

Book Review

Palmer, Sue (2016) *Upstart: The case for raising the school starting age and providing what the under-sevens really need*. Edinburgh: Floris Books

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Upstart is 'what is says on the tin', a manifesto for raising the school starting age to seven years old. As such, I find that I need to be up front from the start and say that I am wholly for the perspective argued for in *Upstart*. The emphasis on play as a mechanism for providing children with the basic understandings for more formal education and learning is something I, as an ex-primary teacher, have preached about for a long time – we all need a bit more play in our learning but particularly young children. In addition, as a parent of a four-year-old, it is a topic I identify with on a personal level. It is almost impossible for me not to be affected by the arguments.

Sue Palmer arguably plays on this emotive aspect throughout the book and at a certain level I was happy to play along. I enjoyed the use of real life anecdotes from the UK and Scandinavia to illustrate the arguments; they gave real life depth to the discussion. They spoke to me of colleagues I have worked with across my career and I could relate to the sentiments expressed. Similarly, I found the chapter on the Finnish Foundations fascinating. The insight into the almost mythical practices of the Finnish education system was a joy to read and I learned a lot. I was additionally intrigued by the argument that even in Finland, where they have standard practices the envy of the world, there is little recognition of the importance of the early years for providing a basis for individuals' future success.

The historical perspective on early years' provision were particularly useful in providing perspective on current practices. It was enlightening to read about English curriculum change and its relationship to assessment over time, and the way this translated down into the early years. The introduction of and increasing emphasis on standardised tests as a method of judgement on individuals, teachers and schools being a prominent theme. Clearly expressed and written in a manner that made the political maneuverings easy to understand, Sue

Palmer's insider glimpse on the internal wrangling behind policy making in England is quite scary, but I am sure it's realistic.

Sometimes the theory and research used to back up points could be considered cursory and while the range of perspectives is to be applauded, the depth is sometimes lacking. This does not mean I would not include it on a reading list for students, but it is not a research text per se. The technical appendices mitigate this slightly and some are a useful reference point on their own merit. Example include: a table of school starting ages around the world with reference to post-colonial historical connections; research on winter and summer born children; practical examples of practice and policy, one from Finland (a lesson for linguistic skills) and one from the UK (The UK Early Childhood Charter: although this is orientated towards English policy). However, they are very targeted and not extensive.

In addition, I do feel that some of the causal relationships, for example, between health and wellbeing in later life and early years' practices, were simplistically explained, if indeed we accept causality at all in education, and would have benefited from a more nuanced engagement. This is maybe the downside of the manifesto format and a strong desire to put across a single point of view, however much I agree with it. There was a tendency to put different standpoints in opposition, to present dichotomous thinking (Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries/early and late starting countries/ S-type and E-type mindset). As such, the complexity of the debate is brushed over and this is not necessarily helpful for a more nuanced understanding of the context.

This does, however, lead to my main quibble. Considering the book finished with the author's intent to work in Scotland, it was somewhat disappointing that so much of the text was centred on the English tradition as representative of the UK. It could be argued that this was synonymous with the tendency to rely on oppositional arguments – the earliest starters versus the latest starters. But it does little to account for the diversity of practice in the sector across the four devolved education systems of the UK where there is increased flexibility, and older, starting ages. I understand that age five is still young in comparison to the book's recommended starting age, but it is not the extreme that England has become and neither is the policy that underpins it. It does distort the arguments slightly.

Overall, the book is an easy read, introducing the dilemmas of early years' practice in the UK in an accessible way. The arguments are comprehensive with interesting connections made between child development, pedagogic traditions, policy agendas and lifelong health and wellbeing. As a manifesto, it argues a point that I know so many parents and practitioners of early years' children, including me, believe passionately in. It does this in a wide ranging and clearly argued way, maintaining an accessibility of voice.

About the author

Kate's work focuses on the development of innovative pedagogies and research methodologies (including visual approaches) that facilitate effective talk about learning (metacognition). For information about her go to <http://www.strath.ac.uk/staff/wallkateprofessor/>

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