Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology

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Doctorate in Professional Educational Child and Adolescent Psychology

Summer-born children starting school after their 5th birthday: An exploration of parents' views and experiences of waiting until Compulsory School Age (CSA).

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Declaration

I, Jennifer Hunter, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

In England, parents legally have a right to wait until the term after their child's fifth birthday before sending them to school; when the child is of Compulsory School Age (CSA). For summer-born children, this can result in them starting school a full year after they might have otherwise. There exists limited research in England on why parents choose to delay their summer-born child's entry into school, and what their experience is of the process. This study contributes to a gap in the literature. A multimethod study was conducted, collecting qualitative data from survey participants (*n* = 153) and interviewees (*n* = 10), which was analysed using thematic analysis. The results indicate that parental reasons for delaying their child's entry to school are complex and cannot be reduced to one reason. However, they include; individual child factors; the child within the family and school system; parental values, beliefs, and views of the English education system. Parents' experiences of the process of delaying their child's entry into school included; systematic barriers impacting on fair and equitable access, and the need for parental ability and capacity to engage with the process.

The participants in this study were typically affluent and highly-educated, which aligns with other research on families delaying their child's entry into school. Issues around equality of access are therefore discussed. This study proposes that future research is needed on understanding more about the families opting to delay, and the potential long-term implications of this. Implications for Educational Psychologists include having increasing awareness of the practice of delayed entry, working with families to understand their views, and working within school systems to support summer-born children.

Impact Statement

This thesis makes a contribution in several ways. Firstly, it draws together and critiques literature on the outcomes for children who are youngest in their school cohorts, and the potential outcomes from delayed entry into school. It highlights how evidence suggests that there is some disadvantage from being youngest in cohort, but that there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that delaying entry into school mitigates this disadvantage. It questions whether delayed entry into school is in the best interests of all children. This thesis suggests that there are significant gaps in the evidence-base, particularly in an English context, which require further research. Having an overview of this literature is helpful for those working with summer-born children, including Educational Psychologists (EPs), who need to use an evidence-informed approach to practice. It is also helpful for policy-makers who are making decisions on whether the practice of delayed entry into school is of benefit.

The second contribution this thesis makes is understanding parental reasons for delaying their child's entry into school, and their experience of the process of doing so. This is significantly under-researched in England, and this is the first known piece of independent research to address this topic that has not come from the Department for Education. This thesis proposes that understanding the complexity of parental views is needed for admission authorities who are making decisions on the admission of children to school – something that currently results in great variability. This thesis suggests that clearer policies are needed which capture parental reasons for delayed entry to school to remove some of the subjective decision making. Understanding parental views, and the support they would like for their child, is noted to be an important aspect of Educational Psychology practice. It suggests that EPs are in a position to support families to work through their views and decision-making, particularly when working with summer-born children in the early years.

A further contribution of this thesis is the equality issues it raises. This thesis identifies that affluent families with higher-than-average parental education levels may be more likely to delay their child's start at school, and suggests this aligns with other research on this topic. It questions whether this is due to difficulties navigating the system, or whether this is due to parental views and beliefs about the English education system. It raises questions on what the long-term impact of delayed entry

may be, particularly on other summer-born children in school who may be from more disadvantaged backgrounds. These questions have implications for policy makers as well as EPs who work across school systems. It suggests that EPs have a role in identifying if summer-born children are over-referred for support, and that EPs should be curious about how the needs of this group of children are perceived by schools. It suggests that EPs have a role in helping schools to think about the provision and support in place for summer-born children.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This chapter will explain the context for this thesis. It will set out educational policy and statutory guidance relevant to the admission of summer-born children to school, and the incidence of families utilising their right to request a reception school place at compulsory school age (CSA). This chapter will also set the rationale for this study by giving an overview of the limited existing research in this field and explain the relevance of this topic to Educational Psychologists (EPs).

1.1 Context of Research Problem

1.1.1 Defining an academic cohort

It is typical global practice for education systems to have a cut-off date which determines when a child reaches school age, and a cut-off point determining which children will fall within one year group (Balestra et al, 2020). Nearly all global education systems group children in a way that results in almost one year's difference between oldest and youngest children in an academic year, making the eldest children approximately 20 per cent older than the youngest at point of school entry (Balestra et al, 2020; Bedard & Dhuey, 2006). In England, the academic year runs from 1 September until 31 August and has been this way since the late 19th century due to historical farming industry (Elementary Education Act 1880), thus in the English system those born in the autumn are relatively older than their summer-born peers. During this study, the term 'cohort' will be used to explain all of those children that fall within one academic year group. Reference will be made to a child's 'normal' cohort; the one they should be in according to their date of birth, and their 'adopted cohort'; the one they are now in as a result of delayed entry to school.

1.1.2 Compulsory School Age (CSA) in England

As school policy is devolved, other systems in the UK operate differently. This study is based on the English school system. In England, the School Admission Code (Department for Education [DfE], 2021a) details that admission authorities "must provide for the admission of all children in the September following their fourth birthday" (p. 25). However, parents have a right to send their child on a pattern of part-time attendance or wait until the term after their child's fifth birthday when they

reach compulsory school age (CSA)[1] (DfE, 2020a; DfE, 2021c). For those children born in the summer months, between 1 April and 31 August, this can mean children starting school a year after they might have otherwise if their parents opt to start them at CSA (DfE, 2020a). At present there is no automatic entitlement for these children to be admitted to school out of their 'normal' year group[2] and parents must gain approval via the school's admission authority if they wish to request a reception place (DfE, 2020a). Summer-born children who wait to start school at CSA are otherwise required to miss a year of schooling and enter into school with spaces in Year One.

