

Better without Baseline: the evidence

Dr Pam Jarvis

Between 2001 and 2004 I carried out research investigating children's play-based learning in the period between their last term in nursery and their first term in Year 1. My investigations focused upon their play in the outdoor areas of the school, particularly in what were termed 'playtimes' which, within the culture of English primary education, were constructed as periods during which children took a break from learning. My findings indicated that, to the contrary, some of the richest learning of all was taking place during such playtimes, as children collaborated with peers to construct complex narratives that made 'human sense' of their activities. There were football games where a rudimentary offside rule was constructed, children competed to 'be Beckham', and had discussions about team names where the category error of Manchester versus England was contemplated. There were chasing games where different roles for girls and boys were constructed by the players, and there were fantasy games where the children collaboratively constructed fast-moving narratives involving superheroes, witches, monsters and princesses, and where heroism, justice mediation and compassion were explored. (Jarvis 2007a¹ and Jarvis 2007b²).

At the same time that my research in primary school was ongoing, I was teaching 'A' level psychology and sociology in secondary school. Here, too, I found imaginative, sensitive young people, but later in the developmental process, on the threshold between childhood and adulthood. Psychology and Drama were a common combination of 'A' levels at this time, and we had many discussions of the psychology of Shakespeare, how he used his depth of psychological knowledge in his plays. Their final performance that year was in [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#), and I still treasure the video of their performance, purchased for me by the students, along with my memory of their live performance as darkly traditional English fairies, a narrative that is in sharp contrast with the more familiar Disney 'sparkly magic' confection. They collaborated in their performance as did the younger children, but this time with the sophistication to give a compelling portrayal of the deeply mischievous, boarding-on-psychopaths that Shakespeare creates in his mythically derived constructions of Titania, Oberon and Puck.

Even at that time, however, there were ongoing changes in the way that 'A' levels were constructed, and it was becoming harder and harder to teach in such a broad-based, flexible manner. The questioning on the exam papers narrowed year by year; students were no longer expected to demonstrate their broad knowledge of the subject; the emergent goal was to answer very specific questions to which they had been mechanically taught the answers.

Between 2010 and 2014, having moved on to university teaching, I worked with two colleagues, one in the UK, one in the US to examine the evidence on recent changes in the construction of what serves as 'education' in English speaking

¹ Jarvis P. (2007) Monsters, Magic and Mr. Psycho: Rough and Tumble Play in the Early Years of Primary School, a Biocultural Approach. *Early Years, An International Journal of Research and Development*, Vol 27 (2) 171-188

² Jarvis, P. (2007) Dangerous activities within an invisible playground: a study of emergent male football play and teachers' perspectives of outdoor free play in the early years of primary school. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, Vol 15 (3) pp.245-259

nations. We very quickly linked these changes to a contemporaneous increase in juvenile psychological problems in the both nations. For example in the UK, the Children's Society and the University of York subsequently estimated that in 2012 about ['half a million children in the UK in the eight to 15 age range have low well-being at any point in time'](#), and a [2013 Unicef report](#) focusing upon the richer nations, found that, in the UK in particular, children experience a feeling of isolation which arises from situations in which they perceive themselves to be continually in competition with each other. Statistics indicate that around one in ten children in the UK will [have a clinically diagnosed mental disorder](#), although [more recent research in the US](#) suggests that this number may have risen in the second decade of the 21st century.

We found no evidence to suggest that 'transmit and test' education systems, and/ or early exposure to formal education raised educational standards; in fact there is evidence to the contrary, in that [nations in which children start formal education later](#) (up to the age of seven) ultimately achieve [better results](#) than those where they start formal education earlier. For example, Finland, where children start formal schooling at seven, are allocated a substantial amount of time for play, and not formally assessed at all throughout the entire early years and primary school period [is ranked fourteen places higher than the United Kingdom](#) in the most recent PISA comparisons.

