

Summer-Born Children Deserve Equal Opportunities

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We would like to make readers aware of the potential and, in our view, highly discriminatory impact on young children of some recent legislation.

For some time, children have been entitled to 12.5 hours of free early years provision from three years of age for up to 33 weeks a year. This increased in 2006 to 38 weeks per year and, from this year, it will increase again to 15 hours per week for 38 weeks a year (The Childcare Act, 2006). The provision must be in an educational, approved setting and will be available from the beginning of the term following their third birthday until they start school. This means that some children, born in the autumn and thus early in the academic year (September to December) will be entitled to receive five terms pre-school education, while others born in the summer, and thus late in the academic year (April to August) will only be entitled to three terms in areas where children begin school at the beginning of the academic year in which they become five.

This is self-evidently discriminatory, as it entitles children to different durations of pre-school education based entirely on an accident of birth. If this kind of discrimination were practised based on various other accidents of birth (eg: gender, colour of skin) there would be justified outrage. However, discrimination against children based on the month of their birth is apparently permitted.

This is an issue which should be strongly trumpeted by the Early Years education community because the evidence of the consequences of this discrimination are compelling and serious. Indeed, for a number of reasons, the time seems ripe to open up the whole question of summer-born children, which is intimately linked to the predominant age-grade system of grouping in our Early Years settings and schools, and which a number of commentators are beginning to question.

To begin with, there is a considerable body of evidence, stretching back to at least the 1960's (Armstrong 1966; Bell and Daniels 1990) showing that summer-born children significantly under-achieve academically in relation to autumn born children. They are, for example, significantly over-represented amongst the children diagnosed with specific learning difficulties (Martin *et al.* 2004) and attending special schools (Bibby *et al.* 1996). The precise causes of this have been difficult to determine, but it is likely that the relative immaturity of summer born children in age-cohort classes is a

significant factor. In one particular study, Daniels, Shorrocks-Taylor and Redfern (2000) saw teacher expectations of the youngest children in their classes as affecting the tasks that were given to children and the children's performance. They showed that summer born children's results in standard tests at the end of Key Stage One were not significantly affected by spending seven or nine terms at school because they remained the 'youngest' in their class. It is apparent, then, that simply putting children into the school system at an earlier age does not adequately tackle the issue.

Other recent evidence looking specifically at the impact of pre-school education, however, has indicated that the quality of this provision, combined with the length of attendance, has particularly powerful consequences for a range of intellectual and emotional/behavioural outcomes, both in the short and long-term. Sylva and Wiltshire (1993), for example, reviewed a range of evidence from studies of the Head Start programmes in the USA, the Child Health and Education Study (CHES) of a birth-cohort in Britain, and Swedish research on the effects of day-care. The Head Start research showed both immediate social and cognitive gains, and, famously, lasting long-term effects on educational and life outcomes (e.g. criminality, employment, house ownership) which were costed at a saving of \$7 to the public purse for every \$1 spent on the programmes. In the UK, the CHES study found a clear association between pre-school attendance and educational achievements at age 10.

Given this well-established evidence of the significance of pre-school experience, it clearly becomes paramount that all children are given the best possible opportunity to benefit from it. In this situation, if the evidence suggested that the overall amount of pre-school experience was not particularly critical, perhaps beyond a particular threshold, then the current situation of inequality for summer-born children might not be so serious. However, the EPPE study recently carried out by Sylva *et al.* (2004) shows a significant impact of the number of months of pre-school provision on various measures of children's achievement at age seven-years. For example, the effects sizes of the impact of high quality pre-school experience on pre-reading and language approximately doubled when high duration (36 months plus) was compared to low duration (12-24 months).

Under the current arrangements, therefore, summer-born children, who are already disadvantaged in age-cohort classes, are now being doubly disadvantaged by being provided with significantly less pre-school education than other children.

However, as the Daniels *et al.* (2000) study has shown, this disadvantage cannot be simply compensated for by earlier school entry. So long as summer-born children remain in age-cohort classes, where they are always the youngest and least mature, they will not be able to benefit from the educational experiences provided as well as their older peers. Interestingly, there is current interest

and a good deal of research looking at alternative grouping arrangements in schools. Gutierrez and Slavin (1992) showed quite a while ago, for example, that, given appropriate adaptations to pedagogy, non-graded elementary school programs in the USA, where children were flexibly grouped according to performance level rather than age, had clear positive impacts on student achievement. This is a position which has been recently supported by a group of cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists (Institute for the Future of the Mind 2006) advising the All Party Parliamentary Group for Scientific Research in Learning and Education chaired by Baroness Greenfield. More recently, Williams and Strangis (2002) found social and emotional benefits for children in early childhood multi-age classrooms in Ireland. What was sometimes termed 'vertical grouping' used to be quite a common practice in some parts of the UK, particularly in the early years of Primary schooling. The evidence seems to suggest that the experience this gives all children of being an older and younger member of a social and educational group is of enormous benefit.

We believe that all those concerned with equal opportunities should therefore campaign to have the present arrangements re-examined, particularly as they impact upon summer-born children. To begin with, all children should have the same entitlement to pre-school education regardless of birth-date. Debate is needed to air how best this could be achieved and the possible impact on young children. Should, for example, all children be entitled to a pre-school place from the start of the year in which they will become three-years of age, irrespective of their birth-date to ensure that they each have around 5-6 terms at pre-school (though the summer-born children would begin at just over 2 years of age and would continue to be the youngest in their cohorts)? Or should more flexible *school entry* arrangements be sought to ensure all children receive at least 5-6 terms of *pre-school* education, which the EPPE project has identified as being so beneficial to their long term education, before starting school. Clearly this would also require more flexible arrangements for progression through Key Stage 1 (with the educational interests of all children in mind, rather than administrative convenience). Perhaps, as a beginning, with the imminent introduction of the new Foundation Stage Curriculum for 0-5s and the shift in guidance from the government towards more individualised learning, the time is ripe to consider the impact of the duration of pre-school education *and* age in a cohort on young children's early learning experiences.

We would certainly hope that any government which claims to be committed to social justice would take this issue very seriously. Once again, it would seem, the poor outcome for summer-born children of the latest legislation on admissions to pre-school is the unfortunate consequence of a policy initiative which has been rushed through and not very well thought out. It seems likely to us that, if we can present the case cogently to policy-makers, they may well recognise the unintended and un-looked for consequences of the current policy and be willing to take on board necessary adjustments to improve

what is currently a quite indefensible set of arrangements. If the opportunity can also be taken to look more broadly at providing, at least in the crucial early years of schooling, the kind of structural arrangements most likely to support young children's early development as learners, then this will be a real bonus.

We would welcome your views. **Please send your comments to** j.moyles@ntlworld.com

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