

Persistence is important: some messages from research summarised

Two short (slightly updated) extracts from Moylett (2013) *Active Learning*, London: MA Education Ltd.

Chapter 2 pp25-26

Einstein, who knew a thing or two about involvement and concentration, seemed to decry his own achievement when he said: "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious." It was that curiosity that kept him working at the theory of relativity for years, despite many setbacks. Most of us will not discover such ground-breaking concepts, but if we are encouraged to concentrate and be persistent it will stand us in good stead for the rest of our lives according to some recent research which interestingly compares the long term effects of early persistence with the long term effects of reading and maths ability.

The study followed 430 children from preschool age to adulthood. Parents were asked a series of questions about their child's ability to pay attention at the age of four, such as whether they played with a single toy for long periods and whether they gave up easily when confronted by a problem.

Each child's reading and maths ability was tested at age 7 and again at age 21.

Contrary to researchers' expectations, they found that maths and reading ability did not have a significant effect on whether or not students gained a university degree. But those who could concentrate and persist at the age of four were almost 50 per cent more likely to have completed a degree course by the age of 25. Dr Megan McClelland, who led the study, said: "The important factor was being able to focus and persist. Someone can be brilliant, but that doesn't necessarily mean they can focus when they need to and finish a task or job.....Academic ability carries you a long way, but these other skills are also important ... the ability to listen, pay attention and complete important tasks is crucial for success later in life."

Reference

McClelland, M., Acock, C., Piccinin, A., Rhea, S.A. and Stallings, M.(2012) 'Relations between preschool attention span-persistence and age 25 educational outcomes' *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* , 28

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The **High Scope** Perry Pre-School project (is) one of the strongest sources of evidence we have about the long-lasting effects of how we are encouraged to learn when we are young. The heart of the High Scope approach is social constructivist ...supporting children to plan, carry out and review their own learning, motivated by their own ideas and interests and supported by skilled practitioners as appropriate. The original High Scope project has been the subject of a rigorous longitudinal study following children who took part in the programme until they were over 40 years old. One strand of the research compared children who had been in the project with those who went to traditional nursery schools (largely child-initiated activity) and those who attended 'direct instruction' (behaviourist/formal, practitioner-led) pre-schools.

Children who had attended direct instruction settings showed early achievement gains in English and Maths but as the children got older that advantage disappeared and the balance shifted. By the age of 15 children from the direct instruction group were half as likely to read books, twice as likely to have committed 'delinquent acts' and were far more

likely to be socially and emotionally troubled than children from High Scope and traditional nursery schools. By the age of 23 the direct instruction group were almost four times more likely to have been arrested and had almost eight times the rate of emotional impairments. They were about half as likely to have graduated from college.

When, at age 40, the High Scope group were compared with children who did not go to any pre-school provision it was found that they exhibited less anti-social and criminal behaviour and were less likely to be drug-users. They were far more likely to be doing voluntary work in the community, have stable marriages and higher earnings. It is significant that these High Scope children were all born in poverty and had been identified as at risk of academic failure.

From 1997 in the UK the **Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)** project looked at the effects of good quality early years education and followed the original children until they finished compulsory education at 16. Like High Scope the researchers found that pre-school quality was still predicting better social-behavioural outcomes at age 14 and beyond.

Both High Scope and EPPE focused on children in provision for 3-to-4-year-olds. Other studies have linked **babies' persistence** at various ages with parenting style and toddler outcomes. For example, one study compared babies' persistence at 6 and 14 months with their mothers' 'teaching style'. They found that mothers who provide access to stimulating objects, are sensitive and responsive to children's emotions, and support children's behaviours just above their current level may foster both persistent behaviour and advanced cognitive development in the future. They suggest that practitioners should work with at-risk children and families to develop strategies that support the development of persistence as early as possible. (Banerjee and Tamis-LeMonda 2007)

The big message from all this research is that what practitioners do in the early years matters for life. As individuals we cannot stop children being born into poverty and disadvantage, but our practice can improve their long term outcomes. The formal behaviourist view that all learning is shaped by the teacher (as in the direct instruction pre-schools) does not have long term impact on aspects of life which help us sustain our learning, loving and earning power. Concentrating in the early years on how children learn by supporting their well-being and learning strategies enables them to be more self-reliant active learners who can exercise control over their own lives. **If we concentrate on what rather than how children learn, any short-term gain soon wears off** and these children are then left with insufficient emotional and cognitive self-regulation resources to manage their lives successfully. It was the concentration on how we learn that ensured the High Scope children were more likely to go to college, rather than filling them up with knowledge that was soon forgotten.

References

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