

# **The effect of an increase in the statutory age for starting primary school to age 7**

**April 2019**

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### **1. Background to this report**

The 2017 AGM passed a resolution on school starting age as follows:

*"This AGM resolve that the EIS should investigate and report on the effect of an increase in the statutory age for starting primary school to age 7 and the development of a compulsory kindergarten stage, where there is a focus on social skills and learning through play."*

During the debate on this resolution at the AGM the mover noted that in most countries, children start formal education later than children in Scotland, and that the starting age of five "dates back to 1870, and isn't based on educational reality". He argued that "there is no educational detriment to starting later".

The EIS Education and Equality Department undertook a range of activities to investigate the effect of increasing the statutory age for starting primary school to age seven and the development of a compulsory kindergarten stage. We started from the assumption that there would be multiple effects of these initiatives. There are implications for:

- children and young people – their outcomes, wellbeing, attainment
- the early learning and childcare sector
- teachers, especially of P1 and P2; teacher numbers; teachers' professional learning
- society – for example, longer-term impacts on young people's social, emotional and cognitive development, etc.
- parents, carers and families – childcare issues, out of school care aspect, etc.
- public finances – for professional learning, for suitable school accommodation/infrastructure, for staffing in adequate numbers, etc.

A range of actions were taken to support the investigation, including:

- Desk-based research during autumn 2017 and early 2018
- Meetings and discussions with key partners and advisers in spring 2018:
  - o Children in Scotland, a charity advocating for children's rights
  - o The Upstart campaign for a kindergarten stage
  - o Prof. Aline Wendy Dunlop, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Strathclyde (who, in 2016, conducted independent research commissioned by the EIS on the contribution of GTCS-registered teachers in early years settings)
  - o The 'Give Them Time' campaign for more parental choice regarding deferral of children starting Primary One in Scotland.
- A Council Members' focus group, held in Sept 2018
- Attendance at a conference on play, Child's Curriculum International Conference, and informal discussions at the conference reception, in Nov 2018
- A survey of NQTs, conducted in early 2019.

## **2. Context: current policy and approaches**

### 2.1 Current school starting age

Children who attend school in Scotland usually start school between the ages of 4.5 and 5.5 years old. Any single school year group consists of children born between the beginning of March in one year and the end of February the following year. Children born between March and August start school in the August of, or following, their fifth birthday. Those born between September and February start school in the August prior to their fifth birthday.

However, parents of children born between September and December can request to defer their child's entry to the following August. These deferrals are not automatic and are subject to approval by the local education authority. Parents of children born in January and February may also choose to defer their child's entry; these requests are automatically approved. Children whose entry is deferred will tend to be aged between 5.5 and 6 years old at the time they start school. Delayed entry to school is more common in other countries than it is in UK countries.<sup>1</sup>

The 'Growing Up in Scotland' study<sup>2</sup> found that:

- at school entry, 42% of children were under 5, 49% were aged between 5.0 and 5.5 years, and 9% were older than 5.5 years
- 87% of children started school in the August when they were first eligible and 13% had their entry deferred
- the most common reasons for deferring entry were that the parent(s) felt the child was 'not ready' (44%) or that she or he was too young (32%).

Young children in Scotland also have an entitlement to early learning and childcare (ELC), and ELC is expanding, to almost double the entitlement to funded ELC from

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<sup>1</sup> Sharp, C. (2002) School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research. Paper presented at the LGA Seminar, November 2002. NFER and Local Government Association

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/growing-up-scotland-early-experiences-primary-school/pages/4/>

600 to 1140 hours per year, by 2020, for all three- and four-year olds and eligible two- year olds (there are specific circumstances which confer eligibility<sup>3</sup>). The campaigning organisation Children in Scotland takes the view that new infrastructure for ELC in Scotland will provide a foundation for a new approach to P1/P2.

Only 12% of countries have four or five as a starting age for school; all are either in the UK or are former British colonies. By contrast, 66% of countries have a starting age of six or over and 22% have a starting age of seven or over. Most children in EU countries start school at age six or over.<sup>4</sup>

*Age of children starting school in European countries<sup>5</sup>*

| <b>Age</b> | <b>Country</b>   |
|------------|--|
| Four       | Northern Ireland   |
| Five       | Cyprus, England, Malta, Scotland, Wales  |
| Six        | Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey |
| Seven      | Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Serbia, Sweden  |

Campaigning organisations which favour a raised school starting age would point out that countries deemed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as having highly successful education systems (for example, Finland, Poland, and Estonia) tend to have a higher school starting age.

