

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Independent Review of Primary Curriculum – recommendation 14(1) – points of entry into reception class

Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

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ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL policy

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

We set out our opposition to proposals to change the age of admissions to primary school in our response to the interim report of the Rose review of the primary curriculum. *Although we would be the first to argue that it is the quality of children's experiences within the early years foundation stage that matter rather than its location, and that children learn better when they engage with qualified early years teachers, the fact is that primary schools are not resourced to manage the varying needs of children who are barely 4 years old alongside those who are already 5. An adult: child ratio of 1:30 which is deemed acceptable in a reception class does not provide opportunities for close support which many 4-year olds still need; reception classes remain more like year 1 than like nursery classes; and the downward pressures from the accountability and testing system is difficult for even the most dedicated early years professionals to resist.*

ATL response

In an ATL survey of primary school members earlier this year, almost 8 in 10 respondents opted for a school starting age of 5 or above. Pupils in many European countries, including Scandinavia and, closer to home, the Republic of Ireland, start school after they turn 6, and evidence shows that in terms of their educational attainment they catch up with and subsequently outperform pupils within the English system.

However, ATL has consistently argued that the problem is not necessarily the age at which a child starts school but whether school provision is suitable for 4 year olds. Unfortunately, even nine years after the introduction of the foundation stage, this is not necessarily the case. ATL's research in 2004 (Adams, et al) showed that, while reception classes were warm and caring environments, and practitioners were working extremely hard to fulfil requirements both real and perceived, activity was too often adult-led and undemanding, and offered too little time for child-initiated play or real dialogue between children and between adults and children. We do not believe that much has changed in the reception class. Teachers continue to feel pressure to meet EYFS 'targets', to introduce whole class and 'formal' teaching at younger ages, and to 'get children ready for Y1'. Teacher: pupil ratios continue to be too low and some classrooms are not adequate for good play-based, child-initiated learning. Most ATL members believe that 4 is too young to start school in the current system in England.

Of course, the proposed change in admissions requirements does not lower the de facto school starting age, as most children already start school in the year after they turn 4. Schools have many different ways of bringing young children into school: some already begin all reception class children in September; others stagger the entry over a few days, weeks or months; yet others have 2 or 3 terms of entry. Some begin children part-time, others full-time. And the ways in which admissions are determined varies widely: some schools begin the oldest children first while others start the youngest first and yet others decide depending on the maturity and previous experiences of the individual child.

The proposed change in admissions requirements takes the decisions about how and when children start school out of the hands of schools. Although we agree that parents and schools must work together to ensure the best provision for children, we have grave reservations about many aspects of the 'parent choice' agenda. Giving parents free choice by insisting that *admissions authorities must accommodate their requests where it appears to be in the best interest of the child* may prove detrimental to others in the class, reception class staff and the child themselves, particularly in the absence of any guidance on how to determine 'the best interest of the child'.

Primary schools manage pupil admissions in many ways. There are good arguments both for starting all children together when they are 4 and for offering different starting points throughout the year. Equally, there are good arguments against the different options. What appears to be forgotten in the government's proposals is that the reception year is part of the EYFS as well as being part of the primary school. As the Cambridge Primary review puts it: *the debate about an early start centres not on early access to provision as such... but to the provision typically provided in the first year or two of primary school.* (p170) ATL believes that the

government has put itself into a difficult position by considering the question of admissions before a review of EYFS and without proper support for continuous, integrated EYFS provision.

Impact on children

Much of the evidence about choice of starting dates and entry methods focus on the academic attainment of the child during reception and beyond. There are of course many equally (and some would say more) important impact measures.

Many of our members point to the different levels of maturity of individual children. Many of the youngest children find full days in reception extremely tiring, which can affect their ability to learn, their behaviour and their overall enjoyment of school – all of which can have a detrimental effect that persists beyond their time in reception class. They may not yet have appropriate skills – the ability to dress and undress, or to go to the toilet by themselves. Children's ability to play with other children, to sit still and concentrate, and to communicate will differ widely. And behaviour will vary too, between those at one extreme who are still intensely focused on themselves (the 'ME ME LOOK AT ME' attitude quoted by one of our members) and those who are a long way down the road of realising that others think and act differently from them and understanding the impact of their behaviour on others. Children can be at very different stages in their ability to cope in large groups and with less adult support. This could point to a need for much greater flexibility in starting dates so that children could begin school when they are sufficiently mature to benefit. However, almost all of these children will be in some form of foundation stage provision, so it could instead point to the need for school provision to be more appropriate for children.

