and mental health problems.

(Source: <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/school-starting-age-the-evidence>)

The removal of play in kindergarten and preschool can be damaging to our children's ability to function as social beings – which is still our key biological drive. The rise in aggressive behaviour being exhibited by many younger children, mainly boys, is a sign they are unable to cope with environments with no opportunity to play, no fun, little movement and developmentally inappropriate tasks – and we then penalise these children by suspending or expelling them! We are failing them – they are not failing preschool!

Labor's legacy

As a former teacher and counsellor of troubled children and teenagers, and in my current capacity, I am deeply concerned and worried about what is happening at grassroots level.

Rather than just be a negative voice exposing the unintended damaging effects of the current direction of Australian education, I have chosen to gather information from parents and early years' educators to support my concerns and communicate them to the Federal Minister of Education in the hope that conversations can occur again with those who know what is best for children – those who study them and those who have been working with children for a number of years.

My highest intention would be to see Australia trial a 'push up' – a nationally consistent, later school starting age for children, delaying formal learning until children turn 7, rather than 4-5.

In Australia the changes that have come about in the last six years under the Labor government have had a disastrous effect on the health and wellbeing of the children of Australia. This is what I am hearing from parents and other sources:

- ✓ Massive increase in suspensions of under 6-year-olds from kindy/prep for inappropriate behaviour (mainly boys)*
- ✓ Many examples of repressed and regressed behaviours of 5-6-year-old children – signs of significant distress
- ✓ Huge meltdowns in the car after school or at home
- ✓ Reluctance to attend preschool/kindy – and within 6 weeks of starting school
- ✓ Significant increase in ADHD (In NSW the number of children taking ADHD medications has increased 133% since 2005)#
- ✓ Increase in anxiety and mental health issues in children and adolescents
- ✓ Four year olds getting homework
- ✓ Seven-year-olds with two hours homework a night
- ✓ More need for specialised behaviour schools for children who are unable to mix well with other children in mainstream school
- ✓ Increases in ASD and these children in classrooms without support
- ✓ Early years' educators being directed to teach in ways that are out of alignment with their education and experience as to what is best for young children
- ✓ Removal of play from 4-5-year-old learning environments both inside and outside
- ✓ More inside activity with no movement and little student autonomy
- ✓ More depression, self harm in children from age of 4
- ✓ More children needing help from allied health professionals

*Sources: [The Courier-Mail](#); [Channel 7](#); and [The West Australian](#)

Source: [Sydney Morning Herald](#)

The pressure to introduce the National Curriculum in schools across Australia has a lot to answer for. Many early childhood educators have been told that the 'push down' is because of the National Curriculum and that the NAPLAN results need improving. The incorrect assumption that making children start formal learning earlier will create these results is NOT supported by any evidence and indeed is seen clearly as being detrimental children except those who are developmentally ready. It seems that this National Curriculum gives educators the 'what' from pre-primary onwards however it is deliberately silent on the 'how' – as how you communicate the content is determined by what your students already know and can do. This is where many of the problems appear to be beginning – a complete lack of clarity as to 'how' we bring in the 'what'. This needs to be cleared up as soon as possible so that we can stop this push down into the early years, thinking it is what is best to improve the educational outcomes of the children of Australia.

This email from a concerned mother highlights the inconsistency that exists between schools, and the scope for the push-down or play-based focus to happen at Principals' discretion:

I am the mother of two girls one aged two and the other five. My five year old commenced full time PrePrimary (WA) this year. in previous years she attended Kindy 2.5 days and three year old kindy 2 half days. When it came to choice of school our catchment state school told me their policy for kindy students was to have two half hour sessions a day of sit down 'numeracy and literacy' lessons. They told me this was a requirement as they would be tested in year three for NAPLAN and NAPLAN scoring was very important for the 'school'. The idea of four year olds having to do this and the lack of concern for the child and more for the school, lead me to look at other state schools that would take out of area children. I found her current school which informed me that they based their learning on play and there was no 'formal' sit down lessons for kindy classes.

Nowhere in the National Curriculum or NAPLAN is it written that starting formal learning earlier is recommended or suggested. What this mother has been told is either a blatant lie or a clear sign of ignorance or misinterpretation.

Our children are not brains on a seat to become test monkeys to serve politicians or educational bureaucrats. Our children, especially our young children, are developing on all levels in those early years. The emotional, social, psychological, physical and cognitive development are all impeded negatively for the vast majority of children by this push down in the early years.

As you read through the extracts from letters and emails embedded in this document I hope you hear the despair, the worry and the concern of educators and parents about what the Australian Government is doing to our children's mental health. Daniel Goleman writes in his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, that 'happy, calm children learn best' and in some early years' centres, kindergartens and preschools you will not see happy, calm children at all.

Bored or stressed children don't learn

Before I continue my exploration of my concerns about what is happening in Australia at the moment with a very heavy heart, I need to put forward two key premises:

1. Humans are biologically wired to be social beings living within units called families within larger units called communities.

2. Humans are biologically wired to survive first, to seek being smart and happy second. Remember Maslow's hierarchy – ensure children feel safe and cared for then we can work on making them grow cognitively, creatively and physically. For many children in Australian schools their beginning years of school are full of fear and boredom.

So the first five years of a child's life is when so much of this primary biological wiring and processing takes place. A child's capacity to pick up language, culture, social norms, emotional capacity and self-regulation, creative thinking, self-preservation and a healthy sense of self takes place in the first five years of their life.

So many of today's children struggle due to a chaotic, busy modern life that forgets that young children need time, endless hours of caring connection with significant adults, and even more endless hours being an explorer and an adventurer working out how the world works to build a brain that allows them to grow into being an independent, capable, resilient caring human being in adulthood.

The ridiculous pressure to make our kids smart before we ensure they are able to get on with others, communicate and be understood, have hours of joy and delight as kids, learn to cope with disappointment and setbacks and enjoy the freedom of being a magical child under seven is making our children sadder, sicker, fatter and more disconnected than any other generation of children.

Professor Margot Sunderland in her book, *The Science of Parenting*, writes that the stress-regulating systems of children that are set up in the first five years become the stress-regulating systems of us as adults. So children who are pushed too much, too soon, have a much higher chance of struggling with anxiety, depression, addictions, poor health and poor relationships throughout their lives.

So many grown ups can't manage stress well because no-one helped them enough with stress and distress in childhood, they never set up effective stress regulating systems in the brains...

— Margot Sunderland, *The Science of Parenting*, 2006

Environments that are stressful to children, especially where there is little opportunity to play in all its forms – both unstructured and structured, both inside and outside, both solo and shared play – will cause heightened levels of stress to young children. In her research, Australian early years' academic Dr Margaret Sims demonstrated clearly you could measure high levels of stress in children through saliva tests. These are empirical measures that demonstrate clearly that children are impacted negatively in environments that do not allow a child to engage in child-like activities in a safe place surrounded by people who feel safe.

Bruce Lipton in his groundbreaking book, *The Biology of Belief*, **showed the cells in our body can only do one thing** - focus on **growth or protection**, in order to ensure survival.

“... children who are experiencing frequent stress will have increased illness because the adrenal hormones will directly suppress the immune system to conserve energy supplies in order to survive their stressful experience” (Bruce Lipton, *The Biology of Belief*, 2008)

What parents are saying

These extracts from parent emails below show the damaging effects the 'push down' of very passive, structured learning is having on children 4-6 (*any errors contained within have remained unedited*).