A 2002 paper by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)<sup>6</sup> considered the reasons for the earlier school starting ages adopted in the UK, and noted that the term after a child’s fifth birthday first became enshrined as the compulsory school starting age in the 1870 Education Act, about which there was very little parliamentary debate.

Reasons advanced in support of setting the school starting age at five “were related to child protection (i.e. protection from exploitation at home and unhealthy conditions in the streets)”. The paper also states that “there was...a political imperative to appease employers because setting an early starting age enabled an early school leaving age to be established, so that children could enter the workforce.” The paper reports that it has been noted (by Martin Woodhead<sup>7</sup>) “that the school starting age was not decided on the basis of any developmental or educational criteria”.

## 2.2 Play and play-based learning

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mygov.scot/childcare-costs-help/funded-early-learning-and-childcare/>

<sup>4</sup> Comprehensive data on school starting ages across the world is available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/se.prm.ages>

<sup>5</sup> National Foundation for Educational Research: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1318/44414.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research, Caroline Sharp, NFER, 2002. <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1318/44414.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> M Woodhead, Journal of Education Policy, cited in Shap, op cit.

All children have a right to play. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 31, provides that all children have a right “to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts”.

The importance of play for children has been recognised by numerous child development experts over many years. Early exponents of play include:

- Robert Owen (1771-1858), whose New Lanark community created the first Infant school, which offered sensory learning, a nurturing and emotionally secure setting for children, and used stories, dancing, singing, nature study and physical exercise as a vehicle for learning
- Maria Montessori (1870-1952), who advocated for children participating in caring for the environment and having choices
- Margaret McMillan (1860-1931), who pioneered a play-centred approach and was keen on children reaping the benefits of being outdoors
- Susan Isaacs (1885-1948), who advocated patient listening and valuing of the child’s play, and outdoor environment with risky play
- Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), who believed play to be the highest level of child development and felt it is essential to give children the freedom to choose, take control, explore, create, imagine and go beyond thinking about the ‘here and now’. He invented the idea of a kindergarten and believed that play was the most important vehicle for learning.

The Curriculum for Excellence describes play as an aspect of active learning. A 2007 CfE paper on ‘Active Learning in the Early Years’<sup>8</sup> states that “active learning is learning which engages and challenges children’s thinking using real-life and imaginary situations” and which “takes full advantage of the opportunities for learning” presented by, among other things, “spontaneous play” and “planned, purposeful play”, supported when necessary through sensitive intervention to support or extend learning. The paper states that “all areas of the curriculum can be enriched and developed through play”.

More recently, play was recognised as important by the Scottish Government, in its ‘Play Strategy for Scotland’<sup>9</sup>, published in 2013. In this strategy, play is defined as “children’s behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated”, and which comes in many forms, including active, passive, solitary, independent, assisted, social, exploratory, indoors or outdoors. A literature review on children’s play<sup>10</sup> reported that “the element of ‘fun’ [is] a central defining quality of children’s play”.

Play-based learning can therefore be defined as an approach to learning whereby play is central to the learning experience. A play-based approach does not mean that children simply do as they please all day. At times children may play alone or with their friends. At other times children will come together as a group as directed

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<sup>8</sup> <https://education.gov.scot/Documents/btc2.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision. Scottish Government, 2013: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/play-strategy-scotland-vision/>

<sup>10</sup> Qualitative Research on Children's Play A review of recent literature, Meire, 2007: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242237359\\_Qualitative\\_Research\\_on\\_Children's\\_Play\\_A\\_review\\_of\\_recent\\_literature](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242237359_Qualitative_Research_on_Children's_Play_A_review_of_recent_literature)

by the teacher, listen when others are talking, follow the rules of the group and begin to take responsibility for their own actions and their environment. Within this approach, the adult's role is to guide and extend the play activities; adults continually evaluate children's play to discover what it is children are learning and to then help contextualise, shape and extend this learning.

The Play Strategy for Scotland states that "All learning environments, including nurseries and schools need "free play"...This form of play has the potential to contribute powerfully and positively to some of the most significant areas of school life." It further states that "Play supports the development of social skills and collaboration. It stimulates physical activity and the development of important physical competencies. It encourages creativity, imagination and problem solving."

Play-based learning was considered by the Curriculum and Assessment Board (CAB) at its October 2018 meeting, in terms of how it supports children's outcomes in early primary. Scottish Government provided a written update on the development of an updated national strategy for play and sought the views of the CAB as to whether more should be done to promote the use of appropriate play-based learning in early primary school and if so, what strategies should be further considered. The paper strongly endorsed a play-based approach to learning in early primary.