1.1.3 Terminology

Throughout this thesis there will be reference to summer-born children starting school at compulsory school age (CSA); that being the September after they might have otherwise. There will also be reference to parents opting to 'delay' their child's start at school. It is acknowledged that some parents in this study challenged the use of the word 'delay' and reported favouring the term 'Reception start at CSA'; largely due to connotations that 'delay' suggests a negative action. However, the term 'delay' is seen throughout the literature in this area of research and allows for comparisons to be made with literature from different countries where CSA is not used as a term. 'Delay' will therefore be used in this thesis to describe the act of parents opting to send their child to school at CSA, the year after they were originally invited to join.

Reference will be made to 'statutory guidance' in which schools and local authorities must comply. In England, there are a range of guidance publications which set out what schools must do to comply with the law (DfE, 2021d). This includes the School Admission Code (DfE, 2021c) which is referenced throughout this thesis, as well as publications such as the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education [DfE] & Department of Health [DoH], 2015). More generally, the term 'legislation' will be used to refer to English Acts of UK Parliament relating to children and education, for

[1] "A child reaches compulsory school age on the prescribed day following his or her fifth birthday (or on his or her fifth birthday if it falls on a prescribed day). The prescribed days are 31 December, 31 March and 31 August". (DfE, 2021c, p.25).

[2] "The phrase 'normal year group' [means] the year group a child would have been in had they entered school in the September following their fourth birthday". (DfE, 2020a).

example the Children and Families Act (2014) and Equality Act (2010), which underpin Educational Psychology practice.

The term ‘parents’ will be used throughout this thesis. The participant inclusion criteria for this study includes only those with parental responsibility (PR), and all participants identified themselves as either the child’s mother or father. It is acknowledged that the terms ‘parents/ carers’ are used in much of the research in this topic, and there may be instances where a child’s carer is making the decision to send their summer-born child to school at CSA. Due to this not being the case in this study, only ‘parents’ will be used.

1.1.4 Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this thesis and have been listed here for ease of reference:

CSA	Compulsory School Age
DfE	Department for Education
EP	Educational Psychologist
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
FSM	Free School Meals
LA	Local Authority
PR	Parental Responsibility
RQ	Research Question
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SES	Socioeconomic status

1.1.5 Policy in England

In England, the concept of ‘delaying’ a summer-born child’s entry to school is in its infancy. Prior to 2014, there were described ‘flexibilities’ that existed for parents who did not feel their summer-born children were ready to start school, as written into non-statutory guidance (DfE, 2013). Changes to the School Admission Code in 2014 cemented parental rights to request a reception year start at CSA for their summer-born child (DfE, 2014a). However, parents do not have a right to insist on admission outside of normal cohort if they choose to wait until CSA, and admission authorities are left to decide which entry point is in the child’s best interests; either waiting to start in reception or missing this year and joining year one with their chronological cohort (DfE, 2021c). The admissions code states that decisions “include taking account of the parent’s views” but “must also take into account the views of the head teacher of the school concerned” (DfE, 2021c, p. 25). However, there is no set procedure for admission authorities to follow and it is known that there is variability between authorities, with some local authorities automatically agreeing requests for children to enter reception and others expecting parents to have a “very strong case” (Abrahams & Cirin, 2019, p. 6). In 2018, the BBC published an article on this “postcode lottery” and varying success rates dependent on where the family live (BBC News, 2018). Further adding to the variability is that type of school determines who the admission authority is. Local authorities are the admission authority for community schools and voluntary controlled schools, academy trusts being the admission authority for academies, and a school’s governing body typically being the admission authority for voluntary aided schools and foundation schools (DfE, 2021c). Parents need to be aware of this when making their application as each admission authority has their own procedures for making decisions (DfE, 2021a).

In 2015 a commitment was made by the government to allow summer-born children to be automatically admitted to the reception class if that is what parents choose (House of Commons [HC], 2019; DfE, 2021a), and the issue has continued to be raised in the House of Commons (HC) (HC, 2016a; HC, 2016b; HC, 2019; HC, 2020). Despite this commitment, changes to the Schools Admissions Code (DfE, 2021c) have not included automatic agreement for a child to be entered into reception if their parents request a CSA start, and there has been no date set on when this issue may go before parliament. In 2016, a House of Commons debate

(HC Deb, 2016b) suggested some of the factors on why the government has not yet agreed to changes in the admissions code. These included; delaying not being in the best interest of every summer-born child, concerns parents may seek an unfair advantage on securing a favourable school by applying when their child is four and again at five, unintended consequences and pressure on the early years system, and potential significant cost to the government from children having an additional year in the education system. Parental campaign group 'Campaign for Flexible School Admissions for Summer Born Children' (https://summerbornchildren.org) continue to challenge the ambiguity of the guidance and call for a definitive change to the school admissions code which would allow summer-born children an automatic start in reception if their parents choose to delay until CSA.

1.1.6 Incidence of delayed admission to school in England

In England, data on the incidence of families requesting delayed entry into reception has so far been collected in three research reports by the Department for Education (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; Abrahams & Cirin, 2019; King & Hammond, 2021), and has been based on surveys of local authorities. The reports give an indication of the incidence, however, are limited in that; not all local authorities responded to the surveys, local authorities were asked to give estimated data if actual data was not available, local authorities are noted to not collect data on summer-born admissions in a consistent way, and there is a lack of clarity on the data for schools who are their own admission authority.