I have just read your post on Facebook and this is an issue that I have great concerns over too. I have three girls aged 10, 8 and 4. I felt pressure to send my now eight year old to kindy when she was only 3 1/2 as her birthday is the end of June and living in WA the cut off for kindy is that they must turn 4 by 30th June. I was also told that if she did not attend kindy she would then have to go straight into full time preprimary the following year anyway. In hindsight I would have just kept her home and worried about preprimary when we got there. She clearly did not want to go to kindy nor enjoy going for the most part and the tantrums and struggles to get her ready were not fair on either of us. In reality she was still a baby at 3 1/2 and did not need that pressure to attend school when she was not ready for it. Initially she was quite happy to be left at kindy having seen her big sister head off to school but it wasn't long before resistance to the idea set in. The kindy teacher was very much focused on 'learning' in a more formal sense, wanting them to practice writing their names (when really they couldn't hold a pencil properly) and becoming annoyed when children got fidgety at mat time (usually the boys). I don't want to criticise the teacher, I have no doubt that her intentions are in the right place and she is well trained and experienced (although I believe she had mainly taught in year 2 and 3 and her teaching style would have been far more suited to these years). It wasn't until year 1 and 2 that my now 8 year old started being more happily willing to get herself ready and go to school. There was never an issue with how she was going academically and by year one was one of the better readers in the class. My concerns lay in the fact that the pressure was there at a very young age to conform to sending these little kids into a more formal education environment when some of them are clearly not ready for it. It would have done her no harm to be in a year below what she is in now in the longer term and possibly done her quite a lot of good to have had a happy and relaxing start to her education at a time when she was ready for it. On another note, a friend of mine living in WA moved to Victoria with her son a similar age to my 8 year old. They had both gone through Kindy in Perth together and would have been going to full time preprimary the following year. However, on moving to Victoria they found that he was too young to start 'prep' based on his birthdate (being in June and the cut off was April) and that there was not the government funded kindy like in WA. So you have two similar aged children (within a few weeks of one another), the slightly younger one in WA is at full time school (preprimary) and the other in Victoria does not have to attend any formal schooling. With the introduction of the national curriculum, there needs to be standardised starting ages and more flexibility in the early years if children are not ready. I have also heard that parents in Victoria are given more discretion to wait an extra year if they feel their children aren't ready and this often results in a more confident and successful student as a result.

I have two children, both are girls. I have seen the progress of both my children through early childhood education. My first child went through kindy 4.5 years of age with learn through play system and embraced school and loved it.

My second child 3.9 years of age went through kindy with formal education and did not embrace school and struggled with the transition and still to this day battles on now in year 1 tells me "she hates school", she is 6. This makes me sad.

My first child readily absorbs school virtually like a sponge my second becomes bored. Although you might argue that it's the child personality you may be right. But the education suits a small percentage of our children and the rest will be left to lag behind and not provided with a fair assessment and made to feel an

underachiever and so forth - hence more increases violence, depression, anxiety etc as young adults and adults. My kids both had the same kindy teacher - who would be in her mid 50's and has had many bub's come through. She never outwardly said it but I knew she hated the new wave of education and she would rush around all day trying to fit in the play education and formal education.

With both kids I have seen the home work come home in pre-primary (only aged 5 and 6), the pressure applied to them to complete the homework. My first child received double the pressure in pre primary as they had to "catch up" to the new way of education. The homework consisted of reading, spelling and sightwords and a test every week. The test results are read out in class. My first child always happy to complete my second child refused point blank to complete and was not interested. All she wanted to do was play after school- yes that's right a 5 year old wanted to play. Year 1 has been the same. This year I have had my 6 year old complete a project, with 6 points of criteria plus homework.

I hate the pressure our kids are placed under from a very early age with the education system, I have grave concerns of the fallout that will happen to our children from too much too soon.. We are children for such a short time in our lives and are placed under pressure by society to grow up fast as it is. I feel the current system is stealing my children's rights to simply be kids and to develop emotionally into a well balanced human being. I tell anyone who will listen that we are basically getting it wrong.

My son, who has just turned 5 in June, is half way through his first year of full time schooling. We are in WA, so the starting age for school is not negotiable. He started Kindy at three years old (2.5 days per week) and he started full time Pre-Primary at 4. My twins will be starting Kindy next year ... I am concerned about their "readiness" for school. I asked the school if I could delay their starting school for a year. The official answer from the Education Department was "no", as they do not have any diagnosed developmental delays. I do have the option to not send them to Kindy (as this is optional) but they would have to start Pre-Primary at 4.5 without the more "gentle" introduction of the 2.5 days per week Kindy program.

The point of this letter to you Maggie, is that if we were living in NSW or QLD, we would have the option to delay all of our childrens' start to school as they are all June babies. So how can there possibly be a "NATIONAL CURRICULUM" when some children start compulsory schooling at 4 (in WA), between 4 and 6 in Eastern States, and even later in Tasmania?

... We did however allow [OUR] 11 year old to participate [IN NAPLAN] as we believed that despite not being interested in the results that she had the skills to get through with the testing. We were wrong. On the last day of testing our daughter ended up in tears having to be consoled by her classroom teacher purely because she did not complete all the questions in time.

Even though we thought she could cope, and even though she clearly knew we were not the slightest bit interested in how she went, the existence of this test, the pressure it creates in schools, on teachers and most of all the students is not worth it. She will not participate within this test again, we will not make that mistake again. Why when we already know how many of our teenage children cannot cope with the pressure of the HSC do we subject our babies to it now??

I am a mother of two small children, an almost 2 year old girl and a 4 year old boy. I'd like to share my story of my recent and current experiences with my boy. He is a beautiful, sweet, happy, sensitive, smiley boy who loves ninja turtles, superheroes, a bit of rough and tumble and has to win at everything! He's definitely more a lamb than a rooster, but definitely has some rooster tendencies. He has always been socially confident and will talk to anyone. He met all his milestones easily and without concern. He does have some health troubles stemming from a hereditary blood condition, but has managed to get this far without major medical intervention. His birthday is on 24th June, which means that he is 1 week within the cut off for starting kindy this year. Myself and my husband agonised over whether to send him to school this year, or wait another year. All advice I received was along the lines of 'he's definitely ready', 'he'll be fine', 'he's a bright boy, he'll cope' 'he's a confident boy, don't hold him back'. I too thought he was ready, despite being only 3. But I didn't know what was in store for him. I didn't realise the expectations, the pressures, the demands that would be placed on my boy. I wish I had known.

... Let me say that I'm happy with my choice in school, they have developed a great programme that allows the kids to move around between activities, that allows play along with learning, and gives the kids lots of time to run around outside. The class rooms themselves are new and all open plan to provide a sense of space and freedom. But they still have curriculum expectations that they need to meet, and the pressure is on the kids.

I work at [a] High School. I see so many students who have "slipped through the gaps" in Primary School, the Education System has failed them. Pushing students harder, at a younger age will surely destroy more students' confidence, setting them up for failure. This new "push" and "rush" of early childhood learning certainly saddens me.

My son loved his first term, it was a stimulating, exciting new environment with all these new people to talk to! But second term, something changed. He started feeling the pressure, and became aware that he was struggling, that according to the Speech Therapist and the Occupational Therapist (assessments provided by the school) he had deficits. When he walks into his kindy class every morning, he has to start the day having to write his name and show proper pencil grip. **At 3, he was expected to hold his pencil properly and form the letters of his name!!!. He couldn't and knew it. The age difference became apparent as he was almost a full 12 months younger than some of the boys in his class.** A massive difference in relation to his social maturity. He started feeling ostracised from some of the boys, and actually experienced bullying from one particular child. My happy, carefree, confident son started each day in tears, was clingy, experiencing night terrors, would have complete meltdowns over minor things, started exhibiting violent behaviour towards his little sister, was not making friends, and did not want to go to school. It broke my heart. I felt like a failure. I'd obviously done the wrong thing in not sitting my child down and teaching him to hold a pencil, teaching him how to sit and be a student, teaching him to deal with bullying. He had 'deficits'. My perfect boy was struggling. At school he was exhibiting some emotional breakdowns, but was trying so hard to do the right thing, he was holding it all in and trying to be a good student. The poor kid was exhausted. And he was still 3! I met with the teacher and she has been lovely but when I told her that I would be considering pulling him out having him repeat kindy next year if this continued, her response was that this wasn't really the best idea as he needed to be with his same age peers. But if he was born just one week later, his same age peers would be those that started next year.

It's been a tough year. I wish I had known. I would never have sent him. But what a big lesson and life experience to learn at 3 and 4.

It is with great sadness that I write to share my young boys first experience at school. He is in Kindy. He comes home with worksheets everyday of " the sound of the day". Once the class had completed the whole alphabet by the end of first semester, he now comes home with blended sounds..eg ng as in sing ai as in rain He must sit on the mat and in silence to hear the sound of the day through the jolly phonics programme. He has to tell news strictly to a format where the teacher guides the students with palm cards. Eg what colour is your object???what shape is it..???who knows what shape a dinosaur is? He can tell me all shape names...- who ever uses the word sphere to describe a circle? He has been taught the correct pencil grip and he thinks he can not draw because when he draws a car it doesn't look like one.

