Too much, too soon? Early learning and the erosion of childhood
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Too much, too soon (TMTS) is an edited book conceived and produced by the OpenEye campaign, a lobby group opposed to the English government’s Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS; DCSF, 2008), a statutory set of welfare, learning and development requirements for early childhood education. The controversial nature of the EYFS needs no explanation to the readers of Early Years: the feeling of many involved in early years education and experts in other fields concerned with child development is that the learning and development requirements set out in the EYFS are too prescriptive and developmentally inappropriate. This sentiment mirrors the concerns that experts in other countries have voiced following moves to introduce formal academic instruction in early years education (for example, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009; for popular coverage see Tullis, 2011). I have gone on public record voicing similar concerns (Kidd, 2012) and so it was with much enthusiasm that I agreed to review this book.

The book consists of 23 chapters divided into four parts. Part I discusses the nuances of the EYFS and its effect on various stakeholders involved in early years education (for example, parents, teachers, childminders). Part II discusses different perspectives on child development and early years education. Part III discusses research on issues concerned with the EYFS, and Part IV attempts to provide a roadmap to guide future changes in early years education provision. The contributors come from a diverse range of backgrounds, and as such there are a broad range of opinions. In this sense, TMTS takes a shotgun approach to its opposition to the EYFS. Some of these shotgun pellets hit the mark; others are a fair way off.

The best chapters provide cogent and reasoned arguments in opposition to various aspects of the EYFS. In Part I Leach (Chapter 1) convincingly argues against the manner in which the curriculum privileges cognitive development at the expense of development in other domains (for example, social, emotional). Dougherty (Ch.3) provides key insights into the process of applying for an exemption from the framework, and Adams and Adams (Ch.4) provide a lucid account of their experience as childminders. In Part II Katz (Ch.8) discusses current perspectives on early childhood curricula, providing 12 principles for curriculum design. Other key chapters discuss alternative pedagogies (Steiner Waldorf and Reggio Emilia, Chapters 12 and 15) and the key role of play in child development (Chapters 13 and 14). In Part III,
Suggate (Ch.17) provides a brilliantly astute examination of research examining the age at which children begin reading instruction. Sigman (Ch.19) discusses the deleterious effects of screen technology (for example, TV viewing) on child development, and Margaret Edington (Ch.20) imparts some insightful pearls of wisdom gained from years of experience as an early childhood educator in an interview with editor Richard House. In Part IV Sheerman (Ch.22) provides a politician’s perspective on policy development, and Scott and House (Ch.23) draw upon the contributions in the book to provide a set of recommendations for educators and policy-makers. These chapters represent the best of TMTS.

Some other chapters are not up to this high standard. Too often contributors make claims that are not supported by evidence or are simply incorrect. In numerous cases there are questionable and over-simplified interpretations of neuroscientific research, some of which are drawn from questionable sources. Other chapters are distinctly anti-science or anti-scientific method, making some rather startling yet unsupported (or incorrect) claims. These misplaced critiques take the reader too far away from the important issues at hand and call for a greater collaborative effort across a range of disciplines to both create and disseminate knowledge.

TMTS will appeal to an audience as broad as its contributors, most of whom will be concerned about the changing nature of childhood. There is some great stuff here, but I urge readers to take many of the more controversial points with a grain of salt. Readers who are looking for a more focused argument that is in the same spirit of TMTS would do well to check out Hirsh-Pasek, et al. (2009).

References


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