

Research into age start to formal education in schools



Play and the age start to formal education in schools have seen to be a highly complicated and a very problematic issue around the world. I found play was hard to define by many experts and published authors, as Tina Bruce described play as a 'political issue'. She stated, 'There are those who think it has no place in a child's education and there are those who believe it must have a central place. This debate has gone on for 200 years' (2006, p. 468).

Recently UK based experts in the field of primary education; the authors of the Cambridge review have laid their cards on the table and advised 'formal teaching of the three R's should not take place before six.' However others, notably Education Minister Ed Balls advocate on an earlier start. The Cambridge Primary review says, there is no evidence that an early introduction to formal learning has any benefit. In fact, research suggests 'too formal too soon can be dangerous counterproductive.' Children in early education are encouraged to learn through play by socially interacting with other children and adults in a range of activities.

I have discovered that it is extremely difficult to identify a particular age to when a child should begin formal education. This is because of my firm belief adopted from the EYFS key principle, 'Every child is unique.' 'I strongly believe each child is a unique individual and therefore, they should not be treated 'all the same'. In order to meet a child's needs, it is necessary to treat each child with 'equal concern' but some children may need more or different support to have equality of opportunity.' 'Every child has different learning needs and all develop at different rates, there may be some children who may be more ready to start formal education at an earlier age than

<https://assignbuster.com/research-into-age-start-to-formal-education-in-schools/>

other children of the same age, who may find a start to formal education highly stressful which may cause damage to their learning.

However, my personal views on the formal start to education are partially contradicted by the theorist Jean Piaget. Although Piaget emphasises on the importance of play in early year's education, his idea of the fixed stages of development do not support the EYFS's key principle 'every child is unique.' Piaget believed children aged between two and seven are at the 'preoperational stage' where '...child is not yet able to conceptualize abstractly and needs concrete physical situations' (Learning theories, 2006). He believed children from the ages five to eight years move from play to taking part in games. 'Children are able to play more cooperatively.' Piaget's theory showed the final stage of cognitive development is formal operations, occurring from age eleven years to adulthood. He believed children who reach this stage are able to think abstractly.

On one hand, I personally disagree with the theory of Piaget as I believe there is no certain age where a child reaches a formal operational stage of knowledge and development. Piaget's theory does not work for children with special educational needs, where the formal operational stage of a child cannot be precisely identified as Piaget suggests. I believe Piaget's last stage of formal operations is not an accurate description of cognitive development. Some adults do not attain a level of formal operations and not everyone appears to be capable of abstract reasoning. This is not that they are cognitively immature but it is because the developmental for every child is unique and has different aspects of mature thought which is not covered by Piaget's theory. I believe Piaget's theory restricts the view of the young child
<https://assignbuster.com/research-into-age-start-to-formal-education-in-schools/>

as a learner. The theory that they not capable of logical thought or able to understand complex issues could artificially restrict the curriculum offered and lead to lower expectations. I believe it is difficult to use age to determine the curriculum programme and believe that recognition of an individual child's uniqueness and developmental difference is central to defining the curriculum.

On the other hand, despite the conflicting issues to when children should be admitted to the rigorous of formal schooling. I have identified from different international countries that schools that have a later age start to formal education at six or even seven such as Finland, Poland and Sweden perform much better than countries like England, that have an earlier start to formal education at five or as early as four. However, I believe the priority is not when children start school but what they do when they get there. I analysed the early education system in Finland and Korea due to the countries being the highest performers in the OECD's latest PISA Survey. The strategies and approaches Finland and Korea have adopted in their early year's curriculum has had a positive impact on my personal philosophy of how children should be educated in the early years of childhood and have taught me the key factors in meeting children's needs as an early year's practitioner to achieve a successful outcome.

My personal views support the views of Tina Bruce that every child has the full potential to develop their abilities for learning, and all grow and develop at different rates. However, the levels of knowledge depend on a child's thought and behaviour and I believe these can be developed through adult intervention as well as, social interaction. The first five to six years of <https://assignbuster.com/research-into-age-start-to-formal-education-in-schools/>

childhood are very receptive to learning and I strongly believe this should be spent on a play based education, where children should be engaged in enjoyable activities, with the support of adults to develop their imagination through social, emotional, physical and cognitive growth.

