Summer-born pupils: What’s the evidence?

For decades, research has found large differences in test scores between autumn-born and summer-born pupils in attainment at school (1). The differences are evident at the earliest ages and remain (though are smaller) at GCSE and A level, and in further and higher education too (2).

The artificial advantage given to autumn-born pupils in tests of educational attainment can have an impact on their wellbeing at school, and matters for pupils’ later outcomes.

There are, of course, other characteristics which affect attainment – in particular, coming from a disadvantaged background (which has a much larger effect on attainment than month of birth), having an SEN, and gender. However, many consider the lottery of birth date to be particularly unfair, and one which has not been properly addressed in our education system.

On average, the oldest in the class outperform the youngest in tests of attainment because they are older when they are tested (3). Even when all pupils have had the same amount of schooling at the time of any test, the oldest have been alive for longer, giving their brain longer to develop and having more time interacting with their parents, their family and the world. Which children are the youngest in the class and which are the oldest is determined almost completely at random because it is difficult to manipulate.

The government recently decided to give the parents of summer-born children the right to delay their child’s entry to reception. Jack Worth considers the implications of this policy, its potential impact on disadvantaged families, and other possible alternatives.

So the government’s willingness to solve the problem that arises from within-year age differences should be welcomed. A new policy announced recently proposes to allow parents of summer-born pupils (covering those born between April 1 and August 31) to have the option of delaying their child’s entry into reception class (see panel, opposite).

For years, some parents have campaigned for the right to delay their summer-born child’s entry to reception. Their motivation is understandable and clear: if their child was allowed to wait another year they would benefit from becoming the oldest in the class rather than the youngest.

“Even when all pupils have had the same amount of schooling at the time of any test, the oldest have been alive for longer, giving their brain longer to develop and having more time interacting with their parents, their family and the world”
Let’s follow the incentives presented to parents by the new policy to their extreme logical conclusion. Being among the oldest pupils in the class is best and being the youngest the worst, so all parents of summer-born children could potentially choose to delay their child’s entry to primary school.

This will, of course, depend on what the alternatives are – what kind of free entitlement to another year of pre-school will be on offer to children who don’t start reception class at age 4? Peer effects will also come into play – children will want to do what their friends are doing, whether that means staying in pre-school or starting in reception class.

Year groups would then be made up of summer-born pupils as the oldest in the year and spring-born the youngest in the year. This would simply shift the oldest/youngest threshold from September 1 to April 1 and fail to solve the underlying problem that relatively older children will perform better, on average, in tests than younger children.

In practice, however, we know that parents from different backgrounds tend to behave differently. Our recent research, entitled School Choice: The parent view (4), showed that parents with higher incomes tend to value examination results in their choice of school more than lower-income parents.

American research from 2013 (5) suggests that it is likely that the parents who choose to exercise their opportunity to delay school entry will disproportionately come from more advantaged backgrounds (this hypothesis will be easy to test using future School Census data).

If pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to delay entry to primary school, then the already large attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers will widen, undermining one of the government’s key commitments.

So, what are the alternatives? Part of the answer could be to make greater use of age-standardised test scores (6). Age standardisation is used in many tests of educational attainment to overcome the problem of within-year age. Because within-year age is randomly determined we can accurately predict what attainment level younger pupils would have achieved if they had been older, and vice-versa. Age standardisation scores pupils on a common scale and removes the effect of their age on raw marks on a test.

Age standardised scores are already used widely: for example, the NFER Baseline assessment provides schools with age-standardised scores (as well as scores not adjusted for age) for pupils in their first few weeks of primary school (7). They allow teachers to assess whether children are achieving effectively, given their age, and give a better indication of children’s potential than looking at raw scores alone.

Some have argued that high-stakes GCSEs and A levels that influence pupils’ progression into further and higher education should also be age-adjusted. However, as the Institute of Fiscal Studies has argued, “when pupils leave school, they should take with them their non-age-adjusted grades, to ensure that employers can be confident that pupils have achieved a particular absolute standard”.

This perennial question is a difficult one with no straightforward solution. A greater focus on children’s progress, and ensuring that those who are struggling (for whatever reason) get high-quality teaching, will help address month of birth effects.

References
1: Month of Birth and Education (Schools Analysis and Research Division, Department for Education, July 2010): http://bit.ly/1M73yw
6: Age-standardised test scores, NFER: www.nfer.ac.uk/research/centre-for-assessment/age-standardisation.cfm
7: Baseline Assessment, NFER: www.nfer.ac.uk/schools/baseline-assessment/

The DfE’s summer-born policy
In September, schools minister Nick Gibb said the current system for handling summer-born admissions was “flawed”. In an open letter to parents, local authorities, schools and admission authorities, he said that while parents could request that their child begin school in reception class rather than year 1, they often found themselves unable to agree with admissions authorities on what was best for the child.

He was concerned that some parents felt “forced to send their child to school before they are ready and before they are required to do so, or else miss out on their reception year at school”.

He was also worried about stories of some children being admitted outside of the normal age group but then later being required to miss a year and move up against their wishes.

The letter states: “We have, therefore, decided that it is necessary to amend the School Admissions Code further to ensure that summer-born children can be admitted to the reception class at the age of five if it is in line with their parents’ wishes, and to ensure that those children are able to remain with that cohort as they progress through school.”

You can read Mr Gibb’s letter at http://bit.ly/1hS7oKp

Evidence for Excellence in Education
www.nfer.ac.uk

School Surveys
Gather feedback from parents, pupils and staff

Benchmark your results to help with improvement planning

Visit www.nfer.ac.uk/sc9

in association with

Evidence for Excellence in Education
www.nfer.ac.uk

“IF pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to delay entry to primary school, then the already large attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers will widen”