Many of our members point to the benefits of having all children start school at a relatively similar time. Children can make very intense friendships at this young age. Some of our members point to children's distress at not being allowed to start school at the same time as friends from pre-school or nursery. Many members tell us how difficult it can be for children who start later in the term or year to 'break into' established friendship groups. It is also very important, according to many ATL members, for children to learn the rules and routines of the reception class and to understand what constitutes acceptable behaviour. This appears for many to be easier for children to manage when they all begin together.

What is extremely important is that children develop positive attitudes to school, good friendships and excitement about learning. ATL would argue that it is the quality and suitability of provision, rather than age of admission, that makes the difference.

Impact on reception class staff

In our survey, many members spoke of the practical implications of different admissions strategies. There were benefits in staggering starting ages and in starting part-time in terms of opportunities to develop close relationships with individual pupils in smaller groups, having time to assess children's abilities, needs and interests, making links with children's pre-school providers, and being able to form partnerships with parents. By allowing different entry points during the first few weeks or months, many members found it easier to compensate for pupils' levels of

maturity and previous experience, leading to more positive attitudes to school and better behaviour. Alternatively, better teacher:pupil ratios, and support from properly qualified nursery nurses or TAs, could help to ensure smaller group sizes and better opportunities to cater for pupils' needs and interests.

Members identified difficulties in providing equal access to the curriculum, and in particular in planning for progression, when children started at different times in the year, or when there were some part-time and some full-time pupils. This is particularly difficult in mixed YR/Y1 classes. Many reception classes follow the rest of the school in timetabling literacy and numeracy in the mornings, which could mean those attending part-time accessing literacy and numeracy only or not at all, or teachers planning very different activities for different groups of pupils. Many members follow structured literacy programmes so decisions must be made about how to accommodate new starters without holding back those who started earlier. Even without the pressure to follow a rigid curriculum, the need to complete EYFS Profiles by the end of the reception year makes it difficult to accommodate a summer term entry point. This of course highlights the different provision available in reception classes and other EYFS settings, even for children of the same age; the lack of opportunity for professionals to build strong links between settings; and lack of trust between different professionals within the EYFS. Offering parents opportunities to take-up the EYFS in the PVI sector may lead to pressure for more 'school-like' provision in those settings, instead of real EYFS provision in school.

Members were also keen to make sure that children did not miss out on school activities through different admissions arrangements. This ranged from attending school assemblies, to participating in special events such as harvest festival, or experiencing the same visits and visitors as their peers. Teachers and schools must constantly balance the needs of the individual child with the need for children to be part of a group developing shared experiences. Teachers in the reception class are constantly trying to manage the difficulties of being part of both the EYFS and school.

More practically still, different entry points to school have often led teachers to feel that they were constantly forming and re-forming the class, disrupting the learning, friendships and routines of those already in the group. It can also mean a number of 'new parent' events rather than a single one.

For staff and pupils, different starting points in reception could impact on the adult:child ratios within classes. Some schools managed to stagger entry or even have more than one term of entry and still keep a consistent level of staffing throughout the year. This could mean one teacher and one TA or nursery nurse per reception class throughout the year, beginning with perhaps 10 or 15 pupils (and a ratio of 1:5) and ending with a 1:15 ratio. Others could keep staffing consistent by using a reception teacher or TA to support other classes or provide PPA time in the first term. But many schools seem to appoint temporary staff, particularly TAs, for one or two terms each year leading to a lack of consistency for pupils and for staff planning. Some of our members are still reporting a lack of full-time TA support in the reception class, leaving some children in a 1:30 ratio for a significant portion of their time. This is absolutely inappropriate and cannot be justified. The youngest children in

school need small groups, consistent staffing and properly qualified early years professionals. If there were real partnership between the reception class and other EYFS provision, including nurseries, nursery classes and children's centres, schools could be much more creative about the deployment and sharing of staff.

Many of our members report that their arrangements work well for them and their children. It is vitally important that reception class staff have opportunities for professional development in order to maximise the effectiveness of their early years practice. They also need opportunities to share their experiences and expertise with others, in order to learn from each other both across reception classes and across EYFS provision.

Implications for schools

Schools must obviously decide how to organise their staffing for best teaching. There are other potential implications for schools in offering different admissions arrangements, in particular with regard to the physical environment. Where schools take very young reception pupils full-time in September, they may need to make provision for quiet areas so that children can rest or even sleep during the day; they may also need greater access to outdoor (and undercover) areas so that children can run and play more physically when they need to. Both of these would have a beneficial effect on children's behaviour and learning.