This concept of play based education and the emphasis on social interaction in the early years of childhood can be identified in the preschools and kindergartens of Finland, ' you won't find the country's next crop of top students drilling through flashcards or poring over worksheets. More likely, you'll see them singing, playing, and painting.' In Finland, the focus for early education is on ' learning how to learn.' Children are encouraged to experience, explore, and play until the age of 7. ' Fins value the development of curiosity and social competency in the early years. They know that the " academics" will come more easily later if the foundation is there.'

In contrast, England, Ireland and Netherlands emphasize on a more prescribed curriculum for over 3 year olds. They concentrate on literacy and numeracy as they believe that there is a ' risk of academic failure' if children are not taught these formal skills. Latest News have shown that, ' While pupils in the UK enter formal schooling at five, in Finland children enter school at seven – and then only for half days.' According to OECD, ' Finnish children spend the fewest number of hours in the classroom.' This proves that spending hours in school and starting formal education at an earlier age is not the key to achieve high academic results in higher education. In fact, it is the foundation adults build for children in the early years of childhood

through social, emotional, physical and cognitive development that affect their academics in later life.

Finland appears to focus on children's social and emotional development during the preschool years, a factor that leads to exceptionally positive results later on. It has been identified that 'Social interaction' and 'adult intervention' are the key factors which these high performing countries have adopted to develop children's skills in different areas of learning. During their pre-school experience children are provided a play based learning where adults play a major role in interacting with children with a rich and a stimulating environment in meeting their individual needs.

The evidence suggests that having formal schooling earlier doesn't have an effect, but the EPPE research shows that the length of time in a good quality nursery school does. The EPPE Projects outlines the importance of social interaction and adult intervention in having an important positive impact on children's cognitive attainment. It indicates that this can best be obtained by giving children an early pre-school experience which promotes inclusion and an opportunity for children to interact with other children. It has strongly suggested children that gain no pre-school experience or adult involvement in the early years are at a 'risk status in relation to special educational needs.' It has also highlighted 'children with no pre-school experience had poorer cognitive attainment, sociability and concentration when they started primary school.' The REPEY Project also identified those settings which saw cognitive and social development as complimentary achieved the best outcomes.

The importance of social interaction and adult intervention can be supported by the theorists Jerome Bruner and Lev Vygotsky who have highly influenced my personal philosophy. Both theorists argued that social environment and in particular our social interactions with others are fundamental to learning. Vygotsky stressed, ' It is through our social interactions with those around us, that we slowly move to becoming self-sufficient and independent learners, and develop our intellectual capabilities.'

Vygotsky and Bruner have also argued that language plays a greater role in facilitating thought than Piaget recognized. Their work demonstrates the important two way relationship between language development and the social context in supporting interaction in the early years. Vygotsky's theory is built on the fundamental premise that development occurs on the social level within a cultural context and language is the major tool by which adults induct children into a particular view of the world. ' According to Vygotsky, social experiences shape the way individuals think and interpret the world.' His theories underpin the importance of talk between children and adults, and between children and children for cognitive development. ' Bruner, Vygotsky and Wells have all stressed the importance of language in terms of its use as a tool of social interaction as well as a tool for organizing knowledge.'

My views support these theories as I strongly believe that children learn extensively through interaction with its environment, usually through talk and play. I believe adults play a crucial role in the early years setting. Adults are role models for children; they play a wide range of unique and enormous roles such as observers, supporters, providers and as play mates. This can <https://assignbuster.com/research-into-age-start-to-formal-education-in-schools/>

be supported by the direct link between children and adult's learning by Anning and Edwards (2003) '...children learn to love learning through being with adults who also love to learn, and are themselves in context that encourage learning.'

The link made from Anning and Edwards can also be supported by Vygotsky's main theory which is the 'zone of proximal development'; he believed that children work on two developmental levels, their actual level and their proximal level. The 'zone' lies just between these levels where the child is just starting to expand their abilities and is the difference between what a child can do with help today and what they can do tomorrow, independently. . For example, supporting a child's bottom as they try to climb the ladder. Vygotsky placed great emphasis on the role of an adult in teaching culture, knowledge and language. He believed that children tackle problems at a higher level when working with an adult than individually. Vygotsky suggested, 'learning mainly occurs and is extended through interaction with adults or more able 'others'. In support to this the Reggio Emilia interpreted the zone of proximal development as the idea of learning partners that operates in his nurseries in Italy and which are becoming well known. His teachers take the role of the children's learning partner and offer strategies to help them when they have problems.