In the years immediately following the change to the school admissions code (2015-2017), Cirin and Lubwama (2018) reported an 84% increase in the number of requests received (n = 916 increasing to n = 1750) in 92 (of 152) local authorities that completed their survey. Whilst this was noted to be a significant increase, it was reported to equate to less than 0.5% of children aged five-years-old in the relevant local authorities. The following year, Abrahams and Cirin (2019) reported the number of requests to have plateaued. The third report (King & Hammond, 2021) provided data from 114 local authorities; 52 of whom had completed previous surveys. From this, it was reported that the rate of requests have continued to increase year on year but have slowed over time. King and Hammond (2021) suggest that as of January

2020, 1.2% of summer-born pupils delayed entry, an increase of 0.2% on the previous year. This currently represents a small proportion of the relevant population.

The reports suggest that rate of approval of requests has increased, with King and Hammond (2021) reporting that in local authorities “almost a quarter (22%) had a policy of agreeing all requests, compared to nine per cent in 2019” (p.7), and that there appears to be an annual trend in increased approval of requests. However, there is significant regional variability. Cirin and Lubwama (2018) noted that a higher incidence of requests were received in local authorities automatically agreeing requests, and less requests where parents were expected to provide strong evidence. Cirin and Lubwama (2018) proposed that increased leniency from local authorities and increased parental awareness could result in a continual rise in requests, although no estimated projections have been made.

1.1.7 Global incidence of delayed admission to school

Globally, there is a history of delayed entry of those youngest in cohort. In Denmark, 20% of boys and 10% of girls have a delayed school start (Dee & Sievertsen, 2018). Those delayed in Dee and Sievertsen’s (2018) study came from parents who were more likely to have completed more years of education and have a higher income at time of their child’s birth. In New South Wales, Australia, the practice of delayed entry has become so common that it is reported to represent 26% of children starting school, with the prevalence higher in advantaged communities who are thought to be better able to afford an additional year of care and preschool prior to starting school (Hanly et al., 2019). In North America, the practice of delayed school entry, where the term ‘academic redshirting’ is often used in reference to athletes who are delayed a year to aid physical development and maturity, has been prevalent for over 30 years (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). The practice is thought to represent 3-7% of children entering school in North America (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020). Notably, those redshirted are most often white boys from high income families (Albanesi, 2019; Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Huang, 2015), with children from low income or ethnically diverse population groups less represented in this practice (Greenburg & Winsler, 2020). It is suggested that reasons for delayed entry in North America could be based on two main factors; concern over a child’s

development or wanting advantage for the child (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017); the second of the two motivations referred to as “gaming” (p. 46).

Much of the research on delayed admissions to school is drawn from high-income economies, defined by the World Bank (2021) as countries which have a gross national income per capita of $13,205 or more, for example, the United States. Research on delayed school admissions exists in countries with lower-income economies (low <$1085, lower-middle $1086 to $4255, upper-middle $4256 to $13205 gross national income per capita), although the reasons parents have chosen to delay are vastly different. For example, in a rural farming province of the upper-middle income economy of China, Qihui (2022) suggested that poverty, scarcity of family resources, and the value families place on education contributed to families delaying their child’s start at school. Poverty and low parental education levels have also been noted as factors informing delayed school starts in lower-middle income economies such as Ghana (Seshie-Nasser & Oduro, 2016) and low-income economies such as Malawi (Moyi, 2010). Comparisons will be made with global literature and research in this study, particularly due to the limited available research specific to the English context. However, it should be noted that comparisons with other cultures and contexts will be made with caution due to variation in education systems, school starting ages, equality of access to early years education, and the variation in motivations for families to delay their child’s start at school based on the contexts in which they live. Due to motivations being different in lower-income economies, comparisons will be made with high-income economies, most notably North America.

1.2 Rationale: Limited Existing Research

A systematic approach was used to identify relevant literature on why parents choose to delay their child’s start at school. The steps taken in the process of identifying relevant literature can be viewed in Appendix A. There was a focus on identifying literature from high-income economies so that some comparisons could be made. In total, nine pieces of research were identified which specifically sought parents’ views on their reasons for delaying their child’s admission to school (see Appendix B). Key findings will be discussed below.

There is a need to fully understand the reasons parents choose to delay their child's start at school in England due to the implications for policy and practice. The literature review will set out potential advantages and disadvantages in the practice of delaying entry to school, both for the individual and the remaining peers in the classroom. There will be an examination of global literature which links parental motivations with outcomes and suggest that outcomes vary depending on the reasons parents have pursued delayed entry for their child. This link between motivations and outcomes has implications for policy which will be explored in the discussion section. Links to global literature, particularly literature from North America, will be made throughout. However, understanding the views of parents in an English context is needed for English policy and practice.

1.2.1 Relevant English research on why parents delay

There exists limited research on parents' reasons for delaying their summer-born child's start at school in England. The only pieces of research identified are two of the research reports published by the Department for Education which sought parental views (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; King & Hammond, 2021) (see Appendix B). This limited research does give an overview of parental motivations but is constrained by the methodology used and the limited scope for parents to fully elaborate on their reasons; both used closed-ended questions in an online survey issued by a government department, asking parents to select their reasons for their decision from a pre-prescribed list. During the course of the literature search for this study, no published qualitative research in England has been identified. This need for a richer understanding of parents' decisions, without using a pre-prescribed list of reasons, gives rationale for this current study.

