

## **For the attention of the Education Select Committee: points on ‘school readiness’ (17.01.2013)**

The main reason that there is such widespread concern about the concept of school readiness in the field is that practitioners and parents understand through their first-hand experience and observations that children’s development is very variable – and the variation is within each child as well as between individuals and groups of children. School readiness has a very different meaning to people looking from the perspective of home and nursery, compared with the perception of people whose starting point is schooling. Although the ability to sit still and take in information is important, it is by no means the only, or most effective, way of learning at any stage.<sup>1</sup>

### **Expectations at the end of the EYFS**

There is well founded anxiety that children will be forced into a mould designed to meet unrealistic and simplistic expectations of their understanding and development. This is compounded by our very early school starting age. In England, although statutory school starts the term after children turn 5, in practice many children begin school long before they are 5, given that annual entry for all at the beginning of the year is now mandatory.

Although the reception year is intended to be part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the Early Learning Goals (ELG) for literacy are set very high. A smaller percentage of children reach the expected level in the writing goal than any other since the Early Years Profile was introduced, with boys and summer born children most likely to find them difficult. This should at least raise the question as to whether the goal is set at a suitable level. Research published by the DfE in 2010<sup>3</sup> showed a weak correlation between points scored on the writing ELG (which has remained substantially the same since the introduction of the revised EYFS in 2011) and achievement in writing at the end of Key Stage 1. The new Early Learning Goal for number in the revised EYFS has been raised to the level previously described for children in Key Stage One, and is also likely to result in increasing numbers of children finding this expectation challenging, with consequent inappropriate pressure applied in teaching approaches. This inevitably undermines children’s motivation as well as their understanding of key concepts underpinning their future mathematical development and logical reasoning.

August born children’s achievement in the Foundation Stage Profile is significantly lower relative to those born in September. Their lower achievement across several measures impacts on summer born children’s perceptions of self-worth and their views of the value of school.<sup>2</sup> It would be useful to introduce an analysis of children’s achievement at the end of the EYFS by their month of birth, as has been done in relation to the Year 1 phonics check. This shows a predictable drop in percentages of children reaching the expected score for younger children, month by month.<sup>4</sup> The long term effects of mis-identification of SEN in YR and Y1 is of grave concern, when many children are diagnosed as having problems, although they are younger and less experienced rather than less able than their autumn-born peers.<sup>5</sup>

The phonics check itself, which is based on questionable evidence,<sup>6</sup> is having a damaging and counter-productive top down effect on the curriculum and morale of many children in Year 1 and also, regrettably, in YR. Worryingly, this pressure is also felt in many pre-schools. The limiting

effects of high stakes testing have been recognised for older children, and are even more damaging in the EYFS.

### **Impact of annual entry to primary school**

Although the schools admissions code (2.16) states that *“Admissions authorities must make it clear in their arrangements that parents can request the date their child is admitted to school can be deferred until later in the academic year or until the term in which the child reaches compulsory school age”*, most parents are not aware of this, and those who do want to defer entry often have a difficult battle. Some feel that the social cost of separating their child from the rest of the cohort is too great, even at the expense of their learning. Others are told by schools that due to the high demand for admission, a place cannot be guaranteed for a child to enter the school part-way through a school year. Admitting up to 30 young children into class at one time makes settling them very hard, for staff and parents as well as children, and this further exacerbates what can be a difficult transition. Summer born children have a particularly demanding time as they are less mature and less experienced than the older children in the cohort. At the age of four, even a few months’ difference is significant. Although it is predictable and normal for younger children not to reach an arbitrary average standard, they are too often perceived and labelled as ‘failing.’

### **Impact of early entry on nursery provision**

The recent insistence on annual entry to primary school does not sufficiently take into account the effect the policy has on the lives of individual children, parents and educators, nor the inevitable consequences for feeder settings. Pre-schools have a large number of vacancies to fill each September. Financial considerations mean that nurseries in all sectors need to admit children as quickly as possible, so the settling in process is inevitably more demanding and stressful than it should be for all involved. The foreshortened time in pre-school education leads to a lack of coherence in the experiences we are offering our youngest children, just at the time when they need continuity, consistency and well-tuned stimulus and challenge in their social, emotional, intellectual and physical development.

Countries with effective provision for early care and education keep children in pre-school for at least three years, which enables staff to provide a coherent programme focusing on the skills that underpin later more academic learning, and the building of secure relationships with families. In this country, early years education is disjointed, and is undermined by the loss of five year olds from nursery settings. These older children provide invaluable role models for the younger children, enriching social skills and the quality of play and learning. Being the oldest in their group, even only for a term, gives summer born children the experience of being “at the top of the class” at least once in their lives, and contributes to their ability to cope with the demands of school.

It is essential that we make appropriate provision for all young children entering school so that they can flourish in spite of the early age of entry in this country. This is why our schools must be ready to support children in all their variety and vitality, and help parents to understand what they can do to contribute to their children’s development as eager and effective learners.

## References:

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