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The Secretary for Education and Skills,

Scottish Government

15th November, 2022

Dear Ms Somerville,

Thank you very much for your letter of 31st October, describing the progress made in the provision of early learning and care over recent years, the extension of parents’ rights to funded deferral for four-year-old children, and the excellent early years guidance in *Realising the Ambition: Being Me.*

We at Upstart Scotland have been very grateful for all these developments but are still deeply concerned that current educational policy in the early years of primary school is damaging the educational chances of very many children and failing to maximise the long term health and well-being of the majority of school pupils. I hope you will bear with me as I try to describe these concerns because, so far, policy-makers don’t seem to have understood the points we are trying to make about the need to focus on child development (as opposed to age-related standards of attainment) between the ages of three and seven.

The Upstart campaign was started in 2015 by parents and professionals from a wide range of backgrounds, including early years, education, developmental science, children’s rights, social justice, the play sector, environmental sustainability and the arts. We were worried by the potential long-term effects of significant lifestyle changes over recent decades on young children’s overall development, particularly the decline of active, social, outdoor play. We had evidence that these changes – combined with Scotland’s extremely early school starting age – were likely to lead to a widening of the poverty-related attainment gap, increases in developmental and emotional support needs, and – as time went on – an escalation of mental health problems among children and young people.

For instance, in terms of the attainment gap, research in 2014 showed that, at age five, children from low income families lagged roughly a year behind those from high income families in spoken language and problem-solving skills. Spoken language and problem-solving are not school subjects that have to be taught. They are ‘biologically primary knowledge’ which *develops* during early childhood as a result of positive interactions with caring adults and plenty of self-directed, active, social play. This naturally developing ‘biologically primary knowledge’ covers many other skills and capacities (not least self-regulation and emotional resilience) that underpin lifelong well-being. It also establishes the foundation upon which children’s ability to benefit from formal schooling is based.

The gap in spoken language and problems-solving skills at age five shows that the attainment gap is at root *developmental*. The best way to close it, therefore, is to support disadvantaged children’s development through relationship-centred, play-based pedagogical practice, thus ensuring a sound foundation for learning when they are ready for specific literacy/ numeracy teaching. (Incidentally, in order to develop children’s interest in the three Rs, the educational setting must be ‘literacy-rich’ – e.g. plenty of stories, rhymes, environmental print, mark-making activities - and ‘maths-rich’, e.g. plenty of construction, cooking, number songs, puzzles, counting games, tallying, etc.)

A developmental approach of this kind does not mean ‘holding back’ those children who,thanks to their family background, are ‘ready’ to learn specific literacy/numeracy skills. In a developmentally-appropriate EY setting, every child is supported as appropriate to his/her developmental level. But it does mean that success in the three Rs is not regarded as of central importance at this stage. Attention is instead directed at children’s healthy development in general: physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.

However, back in 2015 the Scottish educational system did not recognise the significance of these developmental factors. It was the year the National Improvement Framework launched, with an educational agenda aimed at reducing the poverty-related *educational* attainment gap. This included the introduction of Scottish National Standardised Assessments in literacy and numeracy which – since NIF shared the national cultural assumption that schooling in the three Rs should begin at age five – would start in Primary 1, to provide a ‘baseline’ for measuring future progress. The P1 SNSA was accompanied by benchmarks for literacy and numeracy attainment and teachers were advised ‘there is no need to provide curriculum level judgements in all curriculum areas – stick to literacy and numeracy’.

Local authority managers, anxious to help close the attainment gap, have ever since required schools to produce data on all P1 children’s progress in literacy and numeracy. So P1 teachers are obliged to teach literacy and numeracy skills to all children, whether the children are ready to learn or not.

Studies of the effects of early formal schooling on children who are not developmentally ready show two types of outcome:

* some simply switch off, fail to make progress and acquire emotional and/or behavioural problems that dog them throughout their school careers;
* the majority struggle to understand and make some progress but, since their learning is based on shaky foundations, they do not realise their full potential.

Children in this latter group are often anxious and have a poor self-image as learners so, as time goes on, they’re more likely to develop emotional and mental health problems. These usually become noticeable in their early teens.

Upstart’s argument is that – in the early years of primary school – the aims of educational policy-makers, in both national and local government, are now in direct conflict with the developmentally-appropriate advice provided in *Realising the Ambition: Being Me.* P1 teachers are, on the one hand, required to support children’s individual holistic development; on the other hand, they’re simultaneously required to ensure that all children make ‘progress’ against age-related benchmarks.

We recognise that, from the age of eight (the end of ‘early childhood’ as defined by the UN and by Scotland’s Early Years Framework) teachers must take note of age-related standards. However, during the early years – at least to age six, and preferably seven – the emphasis must be on supporting children’s individual development. This would not only maximise all children’s chances of lifelong health and wellbeing, but would also help create the levellest possible playing field in terms of educational achievement.

The developmental issues described in this letter have been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic and will be further exacerbated by the current cost-of-living crisis. Scotland cannot afford to ignore the significance of early child development any longer.

We at Upstart have been heartened by the support shown for a kindergarten stage by delegates at this year’s SNP conference (and, the following week, at the Scottish Green conference). We cannot understand why our arguments still fall on deaf ears at government level and would be very grateful to meet with you to discuss them further in person.

Thank you for reading this letter.

Yours sincerely,



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cc Professor Carol Campbell; Professor Alma Harris

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