He is emotional, angry and often vents a lot of frustration at the end of a school day He asks every night in worry of how many more days until he has to go to school He suffers tics both vocal and physical and these get worse after Kindy days He has recently been told he is not to hug anyone or touch in his classroom I have not seen one finger painting nor creative box construction come home.

I have heard him sing 2 songs all year

I have expressed my deepest concerns to the deputy principal . Her response was " australian curriculum" and last years pre primary students scored poorly in handwriting so we want the current group to do better at the " on entry testing" that is done in pre primary. It is only because of your daily posts, books and recent seminar ... that I have managed to feel I can help him.

My boys were lucky enough to have gone through kindy a few years ago before the compulsory 5 full day week went through. At that time, when the suggestion to increase the days was raised, I remember writing an email to the Minister while both my boys were bawling in the background absolutely exhausted from the day. They did NOT cope and I made the decision to brave criticism from the school by insisting they take the Wednesdays off each week to ensure a rest day.

Both boys (one of whom is now being extended and the other who was evaluated by the school psych and noted as being very bright and in need of extension) struggled in those early years as they were not developmentally ready to sit at a desk and give up playtime - it took a number of specialists diagnoses to convince the school that there was nothing 'wrong' with them. Each specialist told us they were just very bright and we even got quizzed as to why we were 'wasting' one specialists time with what was clearly a 'normal' child. The reason was simple. The school needed kids to cope with the new expectations and our boys just weren't ready. Some children did appear to cope admittedly in school, but those parents shared with us how their children melted down as soon as they got home.

What are we doing to our kids? How does this sort of policy 'enhance' education or allow our children to thrive? Any education policy should seek to do these things before all others, and the new system fails at these key aspects immensely.

As a parent and an educator myself I cannot believe that given ALL the available research and worldwide case studies which show that these ideas are bad practise, that our policy makers are choosing to IGNORE the facts and do the exact opposite. It is our children who pay the price. If this doesn't count as child abuse, what does?

This last piece of correspondence is not the only instance I have heard from parents who have been asked to get their boys assessed only to find out they are well within “normal range”. This is the perfect illustration of the mismatch between expectations placed on children, and their normal (and highly variable) developmental capabilities.

Setting kids up to fail at life

A significant concern with the formalised learning push down is that children, especially boys and Indigenous children – who much research shows can have delayed readiness for formal learning – will develop mindsets that will inhibit them for the rest of their schooling life.

Canadian psychologist and researcher Professor Carol Dweck has done significant groundbreaking research that shows that by the age of 3 to 4 around 70% of children have worked out they are either smart or dumb or good or bad. This mindset or belief makes it very difficult for future educators to encourage the students to participate in formal school learning once the readiness or developmental processes are able to manage. This significantly impacts on a child’s ability to learn to read. This concerns me deeply as we know that around 80% of prisoners in Australian prisons both male and female have low literacy. Learning to read requires having heard lots of words, brain integration (which needs movement), a significant level of phonemic awareness, deep auditory processing cues and lots of modelling of what reading looks and feels like.

More than ever, those of us around the world who are calling for a rethink in the way children live and learn are up against the same pressures: safety fears (and even more insidious, fear of being blamed if a child gets hurt or upset), busy and at times anxious parents, threats to green spaces within and beyond schools and other settings, the growing attractions of the media and the virtual world, and competing political priorities. Helle Nebelong neatly summarised these challenges in talking of the ‘triangle trap’ of institutions – home, school and out-of-school services – that circumscribe too many children’s lives. – Tim Gill, *No Fear*, 2007.

Failing because you are developmentally unable to complete a task, especially for 4-5-year-olds – especially writing, learning sounds in isolation and learning to read creates mindsets that inhibit future learning. “I am dumb, “I am stupid” and “I am useless” are messages parents tell me they are hearing from their 4- and 5-year-olds.

A Queensland early childhood teacher sent me this tick box list below (which is so developmentally inappropriate on so many levels). She was handed it by a parent who’d received it from a government school where she was thinking of sending her child to Prep.

It was titled 2014 PREP PRE CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING SUCCESS.

The requirements were:

Able to communicate simple needs

Able to apply concepts in action e.g. front/behind

Can use comparative language e.g. big/little

Can say alphabet correctly

Can name letters

Able to refrain from speaking/interrupting when adults talk

Able to write name
 Able to identify own printed name
 Able to sort for one attribute e.g. colour/ size
 Able to answer simple questions about a story
 Able to copy shapes
 Scissors cut on a straight line holding scissors correctly
 Roll play dough into snake
 Able to remain seated on a mat for 10 minutes
 Able to maintain physical alertness throughout day
 Able to walk up and down stairs one foot per tread
 Able to follow adult directions in class and playground
 Able to separate from parents and carers
 Able to accept help
 Able to cope with confronting incidents appropriately
 Able to use manners, please, thank you
 Continues to engage in difficult/challenging situations
 Able to follow instructions
 Can find a pair of objects on request
 Can identify main body parts
 Can attend to story for 5 minutes
 Can tell full name
 Speaks in correct sentences
 Able to give eye contact
 Responds reasonably to stop/go commands
 Able to rote count to 10
 One to one correspondence when counting 6 objects
 Able to touch 3 objects in a given sequence
 Able to identify missing object/picture if one is removed
 Able to identify basic colours of blue, yellow, red, green
 Able to draw themselves
 Can recite 3 nursery rhymes
 Can hold a pencil to write and colour
 Left/right hand dominance
 Run efficiently and safely
 Hop on left leg and right leg 3 times
 Double jump take off and land with 2 feet together
 Peg 2 fingers
 Able to greet people
 Able to answer when spoken to
 Able to ask questions for assistance
 Able to take turns

Able to resolve conflict with words rather than actions

Able to tidy up after activities

Able to recognise basic facial expressions: happiness, sadness, anger

Able to toilet self

Keep self-clean and tidy

Able to move safely within classroom and outside

Able to care for belongings, hat, bags, etc.

Put shoes and socks on by self

Able to open lunchbox and food packaging

Able to carry school bag

The last page then has a space for children to draw a person and copy an= '0, X and 8

There is no space for comments.

There are so many things on this list that older children are still mastering and the tick-a-box approach to childhood growth and development makes the notion of 'competitive child rearing' even more of a challenge. I can just imagine the angst such a list causes parents let alone preschool teachers — getting data on children before you meet them, especially up to 6 months before you meet them and seeing them through a lens of data-seeking vessels really worries me!

So many of these tasks are continually evolving in childhood — especially for 4-6-year-olds — and can be influenced by so many other things like temperament, ESL at home, gender, trauma and even birth order. When put in a prescriptive list, I believe this will increase the sense of kids being failures and having deficits rather than focusing on their strengths. In a way we are 'over pathologising' normal early childhood growth and development and making it a kind of race. Competent early years' educators are able to identify delays in 4-5-year-old classes and can work on building capacity with massively engaging, play-based programs. When that time is stolen to do the formal learning that used to happen the following year, it will mean we will set up more children than ever before to fail.

Speech pathologist Amanda Styles wrote to me with her concerns for the children she has predominantly worked with over 20 years who have "developmental difficulties, ranging from speech and language difficulties, learning disorders, ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorders and emotional and behavioural problems".

"Now, with the push for early formalised learning, these children are even more at risk for developing behavioural, learning, social and emotional difficulties. They will lag ever further behind their peers and as we are already seeing, there will be significant increases in concurrent problems (e.g. behavioural issues within the classrooms). Instead of having the much needed time to further develop their oral language development, self-regulatory skills and social-emotional maturity through the much needed play experiences that pre-schooling has previously provided, their attention is pushed towards formal literacy and numeracy training. They do not have the verbal and social prerequisites to cope with this level of teaching. It is like asking a child with a physical disability to run a race they are not yet physically able to run. They can not run that race. Similarly, these children with developmental difficulties are cognitively not ready to cope with the demands of formal learning..."

In my professional opinion, I have grave concerns in where our educational system is heading, namely with the focus on formalised learning before children are developmentally ready for it. In this case, it's too much, too soon and for the more vulnerable students, there will be great risk of more dire consequences. Thankfully, there are educational systems we can model ourselves on. The success of the Finnish system is well documented and serves as a great example of how focus on building up the prerequisites of learning (problem solving, creativity, developmental skills), reaps great benefits further down the track. Finnish students are not exposed to more formal learning until after the age of 7 (not 3-4 as our educational system requires). For over a decade, Finland's education system has continually featured in the top countries in the world and in 2012, based on 2006-2010 results, was rated as the best educational system (Australia was 13th)."