During the discussions that followed, the EIS welcomed the emphasis on the value of play within the paper and referenced the contribution of the Finnish educationalist Pasi Sahlberg in an SEJ interview that play should be firmly embedded throughout the curriculum and not exclusively confined to the Early Years.

### 2.3 Current approaches in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and professional learning to play-based learning

It was reported in discussions with partners about the possible effects of an increased school starting age and the development of a compulsory kindergarten stage, with a focus on social skills and learning through play, that there is already much activity around supporting more play-based approaches underway across Scotland.

One form of early years pedagogy which is being widely discussed and promoted in Scotland presently is the Froebel approach, which derives its core principles from the thinking of Friedrich Froebel. Froebel training is being delivered in Falkirk, Edinburgh, Midlothian, West Lothian, and Glasgow.

Other approaches are also being used. The examples provided were as follows:

- Glasgow City Council is thought to be very supportive of play based learning, with strong support from the Director of Education
- Scottish Borders Council is doing a lot of play based learning, e.g. in Innerleithen and Melrose
- Falkirk Council is also very active in this area

- The University of Edinburgh (Moray House) is developing a Masters in Froebel
- Strathclyde University includes some content on play in ITE (led by Deirdre Grogan, Senior Knowledge Exchange Fellow); they offer an early childhood pedagogy course
- Queen Margaret University and Napier University are also covering play
- Some schools are, reportedly, per Children in Scotland, quietly using more play-based learning but not promoting their activity because they are in authorities which place importance on standardised test results
- In some rural areas children are all together from 3-6 anyway so the structure/formal policy is less important
- One school in East Renfrewshire was cited by Professor Dunlop as an interesting example, having a seamless curriculum, including a nursery on site.

It was also noted that all East Dunbartonshire teachers had been trained in play-based learning (government funded) during 2007, when the then Education Minister Hugh Henry strongly advocated for more play in P1, and thus that these discussions were not new and had been ongoing for several years.

Some of the people and organisations consulted (mainly Children in Scotland and Upstart) argued that ITE is not covering play enough and that there are inconsistencies in professional learning provision. Some members highlighted during focus group discussions that a nursery placement of two weeks' duration during an entire four-year ITE course appears to be inadequate preparation for teaching very young children.

During discussions about play-based learning at an October 2018 meeting of the Curriculum and Assessment Board, Early Years Scotland signalled a lack of focus on play-based approaches within ITE, leading to lack of teacher confidence in adopting them later.

## 2.4 Current evidence

Research evidence reviewed by the Education and Equality Department strongly supports a later start to formal education. The evidence reviewed included:

- The Importance of Play, Whitebread et al, 2012<sup>11</sup>
- research collated by Upstart<sup>12</sup>
- an article by one of the signatories to the 'Too Much Too Soon' campaign, a researcher based at Cambridge University<sup>13</sup>
- information provided by Early Education, including the EPPSE study<sup>14</sup> and the HighScope<sup>15</sup> study
- research conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.importanceofplay.eu/IMG/pdf/dr\\_david\\_whitebread\\_-\\_the\\_importance\\_of\\_play.pdf](http://www.importanceofplay.eu/IMG/pdf/dr_david_whitebread_-_the_importance_of_play.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.upstart.scot/the-evidence/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/school-starting-age-the-evidence>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research-projects/2018/oct/effective-pre-school-primary-and-secondary-education-project-eppse>

<sup>15</sup> <https://highscope.org/perry-preschool-project/>

Upstart Scotland, a campaign for a later school start age and a kindergarten stage, would argue that earlier school starting ages in Scotland are due to economic thinking, not pedagogic thinking or an educational rationale; and that “we are stuck in a way of thinking” (Kate Johnson, Vice-Chair, Upstart, speaking at Children in Scotland Annual Conference, Nov 2016).

Upstart’s position is that “current Scottish policy supports a developmental approach”, but that “the structure of our schooling system makes it difficult to deliver”. They note that “in the 2015 OECD international review, the three most successful western nations were Finland, Estonia and Switzerland. All have a play-based kindergarten stage for three to seven-year-old children.”<sup>16</sup>

Early Education, a charity advocating for high quality early childhood education, notes that much longitudinal research such as EPPSE, CfBT (2010) High Scope, McLelland et al (2012) states that “the short-term effects of formal academic early years programmes wear off after a few years in primary school. However cognitive-developmental approaches emphasising children’s choice, autonomy and self-regulation have longer term positive effects on both academic and social adjustment outcomes.”<sup>17</sup>

An American paper from 2015 by the National Bureau of Economic Research, on school starting age and mental health,<sup>18</sup> noted that “the conjectured benefits of starting formal schooling at an older age reflect two broad mechanisms”, which are relative maturity and absolute maturity. Learners may benefit when they start school at an older age simply because they have, on average, a variety of developmental advantages relative to their classroom peers; or it may be that formal schooling is more developmentally appropriate for older children. The paper notes that “literature in developmental psychology suggests that children who start school at a later age benefit from an extended period of informal, play-based preschool that complements language development and the capacity for “self-regulation” of cognitive and emotional states”.

