What age should children start school?

By Dr. Richard House

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This is an unusual article for me: one that focuses on quite aggregate global data, rather than on personal experience. This is something I rarely do, but I hope the reasons and rationale for doing so will be clear by the end of the article.

In the UK, several research reports have recently been released that have (yet again) raised the issue of school starting, highlighting the fact that children younger than their classmate peers suffer comparatively in terms of lesser socio-emotional readiness for learning, lower levels of readiness for cognitive learning, significantly higher propensity to be bullied – and perhaps, most shockingly, a far greater likelihood of being labelled as ‘special needs children’. This is sometimes termed the ‘relative-age effect’, and is a phenomenon recognised by researchers around the world. Indeed, a relatively new campaign has recently been launched in Britain on what we call the ‘summer borns’ issue, through the setting up of a Google group where parents can share their experiences, and with a dedicated website. Because of the great diversity that is observable in rates of development and developmental pathways in young children, the relative-age effect has greater impact, the younger the age of the children; and with England having just about the lowest effective school-starting age in the world, at just four years of age, the impact of this relative-age phenomenon is far greater in Britain than it is in almost all other countries – which in turn explains why affected parents feel so strongly about it in England.

The Mother magazine is an international magazine, so to look at the issue of school-starting age at a global level seems very appropriate. It is instructive to look at the international data on ‘school-starting age’ (by which phrase, just to be clear, I am referring to what is commonly termed entry into ‘primary school’, which is a quite distinct institution from either ‘nursery school’ or ‘secondary school’. In other words, ‘primary-school starting’ refers to the age at which children begin quasi-formal, institutionally based learning.) Based on the latest data from the World Bank, we find the following fascinating breakdowns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>7 years of age school-starting</th>
<th>6 years of age school-starting</th>
<th>5 years of age school-starting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>44 countries (=22 per cent)</td>
<td>133 countries (=66 per cent)</td>
<td>24 countries (=12 per cent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>62 countries (=31 per cent)</td>
<td>118 countries (=58 per cent)</td>
<td>22 countries (=11 per cent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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What is interesting about these data, especially when viewed from the UK, where the school starting age is so young, is their snapshot pattern and historical trajectory. Note, first, that while there is a modest observable trend towards an earlier school-starting age over this 30-year period, it’s perhaps far less dramatic than we might have expected. Thus, in 1982, over 30 years ago, some 89 per cent of the world’s countries had a school-starting age of 6 or 7 years of age; while in 2013, that figure has fallen by just one percentage point, to 88 per cent – a negligible change, and certainly not statistically significant.

The percentage of countries with a school-starting age of five has also remained largely unchanged over the 30-year period (11 and 12 per cent in 1982 and 2013 respectively); so the major change over the past 30 years has been that between countries with starting ages of six and seven, with there being 18 fewer countries with a starting age of seven in 2013 compared with 1982, and a corresponding increase in countries with an age of six, rising from 118 to 133. But despite these findings, it’s very important to re-emphasise that this is over a 30-year period, and that over those 30 years, the proportion of countries with a school-starting age of six or seven has essentially remained unchanged.

Within the realms of education and parenting, with the exception of those families which elect to home-educate, school-starting age is an issue which
will exercise pretty much all families, in part because of the complex and sometimes challenging emotional transition for all involved, but also because of parents’ legitimate concerns about the developmental appropriateness of government-directed learning experiences to which their children will be subject – usually with parents having little, if any, control or say in the kinds of educational experiences (‘curricula’) to which their children are subject in the schooling system. In this situation, therefore, school-starting age becomes a hugely relevant matter for all parents of young children. In addition, my strong hunch is that school-starting age is increasingly destined to become a battleground where the unfolding ‘paradigm war’ between the fundamental humanistic, human-centred values of perennial wisdom are fought out against the imperatives of ‘technocratic modernity’, materialism and ‘late’ capitalism. More on this later.

One possible criticism of data like this is that it collapses all of the world’s countries – richest, poorest, East and West – into average figures; and data like this can easily hide far more than it reveals. Thus, for example, we might intuitively speculate that in poorer countries where there are far fewer resources available for education and schooling, the school-starting age might tend to be later – and this would then mean that in terms of Western ‘developed’ countries, these global averages are misleading when these wealthier countries’ school-starting ages are compared with global norms. I haven’t analysed these data by level of GNP, for example, and this would certainly be an interesting exercise.

However, what I have done to address this possible bias problem is to look at school-starting data for European countries alone – and to my surprise (and great pleasure), the European data do not support this intuitive assumption. Thus, I looked at the Eurodixce data on the National FER website, which has an article titled ‘Compulsory age of starting school in European countries, 2013’. The Eurodixce paper has a table which enables us to do a similar statistical analysis to that set out earlier; and the data show that, as of 2013, out of 37 European countries, eight (or 22 per cent of the total) have a school-starting age of seven; 23 countries (or 62 per cent) have a starting age of six; and just six countries (or 16 per cent) have a starting age of four or five. Thus, comparing these figures with the global data above, we can see that some 84 per cent of European countries have a school-starting age of six or seven – or very comparable with the global 2013 figure of 88 per cent of countries.

What this indicates quite unambiguously, then, is that the global figures on school-starting age are not particularly ‘dragged upwards’ by the presence of underdeveloped/poorer countries in the aggregate data, and there is therefore a very strong global tendency for children to start formal schooling at six or seven years of age.