I do believe that the Rudd and Gillard governments believed their "education revolution", which introduced NAPLAN benchmark testing of Australian children, was going to improve the educational outcomes of our children. It still staggers me to see that Australia has been led down the same path as America and the UK where there is clear evidence that national benchmark testing has had a punitive and negative effect on students, teachers, and parents without any significant improvements in educational outcome. The high-stakes testing regime has not significantly improved the educational outcome of children and that is partly because it is a statistically invalid test pretending to test something that it does not test. The addition of the My School website and the comparisons between schools – also statistically invalid – has caused enormous performance angst and **it is this angst that is driving the push down of formalised learning into our young children's lives. It seems well-meaning principals of primary schools have initiated the 'push down', the attempt to hurry up, so that the NAPLAN results on MySchool site will improve and make their school look good.**

I have been writing about my concerns on this issue for several years. Here are a couple of links to articles that sum up my concerns: [Who's making these dumb decisions about education?](#) (published by Kindred) and [Testing Times](#) (published by ABC's The Drum site). This message (emailed to me by an experienced teacher) captures my concerns well.

I am a teacher of thirty years. I have worked in junior primary for much of this time. This is such a complicated issue. There are many components to why this is happening. Much of the pressure is NAPLAN results driven where schools' results are published. Schools that don't do well are named and shamed and parents' anxieties are fed from this. Schools that don't do well and have red flags can then be visited by the Standards Review Board and the whole school is gone through from top to bottom. This is not a bad thing but I think we can understand why schools are reacting to this pressure. We have to be seen to be improving in academic standards. Another pressure is emerging from the literacy, numeracy and science results from world tables where Australia's standing is seen to be slipping. This pushing of our kids is a direct result. I don't think it is fair to blame the schools. They are responding to what is seen as push from "above" and social pressure from the community and media. It is absolutely wrong to put so much pressure on our young children but I think it is important to keep in mind where the pressure is coming from and why. **Play based learning can coexist with increased academic standards but our powers that be need to agree.**

These words from a committed teacher show clearly that fear is driving NAPLAN and that there is an enormous amount of mixed information, some of it incorrect, for both parents and teachers. You cannot hurry up 4-5-year-olds academically when they are not ready or they will experience stress or distress while in that environment.

A better way

This teacher's closing statement is the golden secret that needs to be shared with ALL SCHOOLS:

Play based learning can coexist with increased academic standards but our powers that be need to agree.

I have visited schools that are still very child friendly with lots of play, nature time, music and art and their students are doing well academically and yes they have children with phonic awareness without doing phonics in isolation. The secret is that happy, calm children learn best – and you can weave good practice in with play-based learning. It's not one or the other.

First, we need to create an environment that allows children to feel they belong (that is the first theme of the National Quality Framework and the Early Years' Learning Framework). We need to let them be children, while building their social and emotional skills, ensuring they are getting sound saturation, gross motor/fine motor skills, sensory exposure and having fun!

David Whitebread writes about the value and importance of play in young children's development, especially the value with extended periods of playful learning before the start of formal schooling.

"Powerful evidence supporting this view of the role of play in human functioning has also emerged within recent developmental psychology. Here, recent studies using a range of new research techniques, including neuroscientific and other physiological measures, have shown strong and consistent relationships between children's playfulness and their cognitive and emotional development ... We also now have extensive evidence of the inter-relationships between the complexity and sophistication of children's play, particularly their symbolic or pretend play, and their emotional well-being (sometimes assessed through physiological measures of stress) (Bornstein, 2006). Source: Whitebread, 2013.

Award-winning early years' educator Neville Dwyer, the director of the Dorothy Waide Centre for Early Learning in Griffith, NSW, describes what the learning looks like in his centre, in order to meet the five outcomes of the EYLF:

Lots of opportunity to children to engage in meaningful, planned-for play. Within our curriculum planning we intentionally planned for play and actively create opportunities for children to engage and explore play that leads them to discoveries, new skills and new ways of thinking. Our planning model incorporates what children are interested in. This is determined by group brainstorming sessions with the children where children bring their topics of interest and we explore what they know and what they want to learn about. This means they're engaged from the start in the learning process and how we plan for that. This allows us to then build the conceptual knowledge and skills we know children need to have success in life. Literacy, numeracy, life skills, social skills, science and creativity are all included and this is constantly assessed against the framework in the developmental milestones to ensure that children are well within the developmental levels of their age group. Some things you won't see in our play are stencils; these are not appropriate to young children and stifle creative thinking. You won't see children sitting at tables during formal lessons or numbers or the alphabet. This is what school does and is best left when children are older, children learn in a far more organic way. Howard Gardner, educational specialist, identified that we all learn in very different ways – some by doing, some by listening, some think in logical ways, some musical, some through movement. Sometimes it's combinations of all these different learning styles. Our job as educators is to facilitate each child's learning style to get the best out of them.

The children from Dorothy Waide are also stand-out children when they get to mainstream schooling. I have visited the centre on a number of occasions and am constantly impressed by the calm, quiet environments with children very busy and participating enthusiastically in the decision-making of their learning journey.

There are many other examples all around Australia of early years and primary education services that are working within curriculum standards to deliver best-practice, play-based education to young children.

Bold Park Community School in Perth for example, which caters for children aged 3 to 17, places a huge emphasis on unstructured nature play and “views children as strong and powerful contributors to their own learning, and gears the curriculum to suit the individual child whilst maintaining government standards”.

Bold Park bases their philosophy and teaching style on current research into nature and place-based education and brain research, and it is a hugely successful model.

The school’s Director of Teaching and Learning (Co-Principal) Gillian McAuliffe is also the Oceania representative of the Nature Action Collaborative and Planning Committee, and a member of The World Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education. She shares my belief and also wrote to the newly elected Australian government to say that:

“A government which endorses ‘play’ as the most efficient way for young children to build the foundations of all future academic and social emotional pursuits will be endorsing a productive, creative and stable community in the future.”

We must never forget, as articulated here by Rebecca Flanagan, a highly experienced and dedicated early childhood teacher:

“A child’s sense of self, self worth and confidence needs to be nurtured gently and with mindful intention... Creative, emotional, and social intelligences are for the early years the most important areas for an educator to support and facilitate, but when teachers feel they are required to “produce” high scores for assessments, then their needs as professionals are not being met either.”

Erik Jensen, one of the world’s leading brain experts in terms of education would argue that unless children are engaged in novel, challenging and meaningful learning that includes physical activity and a degree of coherent complexity – which means there’s no boredom or chaos, and there is a healthy level of stress – then it’s impossible for the brain to learn, to remember, and to repair and maintain neural circuits.

We are expecting today’s young children to learn in brain antagonistic environments. For Indigenous children, for the vast majority of our boys, for children who have English as a second language and for children who have additional needs we are creating environments that make it impossible for them to do well. We must revisit this as setting children up to fail like this has life long consequences.

Perhaps this is a contributing reason why the latest COAG Reform Council report on education, released in October 2013 shows that the gap for Indigenous children and

disadvantaged children is growing ever wider under the new system, despite some improvements in 'outcomes' overall (Silby, 2013).

In a recent interview with family therapist, educator and author Susan Stiffelman, author and counsellor Dr John Gray spoke about the link between dopamine and attention, which has been the subject of research for many years. As Gray describes it, dopamine is a reward brain chemical and "low dopamine results in boredom and one symptom of that is hyperactivity". (Stiffelman, 2013)

Dopamine is created by physical activity, having fun, being creative, problem-solving, learning fascinating new information and having freedom to explore the natural world. Could we be contributing to higher levels of ADHD for our children, especially boys and Indigenous children, by not providing them with enough of these opportunities?

Not surprisingly many boys are really struggling with formalised learning. As one Mum wrote:

We are going to an OT each week and I have learned to incorporate large amounts of physical activity into my five-year-old son's day to help him concentrate at school. I've met with a teacher to discuss ways to make the classroom situation better for everyone. Interestingly she has found all of the children are better behaved now that she has incorporated extra activities and movement into her class. This is not only my five-year-old who learns best through movement and an active classroom. I wonder how many pre-primary children are struggling with the sit and learn style and are assumed to have a learning disorder or behaviour issue as a result just as my son did. It seems quite obvious to me that the current 'sit and learn model' is not working.