The same study found that a one-year delay in the start of school dramatically reduces inattention/hyperactivity at age 7, which the authors describe as “a measure of self-regulation with strong negative links to student achievement”. They also found that this large and targeted effect persists at age 11.

It should be noted that the estimated effects of school starting age on other mental-health constructs were smaller and less persistent according to that study; however, the NBER paper referenced above notes that “there are some suggestions that an early introduction to a formal curriculum may increase anxiety and have a negative impact on children’s self-esteem and motivation to learn”.

The Scottish Government’s play strategy, which was developed with a wide range of partners, whilst not specifically addressing the question of school starting age or the nature of different ELC settings, makes a strong case for more play-based

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.upstart.scot/reasons/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.early-education.org.uk/press-release/early-years-experts-challenge-recommendation-review-reception>

<sup>18</sup> The Gift of Time? School Starting Age and Mental Health, Thomas S. Dee and Hans Henrik Sievertsen, NBER Working Paper No. 21610, October 2015, JEL No. I1,I2, available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w21610.pdf>

learning and play in schools, saying that “from the earliest days and months play helps children learn to move, share, negotiate, take on board others’ points of view and cultivate many more skills” (Section 2).

Further, the strategy states that “A growing body of evidence supports the view that playing, throughout childhood, is not only an innate behaviour but also contributes to quality of life, sense of wellbeing and is a key element in effective learning, thereby developing their (children’s) physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills (Section 3). Further, it says that “Numerous studies, including Growing Up In Scotland, show play to be a crucial factor in a child’s educational achievement” (Section 3).

In a section on play and learning at nursery and schools, it says, “Teachers who have closely observed free play in schools have identified a wide range of curriculum experiences and outcomes that are being delivered without any formal input from teachers. Schools that provide rich outdoor free play environments report happier children, better break-time behaviour and children who are better able to concentrate in class.” (Section 5)

It was reported in discussions with Professor Dunlop that she has been engaged in a longitudinal study in East Renfrewshire, with a cohort of 150 children, from nursery to leaving school, which is showing that good continuity from early years to primary is related to good outcomes for children. This study is yet to be published.

David Whitebread, from the Faculty of Education at Cambridge University wrote in 2013 that “a number of longitudinal studies have demonstrated superior academic, motivational and well-being outcomes for children who had attended child-initiated, play-based pre-school programmes”. He reports on one particular study of 3,000 children across England, funded by the Department for Education, which showed that “an extended period of high quality, play-based pre-school education was of particular advantage to children from disadvantaged households”.<sup>19</sup>

One American study<sup>20</sup> found that ‘early school entry was associated with less educational attainment, worse midlife adjustment, and most importantly, increased mortality risk’. Another American study<sup>21</sup> followed three groups of disadvantaged children who had different educational experiences between ages 5 and 6 (structured teaching; free play; and play-based learning plus daily structured discussion with the teacher) and found that those who had only structured teaching without a focus on play experienced many more emotional, social and behavioural problems during their subsequent school careers, and more problems in social adjustment during adulthood.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/school-starting-age-the-evidence>

<sup>20</sup> ‘Early educational milestones as predictors of life-long academic achievement, mid-life adjustment, and longevity’, Kern and Friedman, Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 2008

<sup>21</sup> ‘Lasting Differences: The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study through Age 27’ by L. Schweinhart and D.P. Weikart (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. No. 10. Ypsilanti, MI. High/Scope Press, 1993).



David Whitebread notes that studies which compared groups of children in New Zealand who started formal literacy lessons at ages 5 and 7 found “that the early introduction of formal learning approaches to literacy does not improve children’s reading development, and may be damaging”. These studies found that by the age of 11 there was no difference in reading ability level between the two groups, but the children who started at 5 developed less positive attitudes to reading, and showed poorer text comprehension than those children who had started later.<sup>22</sup>

### Missing evidence?

In terms of missing evidence, Children in Scotland argued that there is a need for good research on what’s happening in schools that are doing more play-based learning, to measure the impact on language, confidence, questioning, self-esteem, etc. They suggested that it will be important to find out about the impact of children getting additional hours of ELC, especially those having more outdoor learning, and their response to Primary 1. They noted that PEF money is being used to employ extra staff in P1 and P2 in some schools and would like to know more about the impact of this and any evaluation of this investment.