The research report by Cirin and Lubwama (2018) surveyed parents in the four local authorities who, at the time, were the authorities automatically admitting summer-born children to reception where their parents had requested this[3]. Of those parents that responded (*N* = 196), it was found that 97% of parents selected "whether I felt my child would be ready for school" (p. 21) as a factor, with 47% recording this as the primary factor. Other frequently selected factors included; "evidence I had seen about summer-born children in school" (77%), "advice from pre-school/nursery"

[3] Liverpool City Council, Hertfordshire County Council, Devon County Council and Lewisham Council

(47%) and “medical condition/ developmental delay” (38%) (p. 21). The report did not elaborate on these factors nor define what could be defined as being ‘ready for school’. It would be difficult to infer what parents might mean by ‘readiness’ and whether the concerns are centred around independence, toileting, physical development, academic readiness, social and emotional skills, or other skills deemed important by the family. Results can therefore only be viewed with caution and in a context where requests were being automatically agreed and there was therefore no need for parents to expand on their reasons.

The more recent research report by King and Hammond (2021) was based on the survey being sent out by 42 local authorities who agreed to distribute it, with 804 parents responding. It should be noted that a third of all participants were from just two local authorities. Reasons parents cited as factors considered in their decisions were largely similar to Cirin and Lubwama (2018); school readiness (77%), evidence about summer borns (55%), medical or developmental reasons (34%), and advice from preschool (26%). Some parents used the ‘other’ box to expand on their response and explain their child’s lack of readiness in more detail. Whilst these comments were noted in the report, there was no detail on how they were analysed, or how many parents they were relevant to. There was also brief comment on parents’ experiences of the process of applying, mentioning a “lottery depending on the support of the LA” and “general lack of awareness and understanding” (p.29). However, it is not known how many parents these points were relevant to. It is also not known which local authorities agreed to send out the survey, their motivations for doing so, and the leniency of agreeing requests in these local authorities, which may have impacted on parents’ reported experiences of the process. Therefore, whilst these two research reports give some initial insight into parental motivations, they are limited by their methodology and do not fully explore the depth and breadth of reasons.

1.2.2 Relevant global research on why parents delay

Despite the practice of delaying a child’s entry into school being more common in other high-income economies, such as North America (Greenburg & Winsler, 2020), research on why parents choose to delay is limited. Through the systematic approach to searching for literature (see Appendix A for details), seven pieces of

global research were identified exploring parental reasons for delaying their child's entry to school; six from North America and one from Australia. The publication dates range from 1995 to 2020. See Appendix B for details of the research identified the studies' methodology and conclusions drawn.

Much of the research identified included parental reasons as a small subsection of a wider piece of research (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Bellisimo et al., 1995; Daro, 2020; Dougan, 2014; Mergler & Walker, 2017). Of these, two used secondary data sets and attempted to explore correlations between responses to simple parental surveys and the later prevalence of children with delayed entry into school (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Daro, 2020), with either no correlations found (Bassok & Reardon, 2013), or inferences that a survey on 'readiness' behaviours would sufficiently capture all of the reasons informing parental decision to delay (Daro, 2020). An issue with the research was the assumption that the surveys would fully capture the array of reasons parents may have chosen to delay.

Some of the research prioritised collection of data for qualitative analysis, allowing more understanding from the voice of parents (Albanesi, 2019; Bellisimo, 1995; Dougan, 2014; Mergler & Walker, 2017; Noel & Newman, 2003). However, Mergler and Walker's (2017) research was a small-scale analysis of comments on an online parenting forum discussing delayed entry, Albanesi (2019) interviewed parents undecided about whether they would delay, and Bellisimo et al.'s (1995) interviews were not only focused on those eligible to delay entry, but rather captured data from a range of parents on concerns they might have had prior to their child starting school. Only two of the pieces of global research focused solely on a sample of parents who had been through the process of delaying their child's start at school and obtained a retrospective view on their reasons (Dougan, 2014; Noel & Newman, 2003). Noel and Newman's (2003) interviews of 15 mothers concluded that parents fell into one of two groups; those who based the decision on variables relevant to their child, and those with personal philosophies relevant to child development and schooling. In contrast, Dougan's more recent (2014) doctoral research interviewing 20 parents identified multiple factors influencing parental decisions. These included; the child's date-of-birth being close to the cohort cut-off date, parental view that being youngest in cohort is disadvantageous, comparisons made to siblings

struggling, perception of delay resulting in physical maturity, and a perception that boys are not ‘school ready’. Dougan (2014) concluded that many parents held a “maturationist viewpoint of child development” (p. 74) in that children being older and therefore more ‘mature’ allows them to be better able to cope with school.

1.2.3 Summary of research on why parents delay

The literature base on why parents choose to delay their child’s entry into school is very limited. In England, it is confined to two government surveys (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; King & Hammond, 2021) which used closed questions and provided limited opportunity for parents to expand on their reasons. Globally, only two pieces of research have been identified which are focused on collecting qualitative data from parents who have been through the process (Dougan, 2014; Noel & Newman, 2003). Whilst these give some understanding of why parents may wish to delay their child’s entry into school in North America, they are small studies, and the findings cannot be generalised to a wider population; particularly in an English context. This thesis therefore intends to contribute a further small study to the research base, with a specific focus on families within the English context.

1.3 Rationale: Relevance to Educational Psychologists

This study is relevant to the Educational Psychology profession for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the understanding, and application, of a section of the School Admissions Code (DfE, 2021c) which allows summer-born children to start school at CSA. It is important for Educational Psychologists (EPs) to understand relevant legislation and statutory guidance in education which bounds their work, and for EPs to have awareness of how school systems operate (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2017; Health & Care Professions Council [HCPC], 2015). This research makes a contribution in this area due to the currently limited existing research, and therefore the potential for EPs to be unfamiliar with the guidance surrounding summer-born children starting at school. Having awareness of the topic would be useful for EPs who may be required to make a view on the admission of summer-born children to school at multidisciplinary decision-making panels within local authorities, as suggested by the DfE (DfE, 2021b). This study aims to raise awareness of the guidance within the EP profession.