If we could take some of the \$100 million that is spent each year on implementing NAPLAN and instead invest it on the full implementation of the EYLF especially for children aged 3 and above in community-driven, evidence-based, play based whole-child learning programs we would finally see the academic outcomes of all of our children, our precious Australian children, improve.

Not only that, we would see the other scary unhealthy statistics start to drop. What happens in the first five years tends to last a lifetime either positively or negatively.

See Appendix 1 to read Dr Alice Brown from The University of Southern Queensland's submission on how fundamental the early years are to brain building.

Over 100 academics have also expressed their concerns about the inadequacy of NAPLAN to improve educational outcomes for Australian students:

TEACHERS are holding practice tests for months prior to NAPLAN and children are experiencing stress-related vomiting and sleeplessness, according to the first national study into the impact of the high-stakes testing regime.

The University of Melbourne study raises significant concerns about the "unintended side effects" of NAPLAN, including teaching to the test, a reduction in time devoted to other subjects and a negative impact on student health and staff morale.

Almost half of teachers said they held practice NAPLAN tests at least once a week for five months before the tests every May. About 90 per cent of the 8353 teachers and principals surveyed said some students felt stressed before NAPLAN tests, with symptoms including crying, sleeplessness, vomiting and absenteeism. The study's researchers have called for a national debate into whether there are other ways the data could be collected without the negative impacts revealed in their findings. The Age November 2012

"We are narrowing the curriculum in order to test children," said lead researcher Nicky Dulfer. "There are ways we can support numeracy and literacy learning without limiting children's access to other subjects like music, languages and art."

Source: <http://www.literacyeducators.com.au/images/pdf/letter-of-support.pdf>

There is no question that Australia needed to improve its reporting of student achievements prior to NAPLAN. The schools that claim to enjoy having this benchmark test because it has lifted the focus of their staff and their students need to be reassured that there can be a fairer and more transparent way of doing this than what currently exists. Quite simply NAPLAN has created an unlevel playing field – with some schools preparing from preschool to do well – to some that use it as it is intended simply as a test that occurs in their schooling journey. I have included a message from Dr Karen Martin, Associate Professor in early childhood, School of Education at Southern Cross University who believes that on so many levels NAPLAN is culturally inappropriate for Aboriginal and Indigenous students.

“Our kids are autonomous, not independent. They don't segment and separate themselves, they move around different age ranges and skills throughout their lifehood. In Aboriginal terms of reference just because you age chronologically or physically mature you don't move from one stage to the next in terms of your relatedness; it grows and builds on what was there before. Just because you are a young adult doesn't mean you no longer have childhood or babyhood; it is still all there.”

(Source: http://www.daretolead.edu.au/servlet/Web?s=169694&p=STORY_NCPC_Dr_Karen_Martin)

Revisiting NAPLAN

NAPLAN is responsible for stealing the childhood of thousands of Australian children and needs to be revisited as soon as possible. If one reads early childhood research, Australia should be pushing upwards rather than downwards with formalised learning to achieve the outcomes they want for all children.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every student was given this message (found via our Facebook community and apparently sent home with test results by a US elementary school principal) when they received their NAPLAN results?

"We are concerned that these tests do not always assess all of what it is that make each of you special and unique. The people who create these tests and score them do not know each of you-- the way your teachers do, the way I hope to, and certainly not the way your families do. They do not know that many of you speak two languages. They do not know that you can play a musical instrument or that you can dance or paint a picture. They do not know that your friends count on you to be there for them or that your laughter can brighten the dreariest day. They do not know that you write poetry or songs, play or participate in sports, wonder about the future, or that sometimes you take care of your little brother or sister after school. They do not know that you have traveled to a really neat place or that you know how to tell a great story or that you really love spending time with special family members and friends. They do not know that you can be trustworthy, kind or thoughtful, and that you try, every day, to be your very best... the scores you get will tell you something, but they will not tell you everything. There are many ways of being smart."

To be honest if I get an email from a worried parent about a child whom they see is developmentally too young for formal schooling, and is being told they have to attend because of their age, I might give them four suggestions so they can reduce the stress and angst that their child is likely to endure:

1. Search if you are in a city for a 'best practice' preschool – that still is play based and has happy kids
2. Move to Victoria or NSW where school starting ages are more flexible
3. Find a Waldorf Steiner school
4. Home school

Sad but true. The long-term damage of being a struggling underachiever can set children up for so many other problems later in life especially an irrational fear of failure, test induced anxiety, depression and a troubled journey through adolescence due to life inhibiting mind sets.

Recommendations:

1. Let's question – what's the hurry?

A serious conversation needs to occur to reduce the stress in our children's lives especially in the formative early years. It would be beneficial for Australian educators to explore the advantages of a 'push up' for our young children rather than the push down. Scandinavian countries (who perform excellently on literacy and numeracy rankings) start formal learning when children turn seven as do Waldorf Steiner schools. In particular, this later start of formalised learning would immediately benefit many of our Indigenous children and our boys and those ESL children.

Every single child is a one-off unique human being. Some of our biological wiring means that we are going to be more prone to certain pathways than others. We know that there are environmental circumstances that can positively or negatively impact a child's capacity to learn on all levels and that even siblings from within the same family can have a different sense of readiness for formal learning.

In the last decade epigenetic research has shown that DNA blueprints passed down thru genes are not set in concrete at birth. Genes are not destiny. Environmental influences including nutrition, stress and emotions can modify those genes without changing their basic blue print...and those modifications can be passed on to future generations. Bruce Lipton, *Biology of Belief*, 2008.

There are some key influencing factors that parents need to know about when they are considering whether their child is ready for the formalised learning of our school system — and which should be considered when considering school starting age across Australia.

- a. **Gender does matter** and a significant number of boys are delayed, some up to 18 months behind girls. Boys can struggle with communication, memory, self-regulation and listening, and many find the passivity and the structure of formal schooling very difficult and frustrating. I am keen to see more early years' centres set up for boys only to ensure that they are able to succeed in an environment where they are understood and appreciated. Yes some girls are ready for formal learning very early however they need to have the social skills as well as being able to read to do well in a school setting.

- b. **Aboriginal and other Indigenous children** thrive in environments that are highly tactile, play focused, highly active and in traditional communities, with kin members present. They also need to have early years' educators who can speak the language they speak at home and who know their culture.
- c. **Temperament definitely matters.** Our strong children who I call 'rooster' children often cope with new or unusual situations in school environments and transitions much better than our sensitive 'lambs'. Sensitive children often need some flexibility to be eased into our formal schooling systems. Indeed flexibility is a key subject that needs to be discussed in the early years. Age is a poor indicator of preparedness for formal schooling. Some sensitive children may struggle enormously at the beginning of the year and with gradual easing into the full-time schedule they can be quite ok in 6 months. Serious anxiety patterns can start from being pushed too hard too soon and I have worked with some of these children as they head to high school and often find the same patterns of anxiety surface again in the transition to high school.
- d. **Birth order can also be something to consider.** Younger siblings can often be stronger socially than the first-born children simply because of being socialised a lot more by their siblings. A child who may be young in the year, and yet is a younger sibling will often be better equipped to start school.
- e. **Trauma and disaster** can deeply impact young children's ability to do well in formal school settings for a period of up to 18 months. If it is possible for a child who has gone through a significant loss or major adverse event to have more time at home or in a long day care situation rather than a formal school situation I would take that option. Research has shown that until a child's mind has fully integrated the loss they are unable to learn as well as other children. Children under five can be impacted deeply by losses that adults may not appreciate. For example if a well-loved early years' educator leaves where the child is being cared for, even if it is to have a baby, that can seriously disrupt a child's sense of safety and belonging for a period of time.
- f. **Advantage and disadvantage** Studies do show that children from well-educated families who live in higher socioeconomic communities tend to start at an advantage and even with the readiness often in place, these children can benefit from massively engaging play based kindy/prep rather than a formalised one. The critical thinking pathways and the social and emotional growth benefits ensure these students continue to thrive and they do not suffer from not being hurried up to learn to write and read!