A study on school starting age conducted in 2002 for the National Foundation for Educational Research found that there is a lack of conclusive evidence concerning the benefits of starting school at different ages and highlighted a research gap. It stated that the best available evidence suggests that teaching more formal skills early (in school) gives children an initial academic advantage, but that this advantage is not sustained in the longer term. It also said that “the long-term impact of different early childhood curricula would seem to be an important topic for further research”.

Caroline Sharp, the author of the NFER paper, further notes that “there is no definitive evidence from randomised control trials charting the progress of children who started school earlier or later (and it would be difficult to envisage parents agreeing to participate in such a trial). International comparisons are indirect evidence at best, because they involve such different cultures and educational systems.”

### Evidence of the advantage of an early start?

No longitudinal studies showing that an early start to formal education confers a positive long-term advantage were identified. The NFER paper cited above also comments on one small-scale study, focused on mathematics attainment among a group of children in England and Slovenia, which suggested that the much earlier school starting age in England did not provide any lasting advantages in terms of mathematical attainment.

Caroline Sharp for the NFER concluded in her 2002 paper that “there would appear to be no compelling educational rationale for a statutory school age of five or for the practice of admitting four-year-olds to school reception classes”.

### Evidence of the disadvantage of a later start?

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/school-starting-age-the-evidence>

The NFER found that a late start appears to have no adverse effect on children's progress.<sup>23</sup> Caroline Sharp's paper states that "a later start does not appear to hold back children's progress (although it is important not to forget the important contribution made by children's experiences at home and in preschool)."

### Other issues to consider

The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland have raised concerns that 'play is not a silver bullet' and highlighted a range of issues about which more evidence may be needed, for example the differences in nursery and primary cultures; and the pressure from parents and inspection regimes against the adoption of play-based methods.

Martine Leitch, a Deputy Head Teacher presenting at an EIS Professional Learning Conference in 2017 on 'Reconstructing the Early Years Curriculum', during a session on play-based learning, highlighted some additional challenges, including:

- Developing an understanding of play vs active learning
- Pacing; depth vs speed; ensuring scaffolding of learning for all learners
- Trust: in the research, in guiding principles, in each other
- Risk: Being bold and changing "what we have always done".

## **3. Members' views**

### **3.1 Council Members Focus Group**

A member focus group was held in September 2018. The members were drawn from Council and worked primarily in nursery and early primary. Members considered five questions, considering whether the current school starting age is appropriate; likely effects on children and teachers of a change; and supports that would be needed if the policy changed.

Members were universally of a mind that the current school starting age is not right, citing various reasons, including that 4-7 generally needs to change; and that expecting children to sit still at desks is "turning kids into wee office workers, it's not right".

However, finessing the point, one member observed that "either it's the wrong age or the wrong system"; and said it would be the right starting age if we were doing the right things with the children. Similarly, another said that whether the starting age is right depends on what schools are doing with the children, but that the current approach isn't working.

One member observed that if schools are to do more play in P1/2, curriculum pressure needs to be taken away, saying "it's the worst of both worlds at the moment".

Issues around what is needed to support play-based learning were a strong theme of discussion, with the need for large rooms with enough space and the right

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<sup>23</sup> Sharp, NFER, op cit.

furniture for play-based learning, good outdoor spaces, etc. Members observed the contrast between nurseries and schools, especially in terms of access to outdoor space. There was a view that transition could have a different focus, with less emphasis on children finding their allocated desk and on school uniform.

The group took the view that "the kindergarten stage should take place in the schools that we already have"; that the EIS should highlight that there is no capacity in the ELC sector to host this; and that nursery provision is hugely varied, from purpose built premises to converted houses, and would not be the right setting. It was felt that a creative approach to adapting schools to more suitably accommodate early learning was needed, for example, removing doors or using different spaces in the school.

The focus group identified other supports that would be needed, aside from accommodation, as being:

- promotion of the benefits of play to parents, teachers and wider society – a kind of 'myth-busting' exercise
- professional learning – there was felt to be a huge need for this, for everyone including support staff
- links to the ACES/nurture agenda (this was felt to be a conducive context for promoting play)
- testing being removed: "testing needs to go to make this work"
- addressing the issue of the cluttered primary curriculum
- review of the first level Experiences and Outcomes in CfE, which are too narrow; some are too factual or content-based to be delivered through play
- a huge spend on play equipment, meaning toys, puzzles, etc. and not iPads, screens or Virtual Reality equipment.

