Education Committee, House of Commons

Dear Graham Stuart,

**Age of starting school**

Members of TACTYC have been following your Committee’s inquiry into school starting age.  We agree entirely with the recommendations in your report, but wish to make the point that the inquiry missed an important dimension that influences the experience of all children entering the reception class, and has a particularly damaging effect on summer born and premature children along with any others who develop more slowly for any reason.  The current emphasis on children being ready for school and on raised expectations of achievement in literacy and maths at the end of the Foundation Stage (which is out of line with practice in other countries which can show higher levels of achievement later) is very unhelpful, and disadvantages the youngest children severely.  The downward pressure of the high stakes phonics check in Year 1 also undermines the ability of staff working in the reception class to offer an effective curriculum in line with the underpinning principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage.  This is leading to many children being demotivated and parents being discouraged.  Teachers too are finding it increasingly difficult to engage their pupils in learning because they feel forced into providing a curriculum that does not meet the real needs and capabilities of these young children.

Our considered view is that it is the provision in schools (rather than the children) that creates what is a serious problem with long term negative effects.  In line with the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage, teachers in reception classes should provide appropriately for all children, rather than being required to introduce formal approaches counterproductively soon.  They should be enabled to offer appropriate provision for the full range of pupils, in line with the requirements of the EYFS.  This would eliminate the difficulties experienced by younger children who are developmentally less mature and who have less life experience, making it unlikely that they will be able to achieve standards pitched at an unrealistically high level.

The crucial prime areas of learning together with the vital desire to find out about their world, which is a defining characteristic of young children, are at risk in the present culture in schools.  Teachers, driven by the emphasis on unrealistic attainment targets, are no longer able to give their pupils opportunities to consolidate their learning and actively explore wider options, linking new understanding to what they already know.  Parents also often become anxious, especially if their children are labelled as having special needs.  All this could be avoided if schools were ready for children from all backgrounds, whatever their month of birth, and able to accommodate the variable rates of development that typify the early years.  Surely that is what the reception class should prioritise?  Staff should welcome all children and make appropriate provision for their learning so that parents can be confident that their summer born or premature children, or those going through a difficult time for any reason, or very able children with all the demands that they bring, will be provided for appropriately.  Every individual child does matter and can flourish in a responsive early years environment.

Annual admission to primary school – and the consequent difficulties for staff in both pre-school provision and in reception classes – undermines the integrity of the Early Years Foundation Stage.  We would welcome an inquiry into continuity in the EYFS and on into Year 1 in the next parliamentary term.  Should you be in a position to institute such a piece of work, we feel that the evidence on effective pedagogy in the early years could be disseminated before more damage is done to the youngest learners in our schools, as explained so powerfully by the Summer Born Campaign and Bliss when they attended your Committee on 4th March.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Scott, OBE

President, TACTYC