The second contribution of this study to the EP profession is raising awareness of the existing literature on the outcomes for summer-born children, and the potential implications of delaying their entry into school. The literature review provides an overview and critique of the research in this field. This will make a contribution due to few published articles, and no identified English-based articles, which give an oversight of research on outcomes for summer-born children. Having this overview will be of use to EPs working with summer-born children who may wish to have some understanding of the potential outcomes for this population group, and the implications of the practice of delayed entry into school.

The final contribution of this study is the insight into parental views. Understanding, and appreciating, parental views is an important part of working with families and is emphasised in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015). It has relevance to the EP profession because of the EP role in working with different systems around the child, including direct work with parents. Consultation models help EPs to use questioning to understand the perspectives of others, and what is important to them (Beaver, 2011). EPs are therefore well placed to elicit the family voice when working within schools. This study intends to highlight some of the experiences and concerns shared by this group of parents and offer insights into why parents may be choosing to delay their summer-born child's start at school. This may be of interest to any EPs working with the parents of summer-born children who may need to gather parental views on their child's education, for example, during a statutory assessment of needs.

Further implications for the Educational Psychology profession will be discussed in detail in the discussion section of this thesis (see section 5.2).

1.4 Research Questions

This study addresses two research questions. The first question builds on the research of Cirin and Lubwama (2018) and King and Hammond (2021) on reasons parents delay their summer-born child's entry into school. The second research question intends to address the gap in the English research literature and expand on the limited points presented in King and Hammond's (2021) report on parents experiences of delaying their summer-born child's entry into school.

The two research questions (RQs) explored in this study were:

> **RQ1.** Why did parents choose to wait until their summer-born child was aged five (i.e., of Compulsory School Age, CSA) before starting them at mainstream school?
>
> **RQ2.** What were parents' experiences of the process of starting their summer-born child at mainstream school at Compulsory School Age?

1.5 Structure of this Thesis

Chapter one has provided the context of the thesis, the rationale of the study and the relevance it has to Educational Psychologists. Chapter two provides a literature review which will cover research on outcomes for those youngest in cohort, and outcomes for those delaying entry into school. Chapter three sets out the methodology used in this study and chapter four presents the findings of the research. This thesis concludes with chapter five which will discuss key findings and focus on implications for policy and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter is written in two sections. The first section reviews existing literature on children being youngest in their cohort and their outcomes. There is a long history of research into this topic, and a general consensus that the youngest children in cohort are disadvantaged, although the gap in attainment closes over time. Awareness of this literature, and the believed disadvantage, is cited by parents as a contributing factor in their decision to delay their summer-born child's entry into school (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; King & Hammond, 2021).

The second section will examine literature on delayed school starts at school, and the potential advantages and disadvantages of this. Due to the relative infancy of this practice in England, literature in this area is relatively lacking in the English context and literature from other high-income economies will therefore be drawn upon. The findings from this literature base largely conflict with the assumption that delaying entry will remedy disadvantage from being youngest in cohort. There will be discussion on why this might be, and how outcomes may be directly related to the reasons in which parents chose to delay their child's start at school. The findings from this section will have implications for policy makers who continue to debate the notion of automatic entry into reception at CSA for summer-born children.

An explanation of the strategy used to identify relevant literature for this review can be found in Appendix C.

2.1 Youngest in Cohort and Outcomes

This section will cover literature looking at correlations between being youngest in cohort and children's outcomes. The question being addressed is, 'are children disadvantaged from being youngest in cohort and why might this be?'. This section will discuss correlations with academic attainment, the concept of 'school readiness', the potential impact of teacher expectations, impact on children born prematurely, (over) identification of SEND, and implications for social and emotional wellbeing.

2.1.1 Correlations between youngest in cohort and attainment

The correlation between a person's month of birth and their development and later cognitive abilities has been explored since early in the 20th century (Kassel, 1913). In early research it was questioned whether conception during certain months favoured

later ‘genius’, by comparing the mean intelligence scores of those born in darker and colder winter months, with those born in warmer summer months (Pintner & Forlano, 1934). The notion that climatic conditions or seasons of the year have any correlation with ‘intelligence’ was later disputed when comparisons were made with global education systems and their academic outcomes. It was noted by Musch and Hay (1999) that there is global variation in which month a school year starts, and it is not the season or month itself which correlates with improved outcomes, it is the child’s chronological position within their year group. There now exists a wealth of global literature noting a correlation between a child’s position in their academic cohort and their outcomes in literacy (Vestheim et al., 2019), numeracy (Aune et al., 2018), and across academic areas (Crawford et al, 2007, 2013b; Datar, 2006; Sprietsma, 2010).

Gaps in attainment are most significant upon entry to school. At the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), there is a 24-percentage point difference between those oldest and youngest in being recorded as obtaining a “good level of development” (DfE, 2010, p. 15); a measurement noted to not take account of a child’s maturity (‘actual age’). By the end of year one, summer-born boys are 19 percentage points behind their male September-born peers, with the most significant disadvantage seen for those eligible for free school meals (FSMs) (DfE, 2010); an indicator of deprivation. By the end of primary school, the attainment gap in English and Maths has reduced to 8 percentage points, and to 6 percentage points by the end of secondary school (DfE, 2010). Although the gap diminishes over time, Crawford et al. (2007) found that summer-born children are 5.5 per cent and 6.1 per cent (august-born girls and boys respectively) less likely to reach expected levels in their GCSE examinations than their older peers, potentially affecting some children’s options for further education. Historically there has been 3 percentage points between oldest and youngest students entering academic A-Levels, and later a 0.8 percentage point difference in those passing (DfE, 2010). Crawford et al. (2013b) also found august-born children were slightly less likely to go to University (around 2 percentage points), and graduate with a degree (around 1 percentage point). There is noted to be less of a difference in likelihood of youngest students entering vocational qualifications relative to their older peers (DfE, 2010).