The focus group members were of the view that the effects for children of greater emphasis on play-based learning would include:

- being more emotionally mature when starting school
- being able to concentrate for longer
- being more confident (confidence is commonly observed in children whose school starts are deferred)
- being able to transition more easily from kindergarten to school
- greater independence, and ability to exercise more freedom and choice in their learning
- more equipped with practical skills (changing for PE, buttoning shirts etc), which members felt were lacking presently
- being better able to manage their personal hygiene (for example, being fully toilet trained)
- enjoying school more
- being able to build more effectively on their prior learning, with immense benefits over the long term.

The group discussed different benefits for different groups of children, and caution was expressed in relation to making assumptions about the degree to which some children, for example, those growing up in poverty, are engaged in play at home. It might also be the case that children from wealthier homes have less time with

parents and would benefit from more play. Children with English as an Additional Language would, it was suggested, benefit from more unstructured activity, and the opportunity to talk and listen in more informal ways and learn from peers, rather than having the pressure of speaking in front of a class, as might be expected in a more formal or structured learning environment. It was noted that some children who like and depend on structure (e.g. children on the autism spectrum) might want the chance to have their own seat or have predictability in their activities, but it was felt that this could be accommodated through appropriate adjustments and awareness of those children's needs.

Concerns were expressed about whether play-based learning would be sufficiently stimulating and challenging for children who were more advanced in their learning and keen on maths, for example, although it was generally felt that differentiation for these children could be built in. Members discussed whether the EIS position would be in support of three or four years of kindergarten, and felt that this needed to be resolved.

In terms of the effects for teachers, points made included:

- that as a trade union, the EIS needs to be very careful to advocate for a kindergarten stage being provided in schools delivered by GTCS registered teachers, to protect the profession, with the point made that existing ELC forums often omit teachers from their discussions and don't recognise the importance of the teacher role
- that changes that have previously been mooted in some authorities, e.g. 'soft start' with an 8:30 a.m. start time, have an implication for teachers' working hours/contracts
- that teacher interest in and knowledge of this topic will vary.

Other key points made related to:

#### Understandings of play-based learning

- It's not 'just' play -need to get away from that diminishment; play is definitely a kind of learning and a means to an end, which is learning of concepts, behaviours, skills, etc.
- Parents can sometimes put pressure on schools to do more formal, academic learning, and to prove that children are progressing, and to issue homework, etc. which may cause some difficulty if more free play is encouraged and supported
- Parental opposition to P1 SNSAs has perhaps changed the focus in recent months, as parents don't want children to be tested, so may perhaps become more open to play-based learning and more informal approaches if they are helped to learn more about their benefits.

#### Children's needs and experiences

- Certain children really need nurture when they start school, and a play-based approach can be more nurturing

- There is a marked difference between children who have had access to a teacher in nursery and those who haven't, in terms of what they are able to do when they start school; whether their Additional Support Needs have been identified and addressed; how they behave; if they can follow rules, etc.
- Members are seeing more delay in speech, for example, in one setting, 25% of all children are going to a speech and language service
- A focus across the education system on building children's resilience would be helpful
- Nurseries are now starting to see some 'reverse transitions' i.e. children starting school then going back to nursery a few afternoons a week, which members find very concerning.

### System issues

- It's rare for student teachers to get an ITE placement in a nursery, which is unhelpful for teachers who wish to better understand the needs and learning styles of younger children
- A transitional period would be very important for steering children towards more formal learning, when they have been used to having freedom and choice in terms of the activities they choose to engage with
- Some nurseries have existing partnerships with schools and the children transition into P1 classes for e.g. French, which is very beneficial, but not an advantage shared by all nurseries.

The group was keen to stress that the risk of the loss of teachers must be anticipated and mitigated; members felt that parents would strongly object to their child losing teacher-led learning and would not accept this.

### 3.2 Survey of NQTs

Further to the discussions at the focus group, it was felt that the perspective of Newly Qualified Teachers would be useful to capture, especially as regards how well they feel that play pedagogies were covered in their initial teacher education courses, and if they would support a change to school starting age and a compulsory kindergarten stage. A survey, with question wording closely aligned to the wording of the AGM resolution, was issued in early 2019; a total of 189 responses were received and analysed.