However, on the other hand, the theorist Jean Piaget and the Key educator Maria Montessori partially contradict the views of the theorist Vygotsky and Bruner. Maria Montessori's work suggests that the child should be encouraged to work individually, she suggests little direct parental

involvement and the role of the adult is limited as she believes the child has <https://assignbuster.com/research-into-age-start-to-formal-education-in-schools/>

a 'teacher within himself.' Montessori's approach highlighted that the key role of adult is to provide a learning environment for children and the materials during the activities but encouraged children to work alone with the materials presented to them. Jean Piaget partially supports this approach and places great emphasis on children as being 'active learners' which adults must have confidence in the child's ability to learn on his own. Piaget therefore, underestimated the social and cultural context in learning and cognitive development.

To some extent I disagree with the theory that a child should be left to learn on their own. I personally support the views of Meadows (1995) who criticises Piaget's theory. Meadows argued that 'Piaget implicitly saw children as largely independent and isolated in their construction of knowledge and understanding of the world.' I support this argument, as I believe it is through active intervention, guidance and support of a skilled adult that children make the most progress in their learning. I believe this support from adults can be given to children through skilled questioning and suggestions which is also known as 'scaffolding' in Bruner's theory. I believe scaffolding is a significant way of adult-child interaction that bridge children's understanding with that of the adults. I believe it is extremely important for every adult to play a 'positive role model' for every child that can guide them to develop their maximum potential in all aspects of their lives. Adults working with children make a big difference to children's learning. They cannot only stimulate and support children to reach beyond their current limits but can also support their development and inspire their learning.

The importance of the role of adults and social interaction can clearly be identified in the preschools and kindergartens of Hong Kong, Singapore and China where greater emphasis is now being placed on social learning and cohesiveness through adult involvement. Adult intervention did not only relate to staff and teachers working with children in the early years setting but it gave great importance to 'parental involvement.' In these countries 'parental involvement;' is an essential part of the child's well-being. In most cases it is possible for parents or guardians to have some input towards their child's daily plan during pre-primary education, and they are involved in creating the curriculum for the setting. Parents receive constant feedback from teachers regarding their child's progress throughout their learning and development. They are also involved in the planning and assessment of their children, and an individual education plan is drawn up between parents and teachers to track a child's development.

Parents and practitioners need each other and have useful differences in their approach that can complement each other. Parents are experts on their own individual child, and practitioners offer expertise in this stage of children's development and learning. By combining these, the best opportunities can be provided for each child. By working together they bring together the two halves of the child's world. (p. 149). I believe parents are the child's first teacher because they have known their child from birth and wise practitioners look to learn from the parents of the children they are trying to help. Sure Start guidance (2000) stresses the importance of consistency for the child; 'A strong relationship with parents encourages continuity for the child, good communication, participation and ownership.'

Government legislation and guidance strongly encourage working in partnership with parents. For example, the Education Reform Act 2010 emphasised schools' accountability to parents choice, whilst the Children Act 1989 also stressed the importance of parental responsibility. The EPPE projects has also identified how Governments are also aware that parental involvement can be a lever for raising standards. Findings from large-scale studies in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States show that schools in which pupils do well in both academic attainment and positive attitudes to learning are characterised by good relations between home and school.

However, there are a few complications during the process of building a partnership with parents. Some research on parent involvement in the early years of schooling for instance studies in reading and literacy development (Spreadbury 1995) suggest that children's educational development can be enhanced with long -term positive effects. However, other researchers suggest that some forms and patterns of parental involvement can constrain and even contribute towards the reproduction of social inequalities. This issue can be seen in Japan where Griffin in Pugh described Japanese child development experts, in discussion on spoiling children, they described the attachment-like behaviour of mothers as ' narcissistic' over involved investment in children. They also reported that ' in China group day care is viewed beneficial because children can get away from the dangers of spoiling in a single child family.