When children first start school, the gap in attainment between youngest and oldest is stark, although it does decrease over time for the majority of children. Whilst there is a very small gap by University, literature largely concludes that there is little evidence that any detrimental impact of being youngest in cohort lasts into adulthood (Crawford et al., 2013a, 2013b; Dobkin & Ferreira, 2010). Crawford et al. (2013a) found no significant difference in individuals' income, health status or wellbeing in adulthood. These findings suggest that those youngest in cohort do catch up somewhere in the education system and the long-term attainment gap is marginal to none by adulthood. The gap in attainment closing over time could lead to the question, 'why does this matter?'. If summer-born children do eventually catch-up then why do we need to know about it? The sections below identify summer-born children being less likely to be viewed as 'mature', poorer teacher expectations, increased likelihood of being referred for special educational needs support and being streamed into lower ability groupings. These factors all have potential implications for social and emotional wellbeing, not measured by attainment scores.

2.1.2 'Maturation' and 'school readiness'

Some of the evidence base is focused on the concept of 'maturation theory'; the thought that some children in a cohort will perform better simply because of their relative maturity and physical and mental development (for example, Bedard & Dhuey, 2006). The concept of 'maturity' is noted in the literature concerning physical outcomes, such as those in sport. Correlational studies have identified that those youngest in cohort have poorer attainment in physical education (Cobley et al., 2008), are less likely to be selected for sporting teams (Baxter-Jones et al., 2019), and are less represented in adult professional and competitive sports (Abel & Kruger, 2007; Musch & Grondin, 2001). It could be inferred that this is based on those youngest in cohort being smaller and less physically mature. However, more recent models of 'school readiness', as described below, challenge the emphasis on a child's individual maturation, and highlight the interactions with adults as an influencing factor on the child's progress.

The concept of 'maturation' features in early literature on children's readiness for learning, and is underpinned by nature-nurture debates (Eisenhart & Graue, 1990; Graue & DiPerna, 2000). It is suggested by Weber (1984) that this conceptualisation

of ‘readiness’ for school may be aligning with certain psychological theories on human development, for example, Piaget’s (1959) theory on human development which states that development unfolds over time, and a child has to be developmentally ready for each stage of learning. Brown and Lan’s (2018) qualitative metasynthesis of families’ conceptualisations of ‘school readiness’ in North America found that early studies tended to frame ‘readiness’ through a nativist lens, with the child being deemed to be school ready if they had acquired a certain set of skills and abilities by a set age. Brown and Lan (2018) noted that parental reports of readiness were focused on academic or social skills that the child possessed which diminished the role of the parent or school in the child’s development. However, Brown and Lan (2018) noted that more recent research on parental conceptualisations of ‘school readiness’ have shifted since the implementation of education reform policy, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, with more recognition on the role of parents and schools in preparing children for school success.

Unicef’s school readiness conceptual framework (Britto, 2012) focuses on this idea that ‘readiness’ is not just something that can be achieved by the individual child, but that families and communities need to support children to be ready for school through their attitudes to school and involvement in early learning opportunities, and schools need to be ready for children by promoting smooth transitions. It notes a shift in the definitions of school readiness in research from a maturational perspective to something that is socially constructed, emphasising that school readiness “is a product of the interaction between the child and the range of environmental and cultural experiences that maximize the development outcomes for children” (Britto, 2012, p. 6). In this model, there is an emphasis on the systems around the child, and all of these systems working together. Emphasis on the child’s maturation alone diminishes the role adults have in the progress and outcomes of children.

2.1.3 Teacher judgements of youngest in cohort

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) helps draw attention to the role of the adult in a child’s learning, and how a child’s learning is progressed through structured interactions. Progress is not based solely on a child’s maturity and age, but is influenced by the dynamic social interactions between the child and the more

knowledgeable members of society (for example, parent or teacher). Teachers can directly aid progress by giving the learner guidance to help them manage tasks they would find too difficult independently; known as the ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 1978). Conversely, low expectations of a child’s ability and lack of guidance could have a negative impact on progress, as suggested below.

There exists research showing that teachers are more likely to judge August-born children as less able than their September-born peers (Crawford et al., 2011). The notion that teacher expectations can impact outcomes was seen in Rosenthal and Jacobsen’s (1968) notorious ‘Pygmalion in the Classroom’ experimental study, with randomly selected children in the earliest years obtaining substantial gains on reasoning assessments after their teachers had been told these children had ‘potential’. There is suggestion in this topic area that the teacher view of the child, not just the physical or emotional maturity of a child relative to their peers, is resulting in a “superior experience” for those oldest in cohort (Gladwell, 2008, p. 25). In practice, Campbell (2014) found via analysis of the large national Millennium Cohort Study that those youngest in the cohort were disproportionately assigned to lower ability groupings in class. In schools where ability grouping takes place within a primary class, Campbell (2014, p. 762) states that “the already disproportionate tendency of autumn-borns favourably to be judged ‘above average’ is amplified”. The differentiation for younger students resulting in lower teacher expectations for this group was noted by Daniels et al. (2010), and has also been noted in secondary schools, with summer-born children more likely to be entered into lower tier GCSE examination papers; restricting the highest grade they are able to achieve (Massey et al., 1996).