Views on the school starting age were very mixed. Just under half of respondents (45%) agreed that the school starting age should be increased to seven; whereas 55% disagreed.

Views on a kindergarten stage were less diverse. When asked, 'Do you believe that a compulsory kindergarten stage, where there is a focus on social skills and learning through play, should be developed?', the vast majority of respondents (86%) said yes and 14% said no. Thirty nine respondents made comments about this aspect, from different perspectives, with themes emerging being:

- that six would be an appropriate starting age

- that many children would be more ready for school at a later age, socially, emotionally and developmentally
- that this may delay the acquisition of key skills for children whose home/family life not does equip them with those, and may disadvantage children with more difficult home lives who need the structure and stability of school
- that there is scope for P1 to incorporate more play-based learning
- that some pupils are displaying a decline in literacy and numeracy which this change would compound (NB: no specific evidence for this was cited).

The most commonly occurring theme in the comments was the difference between children who are able to build effectively on their prior learning when they start school and those who are too immature, and not ready socially or emotionally, or who lack the fine or gross motor skills for school. For example:

- *"The attainment gap in one class alone was huge, some children were unable to recognise letters, including letters from their own names, whilst others in the class could read novels."*
- *"Having had Primary 1 in my NQT year...I believe a lot of children are ready for a more structured education. However, there are many children who are not".*

There was strong support for more capacity building, with 68% of members answering yes when asked, 'Would you require more support and / or professional learning to implement this change?', although around a third of NQTs (32%) said no. There were more comments on this question (50) than on any other. Members wanted:

- specific training on learning through play
- deeper understanding of how to utilise outdoor learning
- additional adults in the classroom
- consistent information about what is deemed as best practice in play-based learning
- new course materials.

A recurrent theme was the need for more teachers/staff:

- *"One teacher cannot possibly implement a successful play environment on their own"*
- *"Learning through play requires additional adults in the classroom"*
- *"Additional people to facilitate"*
- *"It would be useful to have an Early Years officer present to support and help staff and learners"*
- *"Assistance from EY specialists, play specialists".*

When asked if ITE had covered play-based learning/play pedagogies, only 4% said this was covered in depth; just under a third said it was 'somewhat' covered (31%); the same proportion said it was mentioned superficially (31%); and the largest proportion said it was not covered (34%).

At the end of the questions, 'any other comments' were enabled; only a handful (14) of comments were made and views on the desirability of a change were

mixed. The majority of comments were in support of a change, but some were very sceptical, and illustrate that if a substantial policy change is agreed by the Institute as desirable, professional learning on the rationale, and on the value of a delayed school start and of play-based learning, will be needed.

#### **4. Employment Relations Perspective**

The Employment Relations Department offered comment on the implications of a change to school starting age. They noted that legislation was introduced in November 2010 to limit class sizes for P1 pupils to 25 (maximum class sizes in primary schools are currently 25 for pupils in P1<sup>24</sup>; and 30 for single stage class P2 or P3<sup>25</sup>) and suggested that the issue that stands out is class size maxima.

It is difficult to predict, as the legislation relates to the current system and not a future one, but one consequence might be that if the statutory age for starting primary school is increased to age 7 then it may be the case that the class size maxima for 4 year olds, 5 year olds and possibly some 6 year olds would increase from the current number of 25 to 30 or perhaps even higher, as the current statutory provisions may no longer apply. This, it was suggested, would be an unintended consequence which would need to be addressed.

There may be other employment dimensions, including impacts on teacher numbers. There is also a risk that the development of a kindergarten stage would affect teacher numbers. Local authorities have shown a tendency to employ less well qualified Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) staff with different skills than teachers, and now employ fewer qualified nursery teachers (who are more expensive to employ than ELC staff). Research commissioned by the EIS found that over a ten-year period there has been a 39% reduction in the number of GTCS registered teachers employed in Early Years<sup>26</sup>. This pattern might continue in a kindergarten for children aged up to 7 if strenuous efforts are not made to ensure that the experience is teacher-led.

Member consultation would suggest that there is a clear view that many more personnel would be needed to effectively deliver play-based learning; and that GTCS-registered teachers should be leading learning in kindergartens.