2. Return play to its rightful place in children's lives

The stealing and demonising of play for children aged 4 to 6 is having a disastrous effect on their emotional and social wellbeing. Essentially play and other important child-friendly activities are being pushed out of early years' curriculum and programming because, as Alfie Kohn writes in *Standardized Testing and Its Victims* (2000):

The time, energy and money being devoted to preparing students for standardized tests have to come from somewhere. Schools across the country are cutting back or eliminating programs in the arts, recess for young children ... the use of literature in the early grades, entire subject areas such as science.

This is what is happening in many of our kindy/prep classes with the removal of art, craft, music, singing and unstructured activities. The 'push down' fills the day with formal learning

instead of engaging young children in ways that develop a love of learning and stoking their curiosity.

According to the Australian Early Development Index, 23.7% of Australian children are turning up to year one with a significant developmental delay. Almost 20 years ago that statistic was 5 to 10%. Boys and our Indigenous children are featuring very highly in this 25% and the current push down to have four-year-olds doing hours of formal learning at a desk, then having homework on top, and endlessly filling in black line workbooks is going to create even more children who are going to struggle their entire lives in Australian schools.

Peter Gray in his article, *The Play Deficit* (2013), explores another area of concern on top of declining mental health in our children:

The decline in opportunity to play has also been accompanied by a decline in empathy and a rise in narcissism, both of which have been assessed since the late 1970s with standard questionnaires given to normative samples of college students. Empathy refers to the ability and tendency to see from another person's point of view and experience what that person experiences. Narcissism refers to inflated self-regard, coupled with a lack of concern for others and an inability to connect emotionally with others. A decline of empathy and a rise in narcissism are exactly what we would expect to see in children who have little opportunity to play socially.

Play is a much underrated but incredibly vital part of children's development. Put simply "play grows the brain". As Hara Estroff Marano highlighted in her book, *A Nation of Wimps* (2008):

"Play fosters maturation of the very centres of the brain that allows kids to exert control over retention, emotions and to control behaviour. This is a very subtle trick that nature plays – it uses something that is not goal directed to create the mental machinery for being goal directed."

I firmly believe that the approach to play in Australia is swinging from being ridiculously boring, safe and demonised as being benign and unimportant in children's lives to something that values play in all its glory, as a profoundly important parts of every child's growth and development on every level.

I frequently share conference podiums with the world's leading play experts and the same shift is happening across the Western world, largely as a response to the increases of mental illness in young children. I am a nature play advocate and am finding it extremely exciting to watch the removal of the bright plastic/metal playgrounds that invaded Australia and have bored the pants off thousands of Australian children. In their place we are seeing interesting, massively engaging playgrounds using far more natural products that allow children to interact much more intensely in their play allowing them to also grow on all levels. There is an urgency about this movement because we are losing children to the screen world and this will cause significant developmental delays to children under five if they are doing screen activities instead of physical child-directed activities more than 20% of the time. Play environments that encourage children to move, to explore, to model, to play, to problem solve, to create, to build, to question and have fun will create children who are not only capable to cope with school, they will be more than able to cope with life.

An excellent research paper on the topic from David Whitebread:

http://www.importanceofplay.eu/IMG/pdf/dr_david_whitebread_-_the_importance_of_play.pdf

What the teachers are saying

As one experienced early years' teacher wrote to me:

"I'm sick of our children being valued on such narrow aspects. Yes numeracy and literacy is really important – I'm a teacher so I get that. But it is not the be-all and end-all and it seems such a colossal waste not to nurture the amazing variety of gifts we are given as human beings."

Another, new graduate early years' teacher writes:

"My greatest concern is that some children (they are probably the minority) are simply NOT READY for this learning but I have to cover this content and assess it with them because we have formal reports at the end of each semester which describe how the student is developing these outcomes or skills. I feel physically ill when I am having to work with these children who are not ready for this learning and assess them at some point because I can clearly sense that these very young children are completely aware that they do not know this content and feel ashamed they don't know the answers or understand what is expected of them. I try to do my best to make these children feel at ease and make them feel their attempts or efforts are valued. However there is nothing I can do to stop these children from recognising the fact that they cannot do or complete the work which many of their peers can do. These children who are as young as 3 or 4 years old are learning at a very early age that they are not as competent as their peers and are feeling inadequate. What are we doing to our young children? This is far too young for children to recognise that they have such flaws! What are we doing to their self esteem and confidence? This cannot be healthy and is certainly NOT promoting positive and confident learners for the future. I feel that we could be doing a great deal of damage to these children who are simply not ready!"

This extract comes from an email from an experience learning support teacher (Prep and Year 1) who moved from the UK to Australia:

"My husband and I lived and worked in England for 4 years between 2001 and 2005 and had grave concerns about the publication of national testing results and the resultant rising of the academic bar for young children.

We were very grateful for the fact that Australia did not have such a system. However, the publication of NAPLAN results and the public comparisons of results encouraged by the media have resulted in us going down the same path.

In the past 12 months, I have observed a significant raising of the academic bar for our Prep children. I have also noted the increasingly diverse range of learning experiences that these young children bring to their Prep classrooms. This is a challenge for teachers who are charged with nurturing children who can already read and others who have little or no experiences with letters, numbers and sounds.

Aside from these academic skills, young learners come from an increasing diversity of opportunities to develop language and social skills. I have wondered whether the apparent increase in anxious children is a result of insufficient language and learning opportunities to solve problems effectively.

Another area of concern for me is the impact of busy working parents on their ability to provide opportunities for children to develop important foundation skills. While driving to school this morning, I was listening to a news item which indicated that, while most parents want their children to read more, many parents do not find time to read to their children more than once/week."

Putting play back into policy

To ensure play is valued and encouraged I believe we need to train parents and teachers about the key aspects of exploratory play, competitive and non-competitive play, imaginary play, modelling play, cognitive play, child- and adult-directed play and using play to help develop a love of reading, language, dance, movement and music.

I recently heard from a very competent teacher in Perth in Western Australia, who was late to teaching and who has a deep passion for allowing children to engage massively in their learning environments. Her program is based on child-centred learning which includes many hours outside, at a farm school, in the rain, climbing trees, growing veggies, building cubbies, playing with sticks, bushwalking and observing regeneration programs, propagation experiments, anything that gets them excited.

The first class I taught with this program were with me for two years pre primary and year one and when they completed then NAPLAN test the following year they did extremely well. Other teachers constantly feedback to me that the children from my classes are standout students – have confidence, a broad subject knowledge, they're vibrant, their minds are turned on, they are creative and enthusiastic about learning.

That says it all.

There are many pre-primary classes that are doing the same child-centred learning in our existing system and they are nurturing student growth on all levels and they are doing fine in mainstream school when aged 6. A school 2 kilometres away can be doing the opposite –with homework for 4-year-olds, endless hours of black line markers and hours and hours sitting at a desk. This is what I am questioning – why?

3. New focus for boys in education especially the early years

In 2002, then Education Minister Brendan Nelson conducted a review of boys in education and noticed large areas of concern – absolutely nothing has changed. There is no question that our boys are struggling more than our girls with the push down for formal learning in the early years. Not only are they over 75% more likely to struggle at school, they are in the vast majority in all remedial classes, behaviour classes and the subject of school expulsions and suspensions. In the words of one Mum who was told her boy was definitely ready for his first year of school (he was only three going into four-year-old kindy):

My son loved his first term, it was a stimulating, exciting new environment with all these new people to talk to. But second term, something changed. He started feeling the pressure and became aware that he was struggling, and that according to the speech therapist and the OT he had deficits. When he walks into his kindy class each morning, he has to start the day having to write his name and show proper pencil grip. At three he was expected to hold his pencil properly and form the letters of his name. He couldn't and he knew he couldn't. My happy, carefree, confident son started each day in tears, was clingy, experiencing night terrors, would have complete meltdowns over minor things, started exhibiting violent behaviour towards his little sister, was not making friends and did not want to go to school. It broke my heart. I felt like a failure. I'd obviously done the wrong thing in not sitting my child down and teaching how to hold a pencil ... and be a student. My poor kid was so exhausted and he was still just three.