2.1.4 Children born prematurely

In King and Hammond’s (2021) survey of parents of summer-born children that had requested delayed entry, 17% of the children were noted to have been born prematurely. This is noted by King and Hammond (2021) to represent around double the national average of premature births, suggesting that this population group is over-represented in those that go on to experience delayed entry into school. It may be that parents of premature children have concerns about their development. It is known that babies born prematurely are at an elevated risk of being identified with

developmental disabilities (Reichman, 2005). The birth weight of the baby is also of specific concern, with the risk for adverse outcomes for children increasing as birth weight decreases (McCormick et al., 1992); those weighing less than 1,500 grams or 3.3 pounds at birth being most at risk of being diagnosed with cognitive and physical disabilities (Reichman, 2005), and a range of poorer health outcomes (Stein et al., 2006). A review of literature published since 1970 found no changes in the prevalence of neurodevelopmental disabilities over time; children born at or before 26 weeks gestation had a 22% chance of being classified with a major disability, and children born at 800g or less had a 24% chance (Lorenz et al., 1998). The higher incidence of neurodevelopmental and physical disabilities means children born of low birth-weight, are more likely to receive support for special educational needs by age nine (Pinto-Martin et al., 2004).

The DfE guidance for local authorities and school admission authorities specifically highlights children born prematurely as a group who may have some developmental needs (DfE, 2021a). There is specific reference in the guidance that admission authorities should be aware of the child's expected due date and the academic year they would be in if they had been born at full term (DfE, 2021a). The premature birth of some children would likely have resulted in them being summer-born when they might have otherwise been born in the autumn term, and therefore have been oldest in their academic year. A premature birth may not only result in the potential for developmental disabilities, but may also result in the child now being educated in the year above the one they might have otherwise been in, making this a specifically disadvantaged population group.

2.1.5 Over-identification of SEND

In England, it is known that children that are summer-born are statistically more likely to have been identified with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) by age eleven (Crawford et al., 2007; Crawford et al., 2013b). Summer-born children are overrepresented in categories of SEND including Moderate Learning Difficulties, Specific Learning Difficulties, and Speech, Language and Communication Needs (DfE, 2010). These higher incidences of SEND have also been found in research in North America (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2010; Wallingford & Prout, 2000) and in Switzerland (Balestra et al., 2020). Dhuey and Lipscomb (2010) found a direct

correlation between a child's age in cohort and their identification of having learning difficulties, particularly for the youngest white boys. No such correlations were found between age and other categories of SEND, such as hearing difficulties. Further, Balestra et al. (2020) found a correlation between age in cohort and referrals for psychological assessment for behavioural difficulties and highlighted that a significant proportion of these referrals were dismissed after initial assessment; further raising concerns about how school staff interpret the behaviours of the youngest children in their cohort.

Notable in the research literature, particularly in North America, is the correlation between relative age and diagnosis and treatment of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), with those with a birth date immediately before their school cut-off point more likely to be diagnosed (Chen et al., 2016; Elder, 2010; Layton et al., 2018; Morrow et al., 2012; Schwandt & Wuppermann, 2016; Whitely et al., 2019). Recent research by Kuntsi et al. (2021) identified that in Sweden those youngest in year had an increased likelihood of receiving an ADHD diagnosis, with an odds ratio of 1.2-1.5. Kuntsi et al., (2021) went on to identify that those youngest in year with a diagnosis of ADHD were more likely to later experience a substance use disorder (with an odds ratio of 1.23). However, the authors do note that it is not possible to separate those with 'true' ADHD from those misclassified due to their relatively young age in class.

As there is no biological reason for younger children being more likely to be identified as having ADHD, there exist concerns about how teacher assessments are driving referrals and subsequent diagnoses through assessment methods asking to view the child's behaviours relative to their peers (Evans et al. 2010). For example, impulsive behaviours may be more observable in younger children (Kuntsi et al., 2021). Further, concerns have been raised about whether higher rates of diagnosis are being used to obtain targeted support for younger students in attempts to manage emotional immaturity and improve educational outcomes (Schwandt & Wuppermann, 2016). It is plausible, that over-referrals for SEND may be due to teachers failing to take account of a child's relative age when viewing their behaviour and learning (Wallingford & Prout, 2000), but may also be as a means for seeking targeted support services (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2010). Regardless, it is of concern that

children youngest in cohort are more likely to receive a SEND diagnosis, particularly where this is resulting in unnecessary intervention and medication.

2.1.6 Youngest in cohort and social and emotional outcomes

Bedard and Dhuey (2006) suggest that children taking exams on their birth dates would not fully counteract the disadvantage from being in youngest in cohort due to the 'relative age effect'. It is suggested that those youngest in cohort have poorer self-belief which impacts on their confidence and attainment; plausibly due to their own comparisons made with peers, as well as adults making comparisons of their abilities. Correlational studies have found poorer self-esteem and wellbeing for those youngest in cohort (Thompson et al., 2004), higher levels of peer relationship problems and emotional symptoms (Patalay et al., 2015), a higher likelihood of experiencing severe bullying (DfE, 2010), and increased likelihood of experiencing depression in late adolescence (Kuntsi et al., 2021). Crawford et al. (2013b) attempted to measure social and emotional factors by asking parents and teachers to complete the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997). From this, they found that summer-born children were perceived to have lower levels of socioemotional development, with parents reporting differences until age nine, and teachers reporting differences persisting until age 11. These findings are based on adult reports and raise a question around how much adults' perceptions of the children's difficulties are contributing to their behaviour, self-perception, and attainment. The potential implications for social and emotional outcomes will be further discussed when looking at correlations for those who have delayed entry into school.