We would also argue that particularly in order to meet the needs of younger or less mature children, an increase in the number of adults in the class, to be closer to pre-school provision ratios of 1:8 would enable better adult support for children's learning, developing social skills and managing behaviour.

Many schools are becoming better at offering high quality foundation stage experience in the reception class. Unfortunately, many others continue to take a more negative approach, moving away from a play-based curriculum with a good balance between adult- and child-initiated activity, and opportunities for sustained, shared thinking. For too many, downward pressure from the rest of the school, and in particular from a test-dominated accountability system, leads to an inflexible curriculum and inappropriate assessment. We continue to need effective and ongoing training for heads and senior leaders in the principles and practices of high quality early years foundation stage provision.

Implications of parental choice

ATL has serious reservations about the system of so-called parental choice. We believe it is data- and Ofsted-driven and adds to the pressure on schools to meet nationally focussed expectations rather than focussing on the needs of the pupils and parents served by the school. It leads to certain schools being oversubscribed at the expense of others, and to schools which are not culturally mixed. It can lead to parents believing that choice of school is the only input they are required to make.

We also have serious reservations about the extension of parent choice offered here. While it is absolutely right that parents and teachers together should consider the needs of the individual child and offer provision that meets those needs, it is not clear from these amendments how schools will be able to balance the needs of individual children with the requirement to make sure that other children are not disadvantaged.

It is also not clear on what basis a parent might make the request. Parents themselves are under increasing pressure to work when their children are small. This can lead to requests for children to start school in order to meet parents' needs. Other parents want the flexibility to wait until their child is 'ready'. Parents would not be forced into these kinds of choices if schools could really offer EYFS provision to meet the needs of all pupils.

However, if parents are to make choices, they will need a range of information about the benefits and disadvantages of the options available to them, and support to make sense of it. It is not clear who will provide that information or support.

The timing of this consultation

ATL is extremely disappointed that the changes are proposed to take place from September 2011. Jim Rose himself stipulates that there are preconditions for admission of 4-year olds to reception classes, one of which is an assurance of high quality early years foundation stage provision in all reception classes. It is not clear to us that this is the case, and it appears foolhardy in the extreme of government to make these changes before undertaking a full-scale review of the EYFS. This review is scheduled for 2010.

As well as considering the quality of provision and the impact of policy on staffing, assessment and curriculum in the reception class, we believe that the review should consider the place of the reception class within the EYFS as a whole. Currently, government policy appears to place the reception class as a stand-alone year of the EYFS, and even this proposal ignores any impact on nursery and other pre-school provision of changes to this one part of the EYFS. The review should consider partnership arrangements with other providers, including children's centres and move away from any assumption that sharing EYFS profile data is sufficient for transition.

In the light of the Cambridge Primary Review and of experiences in Wales, we believe that it is time for government to consider the benefits of extending the EYFS to at least the end of Y1. ATL is not convinced that removing EYFS from schools altogether is the answer, but we believe it is time for honest debate.

It is also clear to us that there is a huge range of options already provided by schools. We believe that it would be better for government to undertake a proper review of those options, in order to understand the rationale behind them. Government should evaluate the impact of these options, not only on attainment, but also, importantly, on children's behaviour, their relationships and their attitudes to learning. This should not lead to any suggestion of 'best-practice' or a one-size-fits-all approach to school admissions. It should offer opportunities to reflect on what children and parents need to support learning throughout the EYFS, and how the reception year can fit seamlessly within that.

ATL recommendations

We recommend that ***decisions about changing the admissions code must be deferred*** until after the EYFS review in 2010.

Alongside the review, research should consider options currently available for admissions, the reasons why schools make these complex

arrangements, the impacts on children's attainment, behaviour, relationships, attitudes and the effects on staff and parents.

The review should consider the place of the reception class within the EYFS, the development of real partnerships between providers and the raising of quality across all EYFS provision.

Support must be made available to ensure high quality provision across reception classes – this should include a review of class sizes, better adult:child ratios (closer to 1:8), and better resources for the youngest children.

Reception classes must be able to provide consistent staffing ratios, with early years trained teachers and support staff.

Better training must be available for reception class staff and school leaders in play-based learning, flexible curriculum planning, observation and assessment and developing sustained shared thinking.

All national assessment at primary level should include relative age effect measures

Time and space must be available for teachers and schools to share and reflect on their own practices, across local schools and more widely.

If the changes are made before a proper review of EYFS provision, government must make clear the amount of choice available to parents, the range of information and support that they will need and how that will be provided.