**Upstart Scotland AGM, 30/6/20**

**Via Zoom**

**Report from the Chair**

Well, we didn’t expect this, did we? The worldwide COVID-19 crisis is still working its way out but we have to hope that one result will be increased awareness of the importance of early childhood education and care in preparing children for a very uncertain future.

There were some very hopeful developments in Scotland during the opening months of 2020 which Upstart is keen to support. However, I’ve found it impossible to write this report in anything other than chronological order so you’ll have to wade through some classic Scottish miserablism before getting to the cheerful bit. Sorry!

**P1 SNSA**

This time last year, we were still deeply embroiled in the ‘Play Not Tests for P1’ campaign and waiting for the decision of the government’s ‘independent review’ of the Scottish National Standardised Assessments at P1. As expected, the Reedy Review ruled in the government’s favour so the P1 SNSA was not scrapped.

Upstart wrote to Kit Wyeth of the National Improvement Framework, asking for a slot at a forthcoming conference on the way forward, then repeatedly re-sent the letter until we got a reply … which was no. I was however granted a phone conversation with David Leng of SNSA in which he said that P1 teachers should ‘act as though the P1 test wasn’t there’ so we reported that in the Newsletter and circulated it via social media. I wish he’d also suggested to COSLA because many LAs remained obsessed by the SNSA until COVID-19 intervened.

It was decided at the 2019 AGM that Upstart shouldn’t waste too much energy on the P1 tests campaign, but instead return to our core aim of a kindergarten stage. So, other than responding to specific news stories/enquiries, we have tried to move on. It has, however, been clear from meetings with many educationists over the year that there is still considerable (silent) concern about the P1 SNSA and, in a Scottish government survey released in September, P1 teachers proved to be overwhelmingly opposed to the tests (see Appendix).

In March (just before lockdown) I had the chance to go head to head with David Leng on the subject at a Holyrood Conference. The case he made seemed to me extraordinarily weak, as did the reply given by John Swinney when I had the chance to ask him at a meeting in February. The COVID-19 crisis has since rendered the question temporarily irrelevant so we’ll have to see what happens when the ‘new normal’ finally dawns.

**Three- and four-year-olds**

At the 2019 AGM, there was great concern about the forthcoming expansion of nursery hours (1140 hours per year by August 2020), particularly the rapid training-up of an expanded workforce, the continued threat to PVI settings and the poor communication with parents. Upstart therefore intensified our social media coverage of this topic and over the following months we commissioned three blogs on the subject: one from an ELC training provider; one from PVI providers, and one from a worried parent. I also attended several briefings on the progress of the expansion, none of which was remotely reassuring, and was also invited to speak at a number of FE colleges around Scotland, where the Upstart message was warmly welcomed.

Throughout the year, Upstart has particularly focused on the importance of outdoor play in expanded nursery provision and the ‘Outdoor Play’ Facebook page has continued to support practitioners in this respect, with almost 4000 members (see Outdoor Play, below).

We have also continued to support the excellent Give Them Time movement in campaigning for parents’ right to school defer entry for all children who are four years old at the beginning of the school year. In October 2019, GTT won a Scottish Government pledge to fund an extra year in nursery for all such cases – a wonderful result! There was, however, no specific timetable for the policy change and it soon became clear that LAs were still refusing deferrals because the 1140 hours expansion meant lower availability of nursery places. This problem has been exacerbated by the difficulties of social distancing after lockdown.

**Supporting play-based practice and *Realising the Ambition: Being Me***

During the last year, Upstart has continued to do everything possible to support practitioners across *Curriculum for Excellence’s* Early Level (3 to 6/7 years) in delivering play-based practice. As well as organising and/or speaking at many meetings in schools and settings, we have provided two very successful training days on the *Power of Play* with Kym Scott (24-8-19 and 29-2-20).

A national conference, *In the Footsteps of Giants*, featuring four international experts and planned for 14-3-20 had to be postponed due to COVID-19 and we’re still wondering whether a practical day on outdoor play with Juliet Robertson can go ahead on 29-9-20. However, the *Play in P1/2* Facebook group has gone from strength to strength, with almost 7000 members.

In February 2020, however, support for relationship-centred, play-based pedagogy appeared from another source. Education Scotland and the Scottish Government published *Realising the Ambition: Being Me*, a magnificent document that is clearly informed by the same research on which Upstart’s arguments for a kindergarten stage are based. It is aimed at the whole of the Early Level and we cannot welcome it fervently enough. Indeed, we shall throw all our energies into helping to see it translated into practice across Scotland.

There is of course, another very important source of support for Upstart’s aims: the main thousands of people across Scotland – not only early years practitioners but people from a wide range of professional and personal backgrounds – who share their knowledge and experience via our social media, meetings or contact or through the website. We cannot overstate our gratitude for this support and hope you will continue to advocate for relationship-centred, play-based pedagogy with colleagues, friends and family.

**Outdoor play**

In March, Kate Johnston and I had a meeting with a representative of the Scottish Outdoor Education Centres, a contact which proved very helpful once the COVID-19 crisis began. There are obvious advantages to outdoor education in terms of social distancing and infection control so this is an idea time to promote the strengths of this aspect of nursery practice (and its extension into early primary classes).

We have therefore tried, throughout the crisis, to influence and support the Scottish government in moving towards greater emphasis on outdoor play throughout the Early Level. This is a very significant part of our aim in establishing a ‘Nordic-style’ kindergarten stage which, as well as its importance for every aspect of early childhood development, has implications for children’s rights (the UNCRC is still due to be incorporated in Scots law by next year) and education for sustainability.

