

Playing for keeps

After an SNP vote to up the school starting age to six, *Lynn J McNair* tracks how the change came and the opportunities it could bring children

In 2009, I had a fruitful (and passionate) discussion with a significant Children and Families leader from one local authority. This leader, someone I respected very much, invited me to share my hopes for early childhood education. I provided my aspirations for the early level of the *Curriculum for Excellence* to mirror nursery, with play being the main medium for learning. I envisaged both early years practitioners and teachers working alongside each other, respectful of the skills and expertise each other possessed.

As a Froebelian trained practitioner, I believe learning does not proceed in a linear way; it is unique, situational, creative, unexpected, personal, eventful, capricious, emergent, collective and inspirational, as Tina Bruce has said. This is in contrast to technological understandings of learning as impersonal, routinised and goal-oriented.

Some years ago, I carried out doctoral research on listening to young children's perspectives on their transition to P1. My PhD was titled 'Rules, rules, rules and we're not allowed to skip'. Ruby, a five-year-old child who had been in primary one for six weeks, said these words in response to an adult asking: "How's school Ruby?" The thesis was born from observing many young children (and often their parents) struggling with school starting age at 4.5 – 5.5 years. My research was carried out in one Scottish early childhood setting and four primary schools. Analysis of the data illustrated that the perspectives of children and their families were often silenced by policymakers, bureaucrats and professionals. Children were expected to become acquiescent and adjust to the coercive practices of the school institution. As one five-year-old boy asked:

'Why are all the doors locked? I don't feel free... I am not in charge of me anymore.'

Raising the school starting age has become the subject of

vibrant discussion for Scottish educators. Since its 2015 launch, Upstart Scotland – a campaign for a play-based kindergarten stage – has been relentless and hugely successful in encouraging others to listen. Its chair, Sue Palmer, said to me recently:

'... play is the best vehicle for developing social / communication skills, self-regulation and a sense of personal agency... introducing formal teaching of literacy / numeracy skills too early can cause many children to feel confused / distressed / ashamed because they can't understand the tasks required of them. If children 'play up' in these circumstances, they're in danger of being labelled as having 'behavioural problems.'

What Palmer highlights was echoed in my research, including in an interview with a five-year-old boy called William:

'And... and... em because, because if you don't do it [writing] neatly you don't get to go into a different class like... like... like if you do that 10 or 20 times you have to stay in class up to next year [said with emphasis] for the rest of the year.'

'Did the teacher say that to you?', I asked.

'We just knew...', he replied

Palmer goes on to explain: *'So most children try very hard to comply and please the teacher, which means they're constantly anxious about failing and learning is no longer a joyous experience – their feelings about school therefore become negative and the foundation upon which they build their literacy / numeracy skills will always be shaky.'* I certainly cannot envisage William ever enjoying writing after his frightening experience, even if it was only his perception.

In May 2018 Patricia Anderson and Diane Delaney set up a Facebook page, 'Deferral Support Scotland' (later to become the Give Them Time campaign), the goal of which

“*One five-year-old boy asked: 'Why are all the doors locked? I don't feel free... I am not in charge of me anymore'”*

was to inform parents of their legal right to defer school entry. Then, there were two procedures which parents had a right to if they did not wish their child to start school. The first was an *automatic deferral*, where parents of children with January and February birthdays could apply to have school entry delayed. A nursery placement was subsequently provided for another year.

The second option, the *discretionary deferral*, was more complex. For example, parents were informed that government funding would stop, resulting in the parent bearing the financial consequences of their decision. If their deferral application was successful, parents would be encouraged to use private childcare. This would of course be perfectly fine for children who attended private settings. However, children (and their families), settled in local authority settings would need to transition to another, unknown, childcare source. This extract from my thesis illustrates the challenges some parents faced:

My deferral request was denied for technical and impersonal reasons. In the end his age was stronger than my concern for his emotional well-being. I can't find a nicer way to describe what happened because even though I read their reasons I can't understand why they chose what they chose... to make such decisions. I appealed. In the rejection papers it was clearly written it was my right to appeal, but clearly not to have my voice heard and considered outside the strict parameters... How can one parent talking with her heart stand against that? [the education committee – all strangers to the parent] not because I felt

against them, but they seemed to have been against me. I had the impression they struggled to even look at me. I left the meeting with the understanding that the power they had given me with the deception of knowing I had been a guest in their territory, where only their rules had weight. (Parent communication).

However, while sadly not in time to save this child and parent, policymakers, influenced by Upstart and Give Them Time, have now put their support behind a kindergarten stage. Of great significance, on 10 October 2022 at the SNP conference, it was announced:

'Conference recognises the body of international evidence in favour of play-based early years education... notes that children in European countries who attend play-based kindergarten till six or seven enjoy higher levels of health and wellbeing... further notes that Scotland and the UK are outliers in Europe in starting formal education at four or five, and acknowledges that since international PISA comparisons began, countries with later school starting ages have performed better... and acknowledges the views of parents... Conference therefore calls in the Scottish Government to introduce a statutory play-based kindergarten for three-six year olds...' (SNP, Party Conference, October 2022).

Exciting times lie ahead. •



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