I have begun running special seminars for parents called “Boys, boys, boys: Understanding, Nurturing and Connecting to Today’s Boys”. I have been staggered at the response from parents to this topic and we have seen some 400-seat seminars sold out within 48 hours. In this seminar I explore the differences between the majority of the gender – in other words most boys develop differently to girls under seven. Research shows that many boys are up to 18 months behind girls when they start Year 1. They think differently, they hear differently, they communicate differently, they are highly sensitive, the list goes on.

As a mother of four sons and former teacher I am fully aware of these differences. Earlier this year, I wrote about why our education system is failing our boys for Fairfax’s parenting blog and in subsequent days we received thousands of interactions via social networking: this is a subject close to the hearts of many Australian parents and teachers.

My articles, [Why Schools are Failing Our Boys](#) (May 20, 2013, *Essential Kids*) and [What Boys Need Most](#) (*Teachers Matter*, June 2013) contain much more detail on the issues for boys in our schools and possible solutions.

4. Fund remedial programs as soon as possible

Even if we introduced a push up, there will still be some children who will need additional support. This area is the area that needs urgent attention. Early years’ educators in long day care can often identify early concerns the children whether that be auditory, speech delays or attention difficulties. Every community needs to have a form of family hub, or community family support where parents can go to seek help as soon as they identify a challenge. Dr Martha Burns, a world expert in neuroscience, dyslexia and literacy recommends some excellent technological programmes that support children who have early learning difficulties. If communities are able to fund these IT programs within their community, schools and homes, they will help children most in need. Many rural communities do not have access to any professional support for children due to isolation – this is a huge concern with children on the Autism Spectrum as early intervention is essential to help these children progress.

Preventative parental education programs are also an essential part of the future of Australian children. A recent media article outlined that many families with both parents working were finding that they only had enough time to read to their children once a week. There is clear evidence that shows that children who are not surrounded by massive sound saturation from humans – plenty of conversation, books read to them, nursery rhyme sang to them, songs sung to them – and hours of human interaction, we will struggle with learning to read and literacy throughout their life. This is not just a problem with lower socio-economic families it is now happening in mainstream families mainly due to the busy-ness of modern living.

5. Having positive, realistic expectations that are developmentally appropriate and realistic

Several teachers have communicated to me that 5-year-olds are now expected to achieve what 7-year-olds were expected to achieve only a few years ago. How can this be good for children? No wonder so many of them are feeling pressured, stressed and that they are ‘dumb’. Remember Carol Dweck’s research into mindsets which I wrote about earlier? This

is exactly what we are doing – **creating children who think they're dumb because we have an expectation that is beyond them developmentally.**

All of this leads to the urgent question of whether it makes sense to expect kindergarten children and preschool children to spend long hours preparing for reading, trying to master skills that come much more easily a year or two later. Given that there is no evidence of long-term gains, coupled with growing concern about losses, it is time for a change. Unfortunately, with standards set in place it is not so easy to change them to meet the needs of children. But one can be creative in how to meet them through experiential education and play. – Joan Almon, *Reading at Five: Why?*, 2013.

One of the teachers who responded to my request for information about the current state of play in Australian classrooms mentioned that her niece who is currently in year two has hours of homework, much of which is based on algebraic mathematical questions, because these are the questions she will face in NAPLAN. This educator's aunt writes that not only is her niece's teacher placing a lot of expectation on her to be reading books that are beyond her (although they may meet some academic standards) but her niece is developing a low self-esteem towards her academic abilities and she is very unenthusiastic about school. This is a clear sign of having expectations to reach the outcomes of a statistically invalid test – that are beyond this child. Where is the love of reading? Where is the love of learning? Where is the acting out and role-playing of what she is reading to ensure she is comprehending? My sister is a literacy specialist in primary school and she has found in the last 3 to 4 years she is now meeting children who can read the words in the book that they are reading, but have no idea what they are reading. So with no comprehension of what they are reading what is the point? This is a clear sign of children being pushed before they're developmentally ready to read.

Another area of concern that has come up is the new drive of Victorian educator John Fleming's towards direct or explicit instruction. I have had many early years' educators who are struggling with this approach for their 4- and 5-year-olds. Much of the instruction is done sitting down in blocks of 15 minutes – which for many children that age, is very difficult! I am a firm believer in 'chalk and talk' – meaning that there are times when teacher instruction is a valuable part of learning. However, with today's children under 6 – this is difficult when it is so prescriptive, predictable and passive. Many early years' educators have been told they have to use this approach, and to fit it in they have had to remove many of the other activities especially play.

I recently received a message from Janet Fellowes, a senior lecturer in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University:

"As a lecturer in Early Childhood Education (Literacy) I have been shocked by what our student teachers report about in terms of what they experience when on their teaching practicums in EC classrooms. More and more their school experience provide little practical understanding of what we espouse about good ECE. More and more they share K and PP timetables that are without fundamental ECE experiences such as free / unstructured play and reading stories to children. There is a new classroom phenomena sweeping early childhood classrooms whereby one hour of direct instruction of phonics teaching is the norm. I have witnessed these sessions and the young children's boredom, lack of interest and confusion. It does seem to me that there is a strong push coming from principals in terms of such practices. Working with teachers I notice how

misdirected many of them are with the Australian Curriculum and how response to the curriculum is often the discrete direct teaching of skills and concepts.”

I was deeply concerned when I read Victorian Deputy Principal John Fleming had told teachers in a professional learning seminar “to forget everything you learned at uni by Piaget and Vygotsky because none of that gets evidence-based results in literacy and numeracy”. To me this shows a man who has very little understanding of early childhood development especially for the whole child. This is a classic case of treating children as a brain on a seat. I find it staggering that his Explicit Instruction Program has now become the new flavour of the month in some states. As Erik Jensen says unless it is interesting and engaging and meaningful to the student, they will not learn. Repetition is a key part of consolidating learning however if students display boredom there will be no dopamine made in the brain so the learning will not happen. I believe Fleming’s results in the schools in which he has worked demonstrate an improvement in structure and direction. I could probably find the same number of schools who have followed a Reggio Emilia approach – which is very whole child, student centred, adult directed and scaffolded – that has turned out the same results. There is so much more happening in the first five years of a child’s life than getting them ready to do schoolwork.

6. There needs to be a return to having conversations and consultations with the experts (especially early years) who are well-informed academics and educators including those who work in today’s schools.

We urge the new government to listen to the broader community of parents and practitioners and their call for an authentic, safe, respectful, multisensory childhood for all Australian children. Then return to the consultation process of the previous Liberal government.

At the Positive Schools conferences this year I was questioning one of the other presenters as to the state of education in Australia. We were sharing our deep concerns in a mature and rational way. When I asked her “How come we’ve got so lost so quickly?” her reply was very interesting. She said that as soon as the Labor government was elected all consultation with teachers and well-respected academics stopped. She believed this was to make sure that benchmark testing was pushed through into the Australian education environment. She believed that if they had consulted with those in the field and academics, it would never have become a reality because no one wanted benchmark testing in Australia.

I believe another good first step would be to set up reference groups to monitor the implementation of the National Curriculum for children under 6 to ensure their needs are being met. There are many committed, passionate educators who would be prepared to be a part of such reference groups.

Each state does have very different early years’ approach and there does need to be some conversation about the ‘how’ to implement the National Curriculum so that the early years are not simply used as a pawn in a game. I know Assistant Minister Sussan Ley is currently leading a review into the implementation of the EYLF and NQF but believe the National

Curriculum is just as relevant to early years so it is important to consider both in this issue

and ask how they work together.

From the correspondence I have received, WA is leading Australia in the 'push down' for formalised learning. My saddest stories from parents came from WA where, due to compulsory 5-year-old schooling being in force, there is NO FLEXIBILITY if a child is displaying distress and not coping. Even though today's children starting school are 6 months older than they were 10 years ago, many are less able than their younger counterparts of years ago, given the more stressful parenting landscape, busier childhoods and the negative impact of the screen world.

In WA, there does seem to be definite efforts from the government to consult on the 'how' and the School Curriculum and Standards Authority has been consulting with kindergarten teachers to develop "Kindergarten Guidelines that will complement the Early Years Learning Framework and the Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline... to support seamless transitions within and across early years settings" (Source: <http://k10outline.scsa.wa.edu.au/>). I also know that the Office of Early Childhood runs professional learning programs for school leaders and educators in better understanding the early years — this kind of work is encouraging and important.