Another complication may be that not all parents whose children attend early childhood settings will have had a positive experience of education
<https://assignbuster.com/research-into-age-start-to-formal-education-in-schools/>

themselves, and for this reason they might distrust those whom they are entrusting their children. This can be identified in the recent debate on formal and play based education. This debate of when to start formal education and encouraging play in the early years of education is a complex and a never ending process and this is mainly due to the involvement and concern of the different views of parents across the world. As articles and latest reports state, ' Parents are concerned and fearful about their kid's future.' (Play debate, 2008) Parents always want the best for their children and have different views to their child's education as some believe children should be aware of reading and numeracy skills before they enter primary education and some view play as a ' fun' and ' relaxing activity' where children are only playing games and not learning.

I strongly believe these misconceptions can be solved with a warm positive relationship between parents and teachers. Although early childhood educators play an important role in the care and education of children, I believe it is crucial that they take into account of what parents want for their own children. It is important that we ensure careful planning and preparation on how to work with parents effectively in bringing out the best from their child. As teachers I believe it is important we listen carefully to parent's concerns and hopes for their children. Every parent is entitled to their own opinion; however I believe their perspectives entirely depend on the length of time they have spent in observing children. Therefore, parents should be encouraged to spend time with children in the early year's setting so they can observe and understand how children learn best through play based activities. Teachers should have consistent discussions and meetings with

parents to help parents understand the concept of play based learning and how it is not only about children having 'fun'. Furthermore as long as 1580 Montaigne, the French essayist wrote, 'It should be noted that most children at play are not playing about; their games should be seen as their most serious minded activity.' (Tina Bruce, 2006, p. 465) Tina Bruce also argued 'Play is not the same as recreation or relaxation. Play is about high levels of learning while recreation is about relaxing and not thinking very hard' (2006, p. 466).

In relation to the debate on 'play' and the issues which have been raised against play, I have acknowledged that play is difficult to define. This is highlighted by Tina Bruce who mentions, 'Play is one of the most difficult aspects of a child's development to understand and support.' Bruce also states, 'Play is one of the most complicated concepts to study and understand, and there is a mass literature written about it.' (2006, p. 468)

However, many adults view play as a form of 'entertainment' and see play and work as two different forms of learning. I observed this during my school placement where I came across teachers saying to children 'when you have done this task, you can go and play.' I found that many teachers saw play as separate from 'work' for young children which I believe can lead to an unnatural division in that it rejects the important principle that play is the main vehicle for children's learning.

Play is one of the top key priorities in the EYFS, 'Play is at the heart of the EYFS...' 'They EYFS is delivered through a well planned play based approach to learning and development.' Early childhood education in many

countries has been built upon a strong tradition of a materially rich and active play-based pedagogy and environment

Adults working with young children should avoid using language in ways that devalue what the child is doing in play by separating what is seen as 'work' from what is seen as play.

Through play children are helped to develop physically, and are encouraged to explore, experience, discover, practise skills and ideas, and interact socially. Play acts as an outlet for feelings and concern. Playing goes ahead of serious 'doing' as children experiment and become confident with new skills and concepts. I believe it is through play children create other worlds where they can test out reality and discover who they are. In play children's self esteem grows and develops as they can succeed in what they do. 'Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul.'

If we step back and look at the pros and cons of Play Based learning in year 1, it becomes obvious that play is not only an effective means of teaching and learning, but often the most beneficial to the child.

Therefore, from my personal philosophy I have learnt that adults from teachers, carers, parents to catering staff have an extremely significant role in the early years setting to develop a positive, warm and loving relationship with a group of children as a good friend, philosopher and a guide. They need to take precautionary steps to follow the right path keeping in mind the pros and cons of their thoughts, speech and action which will leave an everlasting imprint on young minds. As an early years practitioner I have <https://assignbuster.com/research-into-age-start-to-formal-education-in-schools/>

acknowledged that I have an important responsibility in creating a bright future for every child I work with. This is by teaching good values, building high esteem and arming pupils with knowledge and skills that will them cope and integrate with the outside world.

UNICEF therefore proposes that attempts to mitigate educational disadvantage need to begin through good quality early childhood care and education. Care outside the home in the two years or so before primary school is today a fact of life for many children growing up in OECD countries. And there is mounting evidence to suggest that high quality early childhood care and education may have an increasing role to play in minimising educational disadvantage and social exclusion