So what is it about that in England, the school-starting age is effectively fixed at four? My campaigning colleague Sue Palmer tried to find this out some years ago, and it seems that it’s far more a historical quirk or oddity, and has nothing remotely approaching a thought-through pedagogically informed policy based on child-development theory. One of Britain’s most eminent educational researchers, Caroline Sharp, wrote a paper in 2002 that helped throw some light on this historical aberration. Posing the question, ‘Why do children start school early in the UK?’, she tells us that the term after a child’s fifth birthday actually became enshrined as the compulsory school-starting age in Britain’s 1870 Education Act. Apparently there was very little parliamentary debate on the issue at the time, and the reasons then put forward to support setting the school starting age at five were to do with child protection (i.e. protection from exploitation at home and unhealthy conditions in the streets). More sinister was that there was also political pressure to appease employers, because setting an early school-starting age made possible an earlier school-leaving age, so that children could enter the workforce at a younger age.

Thus, the stark and rather shocking reality is that England’s current school-starting age has not been decided upon on the basis of any developmental or educational criteria. And to be blunt, this is absolutely scandalous – i.e. that in the most sensitive and impressionable years of a young child’s life, a whole nation’s children are being inserted into an institutional quasi-formal learning system without any reference either to developmental theory, or, crucially, to the fact that the rest of the world does it very differently (as the above data illustrates). Some of us believe that this is tantamount to state-sanctioned child abuse, and we’re doing all we can to campaign for a later school-starting age for England’s hapless young children. Last year, for example, I managed to achieve major national media coverage of research coming out of California, termed the Longevity Project, which is the only data set that exists which tracks children’s well-being and life attainment right from school starting to the end of their lives. What this data set shows is that, on average (this is important, because there is wide variability in data like this), the earlier children started formal schooling, the more likely they were to suffer lifelong negative health effects – and most shocking of all, to die at a younger age. What is so fascinating is that around a century ago, this is pretty much exactly what educationalist Rudolf Steiner predicted would be the effect of young children being exposed to developmentally inappropriate formal/cognitive learning at too young an age – and now here is the empirical research data to substantiate something which many parents know intuitively to be true about their children’s early experience.

Secondly, in England, what has been termed the ‘scandal of England’s summer-born children’ has also generated considerable media coverage in recent months, with a number of published articles, media report, a BBC TV documentary in the offing,
and an Early-Day Motion having been launched in early June by the Member of Parliament Annette Brooke.8

As mentioned, unusually for me, this article has focused more on aggregate statistical data than it has on personal experience; but sometimes, this is a useful exercise, both in terms of getting a handle on long-term social/historical trends, and also in terms of comparing the situation in one’s own country against global norms. While I’m not usually an advocate of ‘comparing’ and evaluating in this way, I think in cases like this, it does have a place, where the situation in one’s own country diverges significantly from global norms – as it does in the case of England.

I make what I think is the assumption that at the global level, these data represent some kind of settled, sensible view about when it is appropriate for children to begin quasi-formal, institutional learning. And if this is anything like right, then not only should England’s citizens and parents be deeply concerned about our school-starting age of four (virtually unique in the 200-odd countries across the globe), but these data give us a very strong card to play when any government attempts to lower the school-starting age via legislation at national, central-government level. As the ‘paradigm war’ continues to unfold in the future between ‘technocratic modernity’ and hyper-materialism, on the one hand, and more human-centred values informed by perennial wisdom (for which this magazine stands), on the other, we can expect this to become an issue on which global citizens are going to need to take a principled stand, and to let governments know that the quality of early childhood experience needs to be fiercely protected from the march of institutionalised ‘schoolification’, if our children’s vital early formative experiences aren’t going to be toxified and compromised. There do, of course, exist educational approaches, most notably Steiner Waldorf, that do give some parents the option of a more sensible start for their children in most countries, but this is an option that is not by any means available to all families; so it is absolutely imperative that parents across the globe mobilise against any trend towards inappropriate ‘schoolifying’ encroachments into the sacred realm of early childhood.

It would be really interesting to hear from readers across the world on such issues which are crucial for our children’s well-being – so why not write into the mailbag about your own experience? For example, are you happy with the legislated school-starting age in your country? Do you perceive there to be newly emerging pressures in your country from the central government trying to introduce quasi-formal, institutional learning at younger and younger ages? And if so, what reasons do they give for this, and do they stand up to scrutiny?

So let’s start a global conversation about these issues through the pages of this magazine, as it’s through such conversations that we can empower ourselves, mobilise, campaign, and gain mutual support, and so protect early childhood from the noxious impingements of ‘late modernity’.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1 See, for example, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Relative_age_effect
2 See www.summerbornchildren.org
3 I have a large number of papers and articles on this issue, some written by myself and some about specific countries. If you’d like more information, do email me at richardahouse@hotmail.com
6 Note here that although the legal school-starting age in England is notionally at age 5, because of the way the bureaucractic admissions system functions, most English children are in school reception class at the age of 4, with some only just having passed their 4th birthday.
8 Early-day motion 213: SCHOOL-STARTING AGE FOR SUMMER-BORN PUPILS: That this House notes with concern the robust and consistent evidence from around the world on birth-date effects, which in England shows that Summer-born children can suffer long-term disadvantages as a result of England’s inflexible school-starting age; believes that the Government should ensure that parents of Summer-born children are able to exercise their right to defer their child’s school start up until the statutory school-start time, if that is their choice, without losing a place offered at the school of their choice for the September after their child’s fourth birthday because of funding issues; and calls on the Government to ensure that parents also have the choice of placing their child in a school reception class, rather than Year 1, at statutory school age, that is the September following their fifth birthday.