

What is the right age to start formal schooling - is it four, five or six?

Have we got it right in Britain, where our children start full-time schooling much younger than in most of continental Europe?

This week a school inspectors' report revived this fundamental question: one which cuts to the heart of the conflicting pressures of parental anxiety, obsession with league tables, and fears over the narrowing of the curriculum.

The report by the English inspectorate, Ofsted - Transition from the Reception Year to Year 1 - did not pull its punches.

It said parents had told inspectors they felt their children were forced to start reading and writing "too early".

In particular, Ofsted criticised the "abrupt transition" some children experienced going from Reception to Year 1.

This is, after all, a vital moment in a child's education: the move from preparation-to-learn to the first lap of the national curriculum.

The Ofsted report was also highly critical of the Foundation Stage Profile. This is the 12-page document which teachers must complete for every child as they make the transition to "proper" schooling.

With this inquiry, Ofsted has usefully highlighted the pressures which lead to many children being put on the starting blocks too soon.

Conflicting views

With the national tests at age seven less than two years ahead, it seems many schools start five year olds on formal schooling straight away, including the daily numeracy and literacy hours.

Now there are two conflicting views of this. Some say nothing is more fundamental than learning to read and write and therefore it is right for schools to get on with it straight away.

Others point out that many of these children will have had only a few months in Reception classes and it is better to wait until they are ready rather than firing the starting gun at the earliest possible opportunity in the hope this will give them an early advantage.

Of course starting school can be traumatic however well prepared a child is. I will share a guilty secret with you: I howled the place down on my first day at school.

Mind you, I had my excuses. I was only just four and had never been to nursery school.

What pupils say

Still the memory of that first day stays with me (the trauma may explain a lot!) and it set me thinking: when we discuss the issues surrounding the start of school, we rarely ask the children themselves what they think.

So that is what I did. A group of Year 1 pupils and their teacher, Brenda Burden, at Bentworth Primary school in west London kindly agreed to give up some of their lunchtime break to talk to me.

On the face of it these children had been extremely well prepared. All had attended both nursery and reception classes. They had also moved up with the same teacher from Reception to Year 1.

Yet, to their teacher's surprise, all of them said they had found the move "pretty scary" or "frightening". It had obviously been a big step for them and eight months on it was still fresh in their minds.

Other impressions included "we were in a bigger class", "there were lots of numbers on the walls", "it was harder", "I get a bit confused with my work sometimes" and "it was hard work and there were books with a lot of pages".

Some had been quite bewildered. Two of them thought they were moving straight into Year 2.

Confusion and upset

This confusion is hard to comprehend for adults but it had something to do with their perception that the previous Year 1 were becoming Year 2 and they thought they were joining them. It is just this sort of confusion which can cause upset.

We are perhaps more familiar with the shift from primary to secondary school. It is easier for adults to recall and 11 year olds are more articulate than five year olds.

Yet the impression I got from these children was that the move from Reception to Year 1 was similar to that move into secondary school. The curriculum suddenly seemed very strange and advanced to them.

When I asked them to explain what was different they cited the long list of discrete subjects they first encountered in Year 1.

They were clearly awe-struck by the very names, just as secondary school pupils are struck by the novelty of physics or chemistry.

Several recited the list of subjects they were now doing. One boy summed it up well: "Sometimes we do literacy, numeracy, geography, RE, history and sometimes we talk about Muslims and Christians".

Tests

For teachers there is a dilemma. All these subjects are required under the national curriculum.

Yet, as Ofsted pointed out, in some classes this led to "an imbalance in the Year 1 curriculum, with insufficient time given to improving standards through other creative and expressive areas".

When I asked the children what they liked doing best, the most common answer was art or PE.

Ofsted also identified the looming presence of the national tests at the start of the summer term in Year 2, just five terms after the start of Year 1.

As Ofsted put it: "The need to make sure pupils make good progress towards the standards expected in the *ù* tests sometimes leads to abrupt transitions to more formal approaches in Year 1."

As an experienced teacher, Brenda Burden made a very wise point. She doesn't think of her pupils' ages in years, but in months.

"When you think a child is just 60 months old when they start Year 1 you remember just how young they are."

Perhaps we would all do well to remember that.