We explored literature ranging across psychology, anthropology, education, sociology, marketing and philosophy to create a holistic picture of the situation. Our conclusion was that 'over the last few decades, Anglo-American society has increasingly placed children within highly artificial, adult-directed environments' and we identified a key issue within this as the 'experience of immersion within rushed transmit-and-test processes erroneously presented as "teaching and learning"' (Jarvis et al 2014, p.63). [The article](#), *On 'becoming social': the importance of collaborative free play in childhood* in the International Journal of Play, has become one of the [most downloaded from the journal website](#).

However, the English education system has continued to become even more 'transmit and test' focused, and the latest initiative in this area has extended literacy and numeracy testing to children in the first half term of their reception year, which for some will fall within in weeks of their fourth birthday: Baseline testing, intended to become statutory from September 2016. One of the tests that has been endorsed by the government requires that a child sits with an adult at an iPad, listening to a series of recorded prompts, pointing to pictures in response to a computer voice. The device records the child's overall score, which is then automatically forwarded to the Department for Education. The score is then entered on the child's national record as the 'Baseline' against which all subsequent assessments will be evaluated. How this process will effectively track the child's developing narrative imagination in a game of fairies and princesses against their later understanding of Shakespeare's dark imps, and their ability to reflect upon this with respect to a deepening knowledge of human psychology is unknown, and I challenge the government to respond to this question.

Teachers are already very aware of the issues, as I was as a classroom teacher eight years ago. Here are some comments that they made to the researchers who

[have just published the report *Exam Factories? The impact of accountability measures on children and young people*:](#)

It is heart-breaking to have a four-year-old approach me in tears because they 'are still in the bad group for reading' because they have already been streamed in phonics at age four! *Primary teacher 'outstanding' primary school, p.45*

All the focus is on phonics, so children are not learning other key reading strategies. Often they don't even realise it is a story they are reading! *Primary teacher 'outstanding' primary school, p.46*

EYFS/Year 1 children [*children between 4 and 6, the same age as my research participants in the early 2000s*] are suffering from night terrors, sleep walking and other sleep disorders. Parents confide that the children cry at the thought of coming to school and are often exhausted due to the stress of learning. *Primary teacher, p.59*

A secondary teacher offers a very salient question about what may happen in the future when these children become adults and realise that emergent mental health difficulties have been largely created by the way in which they were schooled:

Do we constantly try and just hit the targets of whatever the government is saying at the present time or do we do what we think is best for our students and face the consequences? *Secondary teacher, p.42*

When it is considered that the [Early Years Foundation Stage \(2014\)](#) advises 'Providers must take all necessary steps to keep children safe and well' (p.16), a double bind dichotomy arises. If children are being forced into a situation where their mental health is being compromised, when should their teachers refuse to co-operate with the government policy that is creating such unhappiness and insecurity?

Many teachers like myself vote with their feet, refusing to be part of such a dysfunctional national machine. This is just an individual solution however, and is already impacting upon the profession as a whole, in that [four in ten Newly Qualified Teachers quit in the first year](#), [50% of teachers are no longer working in state education five years after qualification](#), and [the cohort of candidates for head teacher posts is rapidly dwindling](#). It does not solve the core problem which is succinctly voiced by a secondary teacher in the [Exam Factories](#) report: 'as a teacher you are not allowed to teach any more' (p.48).

The wider evidence indicates that the [DFE does not listen to teachers or to early years and education academics](#); it responds to our criticisms by turning the debate into a political points scoring match. This must cease, and in order for this to happen, parents and the general public must stringently question the government for the empirical evidence that supports their policy, and if they are not satisfied with the answers, further question why their children and grandchildren are to be fed into such a dysfunctional, toxic machine.

I am sure that all of those with Qualified Teacher Status, myself included, can empathise with an [Exam Factories](#) participant who poignantly commented 'I don't

want to be some robot stood in front of kids' (Primary teacher, p.49). We are now urgently requesting the nation's help to deal with this dilemma.

Please visit the ['Better without Baseline'](#) ['Too Much, Too Soon'](#) and [Save Childhood](#) web pages to receive more information about how we as a profession can collectively respond to the increasingly dysfunctional environments in which we are expected to teach and care for children.



This article is distributed under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) Creative Commons License, which allows readers to download and share freely with others, as long as the article remains unchanged, is credited to the author, and is distributed free and without charge.