

# Early-years debate in search of battle lines



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Section: Analysis

**While the Alexander and Rose reports have been portrayed as opposing views on the school starting age, the real argument lies in how and what you teach - not when. Helen Ward investigates**

The school starting age is still five. If you read the headlines on Friday, you could easily have formed the impression that Professor Robin Alexander, leader of the independent Cambridge Review into primary education, wanted children to begin school at 6.

But when you saw Monday's headlines, you would assume that Sir Jim Rose, head of a government-commissioned review of the curriculum, was calling for a starting age of 4.

It seems a straightforward clash between two respected educationalists. Except it is nothing of the sort. Despite the headlines, neither review has recommended a change to the school starting age.

Dame Gillian Pugh, chair of the Cambridge Primary Review, said: "The starting school issue is irrelevant because children are in school by 4. We prefer to start with ensuring the experience every child has between the ages of 5 and 6 is appropriate."

Proposals for the early-years foundation stage (EYFS) to be extended into Year 1 arise from enduring concerns and research evidence collated by the Alexander Review.

When Professor Alexander was invited to appear on BBC News to explain his report, he was politely exasperated - but perhaps not surprised - when the discussion morphed into a debate on school starting age. The focus was on the unspoken implications for working parents of children being cared for at home or in a potentially costly nursery.

"What we're arguing is the upward extension of the Government's early years foundation stage to age 6 ... It's a bit different from saying formal schooling should start later," he said.

Where did it all go wrong? The report's recommendation that children start formal lessons at 6 was accurately reported, but the headlines were shortened to "start school at 6".

Vernon Coaker, schools minister, and Nick Gibb, his shadow, then responded that children should be in school at 4 and 5, unknowingly demonstrating the observation in the final report of the Cambridge Review that "ministers do not have time to read important documents and are forced to rely for their information partly on their officials and partly on the press".

Concern about the effect of younger children entering school was also being fed into Sir Jim Rose's independent review of primary education. He found that 94 of the 150 authorities do this, and suggested parents should have the choice.

This week, a Government consultation began on plans to allow all 4-year-olds to attend school, where they would learn through the play-based EYFS curriculum.

It is on this that the reports differ sharply. Sir Jim is more optimistic than Professor Alexander about implementing the EYFS curriculum in reception classes.

The experience of the EYFS and transition Year 1 is genuinely very varied - as are the experiences of school staff.

Janis Burdin, head of Moss Side Primary School in Lancashire, said: "One of the problems is we still do tests in Year 2."

There is a huge jump from reception to Year 1. The advantage of extending the foundation stage to 6, if you look at what they do in other countries, is that you can build children's skills in listening and talking.

"But I have mixed feelings. Some children come into school more than ready to read and write. Not to do any formal word-building until Year 2 would be far too late."

But Mark Case, assistant principal and primary-years programme co-ordinator for the independent Southbank International School, Kensington campus, does not have to worry about tests in Year 2.

"We call Year 1 kindergarten," he said. "Children start the year with a lot of play-based learning, but during the course of the year it becomes more formal. The kind of formal sit-down schooling starts in Year 2.

"There is a perception - I don't think entirely accurate - that private schools push hard younger than state schools. We get concerns from parents about children in kindergarten that things aren't progressing fast enough. But those who stick with it find those disappear within a couple of years."

The debate, it seems - Rose and Alexander would probably agree - is more about how and what you teach than when you start teaching.

## WARM RECEPTION ...

The views of Moss Side Primary, Lancashire

"I played on scooters in the outdoor play area. You don't go to the play area in Year 1. I liked doing phonics and writing stories."

Ellie Thomas, age 7, Year 3

"We did a lot of reading and writing in Year 1. We didn't start with books - we had pieces of paper with words on."

Connor McCrossan, age 9, Year 4

"My favourite was the 'Under the Sea' topic. I liked reading books. I learnt to read in Year 1 but I read in reception."

Chloe May, age 9, Year 4

## UPWARDS AND ONWARDS?

Cambridge Primary Review's findings in favour of raising the school starting age to six:

"Teachers, parents and consultants were concerned that transition between the early years foundation stage and key stage 1 is difficult for children. Many submissions called for a starting age of 6 or 7, arguing that formal schooling any earlier dents children's confidence and risks long-term damage to their learning."

Findings against: "Children in independent schools also start at age 4 and often 3. International studies show a wide variation between UK children's literacy achievement.

"Arguing against extending the foundation stage upwards are those review witnesses who believe that children from deprived homes or with unsupportive parents need an early start to literacy if they are to make sufficient progress by 11."

Conclusions:

"With almost all 3- to 4-year-olds already receiving at least 12.5 hours of early-years education a week, the crucial issue becomes not when children 'start school', but when they move from play-based to subject-based or area-based learning."

## TES FORUMS

'I'm not a fan of learning through play'

Emperor\_Katan

"I am not a fan of the learning through play aspect, at least not from my observations. I found it to be very poorly implemented and a disaster for when they move out of the phase."

Jacob

"I work in Germany, where kindergarten is all play and no letters and numbers, and then school, which starts at 6, is totally full-on, in-your-face formal. No transition. That's hard for kids who come into school at an earlier age to deal with. The talk now is about starting school at 5 and some states have already started this."

Sulla

"In Finland, children start formal schooling at 7 (ie the reading and writing stuff), but they do have an excellent kindergarten system too. Why are they so ready to mimic some aspects of the Finnish system (eg the masters for teachers) but not other bits (school starting age at 7)?"

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