Transitions – A big issue to be considered in all this is how can we better transition children to school? Age is not a reliable indicator in many cases – some girls are reading by 4, and display linguistic and emotional strengths that many boys struggle with. It's not a bad thing to start full-time when children can manage physically – exhaustion is common in today's preschool children and it may be because of less play and more concentrated learning tasks.

Homework – this is another area that needs to be explored. It is soul destroying to hear of 4-year-olds completing picture recognition sheets at home and 5-6-year-olds doing black line markers that are mind numbing and steal even more of our precious children's childhood – for no gain! No wonder parents have stopped reading to their kids – they are so busy with homework. There is no evidence that homework improves educational outcomes especially in early years and this must be stopped as soon as possible. Reading to our children should be the only 'homework' that is recommended. If we follow a 'push up' approach, sight words and numeracy practice would happen when children are 8 instead of 5 – when the majority would be better able to cope. Five and 6-year-olds need to play after school to release the nervous tension of a full day of schooling in a highly structured environment. For more information: <http://www.maggiedent.com/content/real-truth-about-homework>

Conclusion

Australia is an amazing country and a fabulous place to raise children. I hope you can see from my submission that we are not doing what is best for young children in Australia at the moment in many schools and communities.

The flow-on effect of the additional stress and the bastardisation of play is showing up already in primary and secondary students.

Or in the words of a university lecturer in engineering, Dr Alex Lubansky, from Edith Cowan

University in WA:

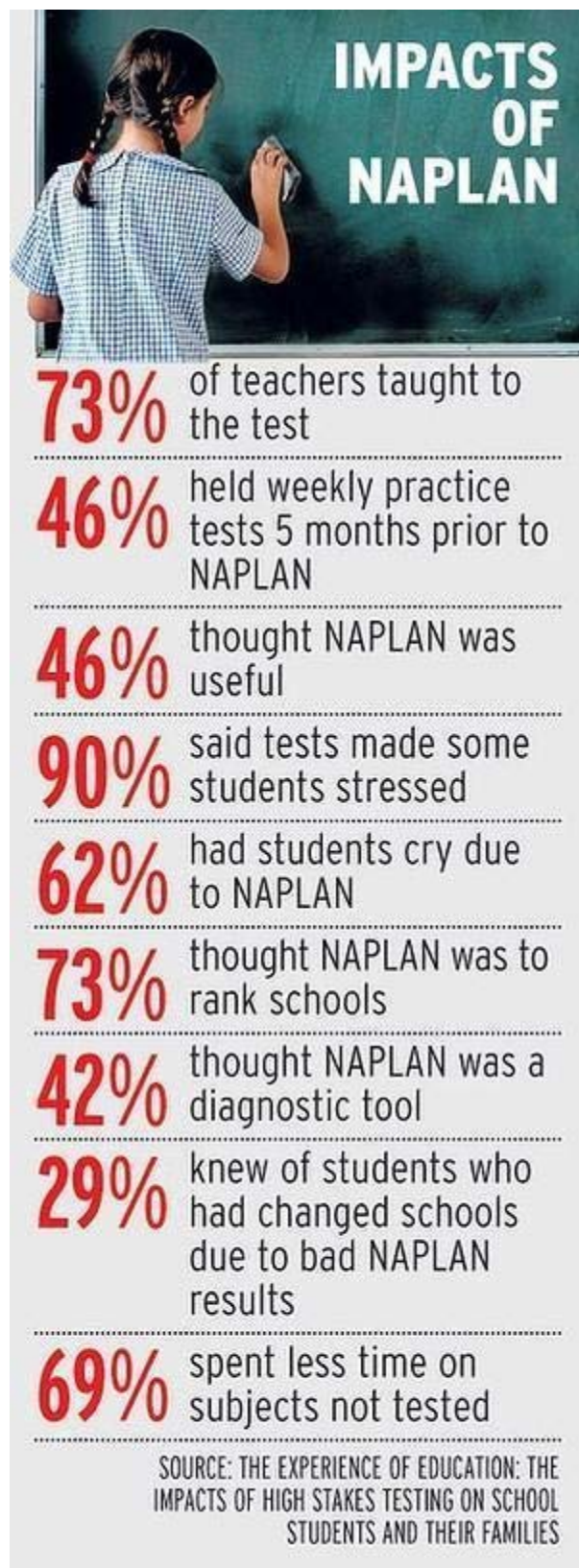
I couldn't be more strongly in favour of increasing the amount of time, effort and resource spent on play-based learning in our schools. I don't limit this view to early childhood. I believe it increases in importance as students get older, as it instills a range of very good learning practices in students and enforces a discipline on teachers where they are responding to the students' needs, interests and personalities as a basis for delivering the curriculum. Within our university teaching, we aim for "authentic" teaching, where students are exposed to as real situations as possible. Unfortunately, many students struggle to adjust to the more authentic tasks, as these represent the greatest departure from what students recognise as learning. I believe that if students had more exposure to play-based learning for longer, they would have a greater versatility, recognising interesting situations as a starting point to explore and create, leading to more engineers who enter the workforce ready to work effectively and productively, and more engineers of a higher calibre.

When we make decisions that do not take into account the whole child, when we introduce sweeping educational changes across Australia without specifics on the 'how' in terms of best practice and when we neglect to consult with educational experts as to the implementation of bold ideas, we end up where we are today. Too many Australian children under seven are hating their transition into formal schooling. Why worry about where we stand on international standings, when we have massively increasing numbers of our children struggling with mental health issues, stress-related illnesses, inappropriate behaviour, the social inability to play with other children and poor academic engagement?

Everywhere I go in this great country I am hearing experienced passionate early years' educators telling me they are considering walking away. They are struggling with being mandated from their school leaders, who have no background in early years, to introduce learning that is passive, boring and often developmentally inappropriate. Many tell me they feel they've sold their soul and that every morning they wake up, they feel frustrated and sad and not sure teaching is what they need to be doing any more. The turn-off is the same in the US, where Alfie Kohn writes:

It also seems clear that most of the people who are quitting, or seriously thinking about doing so, are not mediocre performers who are afraid of being held accountable. Rather, they are among the very best educators, frustrated by the difficulty of doing high-quality teaching in the current climate.

We are not asking for money, simply for a commitment to study the evidence which clearly demonstrates that we have been set on the wrong path and change policy to recognise and respect the rights and needs of children. I urge the current Federal Government of Australia to invest heavily in improving what is happening in the early years of our children's lives in Australia. We do have best practice. We do have amazing educators who allow children to grow on all levels. We need to clarify, consolidate and lead with courage and vision to ensure the care and education of children under six. If we aim to create happy, calm children who are capable, resilient and kind as well as clever, Australia could be seen as a world leader in education for all the right reasons. Please stop stealing childhood in the name of education.



Read more:

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/naplan-tests-take-heavy-toll-20121125-2a1n6.html#ixzz2h0GVJrr0>

Appendix 1:

Caution....brain building in progress!!!

A message from Dr Alice Brown

With children in the first years of life forming 700 new neural connections every second the quality of their environments and experiences with others are paramount (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2013). Along with other significant adults in a child's life, the role of the early childhood educator is critical and in many ways on par or even more important than any brain surgeon or neural scientist. We are the "builders of brains", the "experts in cognitive enhance". We shape lives by scaffolding children from where they are to where they can be. We are the ultimate resource

Quality early childhood experiences don't just happen. They are informed by a deep appreciation and understanding of child development, theory, experience and knowledge of how children learn. Decision making is underpinned by a respectful and humbling image of the child, seen as capable of co-constructors/co-researchers of knowledge, competent in learning and loving (Rinaldi, 2013), and with universal entitlement to play (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). This image has a profound impact on our practice.

Early childhood educators cultivate the most precious resource. We build assets and empower individuals. The positive experiences we plan and support children with provide a powerful trajectory for a child's future development, values and behaviours (Doyle, Harmon, Heckman, & Tremblay, 2009). As Robyn Moore says, "We grow little people into their bigness". The support, the environments, the programming that we develop with and for young children help to form part of the lifelong habits and experiences that have far-reaching and solidifying effects on future development, habits and behaviours that are often much more difficult to change later in the life (Shonkoff, 2012). We have power lunches with leaders of the future....and so how is it possible to be anything less than passionate (Brown, 2011. Also [see attached article by Louis Bradfield](#))

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