**Moving towards a kindergarten stage**

At the 2019 AGM, we were instructed to investigate the next steps for Upstart in achieving our key aim of a kindergarten stage. A committee was set up to look into this issue but was soon overtaken by the opportunity to compile a book, written by experts on various aspects of our campaign aims. Many thanks to Carol Craig for commissioning this book for the *Postcards from Scotland* series. Its current working title is ***A Kindergarten Stage for Scotland: why we need it and how to achieve it*** and we have a very exciting list of prospective contributors. We are currently aiming at publication in October, all being well.

Just before lockdown, Kate Johnston and I attended the publication of a document by the Scottish Futures Forum (*Schooling, Education and Learning: 2030 and beyond*) and were delighted that it suggested a kindergarten stage for children aged three to eight years.

**Administration and funding**

This section must begin with my heartfelt thanks to the Upstart Board for all their hard work and support in keeping the campaign going over the last year. Upstart is extraordinarily lucky to be guided by people with such a wide range of expertise.

We were very sorry to lose two Board members during the course of the year. Hilary Long left to pursue other interests, although she continues as Upstart’s Glasgow convener, on the Outdoor Play Facebook page, and through her writing and advocacy for children, particularly those who are often forgotten. Upstart’s first Secretary, Fran Mackintosh-Walker (who also produced the Upstart launch video) was also obliged to leave us due to increased family commitments. We are very grateful to them both for all their work on Upstart’s behalf.

I should also like to extend special personal thanks to our Vice-Chair, Kate Johnson, who shares the day-to-day running of Upstart and is a fount of amazing ideas and background knowledge; David Ashford for his tireless work as Treasurer and Membership Secretary; and Tam Baillie whose discussions with movers and shakers behind the scenes necessarily remain unreported. Also, of course, to our immensely efficient Administrative Assistant, Jennifer Gall, without whom I’d be completely lost and the training days that keep Upstart financially afloat would not have happened.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has put paid to training days for the foreseeable future. We’re therefore also extremely grateful to our regular/ donors, whose generosity has helped cover the many administrative costs of the campaign. Kate and I are now looking into the possibility of ‘virtual training’ and ‘virtual conferences’ but are at present hampered by our lack of IT expertise. We therefore hope more supporters will feel able to pledge an annual or monthly donation to help us continue with our work.

**Other activities**

Since the last AGM we have:

* held four Board Meetings, one via Zoom
* provided speakers for dozens of meetings/conferences – not just our own but events held by other organisations, such as local authorities, political groups, and Holyrood Conferences
* attended scores of other meetings, to ensure an Upstart presence, make contacts with like-minded organisations and keep ourselves up-to-date
* met with politicians and representatives of organisations/charities, such as nurseries, teacher education, children’s rights and playwork
* continued to publish our monthly Newsletters to grow our following on Upstart’s main Facebook page (10K followers) and Twitter (8.5K followers).

We’ve also begun to have influence outside Scotland – as well as growing international interest in our social media, during the last year I have spoken about Upstart at two international conferences, a joint conference with Keep Early Years Unique in England and a Zoom meeting of England’s Early Years Forum.

The Upstart campaign therefore continues to gain support and attention. We’re delighted that, thanks to *Realising the Ambition,* we no longer find ourselves continually at loggerheads with the Scottish Government and hope that, post COVID-19, Scotland will soon be leading the way in the UK in terms of early learning and care for the 3-7 year age group.

We look forward to welcoming Members and supporters to the 2020 AGM where we will discuss the next stages of the Upstart Scotland campaign.

***Sue Palmer, Chair of Upstart Scotland, June 2020***

**Appendix: Government survey of P1 teachers’ opinions on the P1 SNSA in September 2019**

33% of the responses are ‘very critical’ of the SNSA  
33% are ‘generally negative’  
31% are ‘neither negative nor positive’  
3% are ‘positive’  
  
Around 50% of those surveyed mentioned that children were stressed or distressed. Many spoke of children being bored and disinterested.  
  
Some quotes:

- I do not feel comfortable carrying out the P1 SNSA. I think the test is hugely flawed, gives poor information compared to my own professional judgement and is not in line with how P1s are taught.

- They are bored - this is not the way they learn on a daily basis, sitting in front of a machine ticking boxes! We often hear them say, “When will I be finished?” “Can I go and play now?” - this is their real work!

- I haven’t used any of the data as it seemed meaningless. The literacy assessment was set at a much higher level than the Early Level benchmarks.

- I feel that this assessment is in no way for the school or a class teacher. It is simply an inaccurate data collection process for the Government.

- It was an awful experience for the children and adults alike, for no good reason and for data that was vague and limited in its ability to address the children’s difficulties or help us to address whether a level had been achieved.

- many children who have English as an Additional Language guessed answers and scored highly when they do not yet speak English.

- Extremely time consuming and of little value.

- I am completely ignorant of how these tests can help bridge the attainment gap in literacy and numeracy.

- Many children were very stressed and upset about the procedure, finding it tiring and draining. One pupil said “I just can’t read anymore”, as he painfully tried to sound out every single word.

- I feel that this process has harmed the confidence of many of the learners in my class that I had spent a school year building up.

- SCRAP IT, it is a complete waste of time, energy and resources which would be so much more beneficially used elsewhere.

- the tests are not only developmentally inappropriate, but also the data provided is irrelevant at best.

- Please scrap the test? It is not fit for purpose and is a waste of everyone’s time.

- A few enjoyed doing it, many were confused, and some became quite distressed. One child told me “I’m hopeless at this”, another told me “I can’t do anything” and started crying.

- The whole process is developmentally inappropriate for the P1 level.