#### **5. Possible effects of a change to school starting age**

Without conducting a full-scale literature review it is difficult to be certain about the likely effects of raising the school start age to seven and developing a compulsory kindergarten stage, with a focus on social skills and learning through play. However, the possible effects of such a change, based on the information gathered above, from stakeholders and partners, members and academic research, might be as follows:

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<sup>24</sup> Education (Lower Primary Class Sizes) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Education (Lower Primary Class Sizes) (Scotland) Regulations 1999

<sup>26</sup> EIS, Sustain the Ambition, 2016: <https://www.eis.org.uk/Content/images/education/Early%20Years/STA-Nursery%20Booklet.pdf>

|   |  |
|---|--|
| For children and young people               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more enjoyment of kindergarten/school</li> <li>• enhanced wellbeing including improved mental health</li> <li>• more opportunity for outdoor learning, with consequent benefits for physical fitness, coordination, confidence</li> <li>• improved social skills</li> <li>• more independence</li> <li>• less disadvantage for children with EAL</li> <li>• better able to concentrate</li> <li>• better able to build on prior learning</li> <li>• improved longer-term outcomes including attainment</li> <li>• rights to play met</li> </ul> |
| For the early learning and childcare sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more able to focus on the needs of very young children/lesser role in working with older children</li> <li>• development of more and better partnerships with schools</li> <li>• highlighting of the need for professional learning so there is consistency of approach across settings</li> </ul>  |
| For teachers                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• highlighting of the need for significantly more teachers</li> <li>• highlighting of the significant need for professional learning on play pedagogies/play-based learning</li> <li>• highlighting of the need for more time for peer to peer support/developing and sharing practice</li> </ul>   |
| For society                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• may lead to enhanced wellbeing and outcomes for children having consequent effects for social cohesion in the future</li> <li>• may lead to future employees have more useful soft skills e.g. resilience, confidence, independence</li> <li>• may lead to greater equity of educational outcome for children from more and less affluent backgrounds</li> </ul>  |



|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| For parents and carers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• may have more difficulty balancing work with children’s schooling if kindergarten hours are shorter than school hours</li> <li>• may be supportive, especially if they subscribe to the view that testing, homework, etc. makes children unhappy, and if they understand the positive outcomes of more play in learning settings</li> <li>• may benefit from children being happier at kindergarten/school</li> <li>• would need information about the change of approach</li> </ul>  |
| Financial              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• would lead to costs associated with employing requisite numbers of highly skilled teachers (much will depend on the ratios in kindergarten stage)</li> <li>• would lead to costs associated with creating more suitable premises for kindergartens and for early level primary classes</li> <li>• might be some cost involved in adapting school premises</li> <li>• more investment in outdoor spaces would be needed</li> <li>• would lead to costs associated with the provision of significant amounts of professional learning</li> <li>• would create a need for significant investment in play equipment such as toys, outdoor equipment etc.</li> </ul> |

### Possible risks

Some risks and concerns were shared during discussions and by members in the survey. For example:

- a change of school starting age and focus on kindergarten could let the government ‘off the hook’ for not employing enough teachers, and instead employing less qualified ELC staff with different skills; particularly as teachers are more expensive than ELC staff
- this could lead to learning being given less focus than child development, when learning actually promotes development and children need progression
- children’s literacy and numeracy might decline as a result of less formal schooling (although no specific measures were cited)

- children with more difficult and less stable home lives might be disadvantaged by this change
- there might be other alternatives which are worth considering, e.g. the creation of a bridging class between the last year of nursery and the first year at school
- this would be yet another change in a system which is constantly changing, creating further pressure within an already changed-fatigued system, if not well supported.

## **Conclusion**

Key points arising from this investigation are listed below.

- Children in Scotland start school earlier than children in most other countries. Just over four in ten children in Scotland start school before they are 5 years old; and just under half of children in Scotland start school between the ages of 5 and 5.5 years.
- It appears to be the case that historic decisions about the school starting age were not based on an educational or developmental rationale.
- It appears that no longitudinal studies exist which show that an early start to formal education confers a positive long-term advantage.
- Whether children are in school or nursery, the importance of them experiencing play-based approaches to learning has been widely recognised in Scotland for many years; but despite this, the extent to which play-based learning is covered within ITE and teachers' professional learning vary.
- Research evidence reviewed by the Education and Equality Department strongly supports a later start to formal education and more play-based learning at all stages of education.
- The implications of changing the school starting age to 7 and developing a compulsory kindergarten stage with a focus on social skills and learning through play would be significant, and such a change would require substantial public investment.
- There are potential implications for reduction of the size of the qualified teacher workforce in light of now well-established local authority trends towards the employment of ELC workers in lieu of teachers.

It is recommended that these points should be fully considered by the Education, Salaries and Employment Relations Committees. Given the complexity of this topic, and the likely short and long-term implications of changing the school starting age and developing a compulsory kindergarten stage, Council may wish to consider whether further investigations or research on this topic are needed.

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