2.1.7 Summary of youngest in cohort and outcomes

The literature on the correlation between children youngest in cohort and their outcomes largely suggests that there is a gap in attainment when children first enter school, but that this reduces over time. Whilst the attainment gap is negligible by adulthood, the literature suggests that there may be implications for a child's wellbeing, with poorer social emotional development, comparison with peers which could result in negative self-perception, and higher likelihood of being identified as having SEND. There is some suggestion that teachers' having poorer perceptions of the youngest in their cohorts could be contributory.

If adults' perceptions of a child's abilities are contributing to their outcomes, then there is a role for Educational Psychologists in reframing the view held of summer-born children and their abilities. There is a role in challenging school systems and structures, such as in-class ability grouping which may be disadvantageous for those youngest in cohort. Further, there is a role in identifying any correlations between referrals for support and assessment, and child's month of birth. If noted that there are higher incidences of summer-born children being referred, then work would be needed within school systems to identify why this might be, and what support might be needed for these children.

2.2 Delayed School Entry and Outcomes

This section will cover literature looking at correlations between delayed school entry and children's outcomes. The question being addressed is, 'if those youngest in cohort could be disadvantaged, does delaying school entry counteract this disadvantage?'. There will be a focus on correlations with academic attainment, implications for social and emotional wellbeing, followed by discussion of implications for disadvantaged children and those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

There are limitations in the research which explores the correlation between a delayed school start and the child's outcomes. Ethically, it would not be appropriate to conduct a controlled study comparing those delayed against those who have not been; particularly if the evidence suggests that there may be some benefit from delayed entry. Data relevant to the English school system is also limited due to the relative infancy of the changes to the School Admission Code (made in December 2014) (DfE, 2021c). Children entering school after this point will be taking their Key Stage Two SATs assessment at the time of completion of this thesis (2021/2022 academic year). Cirin and Lubwama (2018) note that it will be important for analysis of attainment data after it becomes available. Whilst there is literature available from outside of England, policies that allow delay vary globally; there is a tendency towards increased flexibility and delay not only being confined to those born immediately prior to the school year cut off.

Furthermore, there are limitations in drawing comparisons between children who have experienced a delayed entry into school and those who have not due to the

reasons that parents might have chosen to delay. For example, concerns about social and emotional development, suspected or confirmed SEND, developmental delays, or lack of 'readiness', could have implications for the child's future attainment. Not accounting for parental motivations when looking at outcomes is noted to cause the empirical evidence to be inconclusive (Stipek & Byler, 2001). Fortner and Jenkins (2017) attempted to correlate outcomes with parental motivations, but this is reduced down to either concerns about a child's development or wanting an advantage for the child. Correlations between other parental decisions to delay, and resulting outcomes, are limited in the literature. Therefore, whilst relevant research on delayed school starts and outcomes will be presented below, it will be discussed with some caution.

2.2.1 Correlations between delayed school entry and attainment

Similar to the research on those youngest in cohort, research into delayed school entry is largely focused on correlations between age of child and test scores; a quantifiable measure. Some research finds positive correlations between delayed school entry and attainment (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Datar, 2006; Datar & Gottfried, 2015; McEwan & Shapiro, 2008), which suggest potential benefit for the individual child (Bassok & Reardon, 2013). Datar's (2006) study in particular reported children gaining much higher scores in reading and maths upon entry to school (*SD* = 0.6 - 0.8). Similar findings were reported by Dağli & Jones (2013) with higher initial reading and mathematics scores for those delayed compared with peers who entered school on time (*d* = 0.27 and *d* = 0.52 respectively), a small effect in reading but a medium effect in maths. A conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that those oldest at point of school entry are more likely to score highly on assessments than their younger peers. However, Elder and Lubotsky (2009) suggest that the higher attainment of delayed students in their first few months of school is possibly not just from age-at-test and could be resulting from time spent in nursery and accumulated learning. The extended exposure to learning before school is noted by Fortner and Jenkins (2017) who comment that any correlation between those 'redshirted' (delayed) and higher attainment when entering school may reflect higher socioeconomic status, as it is known that those with higher SES are more likely to 'redshirt' and have had access to nursery or pre-school.

Whilst there are reports of some initial benefits from delaying, there is less evidence of gains over time. Datar (2006) did report that those delayed continued to experience gains in attainment over the next two years of schooling and suggested that the continued increase in scores was not simply from age at test; perhaps suggesting other factors such as a child's increasing confidence having an impact. However, the gains were small (*SD* = 0.07 - 0.10). Fortner and Jenkins (2017) also report a slight advantage for 'redshirted' students in third grade reading and maths scores relative to peers, again with small gains (*SD* = 0.16 and 0.12 respectively). Stipek and Byler (2001) and Dağli and Jones (2013) found that by the end of third grade the difference in results were negligible. Datar and Gottfried (2015) also found that there was an initial gap in attainment on entry to school, with those delayed scoring 22 and 15 percentile points higher in maths and reading assessments, however by the end of eighth grade the gap had closed. The authors note that those youngest in grade actually had larger overall gains in attainment over time, seen by them catching up with their peers.

Other research has found no advantage in test scores, with delayed students achieving in line with their summer-born peers who entered school on time (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Interestingly, this conclusion was made in the only English research to date looking at attainment scores of those delayed (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018). Whilst Key Stage Two SATs data is not yet available, an analysis of the year one Phonics Screening Check has taken place with analysis of the 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 cohorts. This research found that whilst delayed summer-born children scored marginally higher than other summer-born children who started school in their 'normal' admission cohort (0.7 marks higher), children who were autumn and spring born (September-March) outperformed both the delayed and 'normal' admission summer-born children in both cohorts; delayed summer-borns who were now oldest in cohort were not the highest achievers. From this, Cirin and Lubwama (2018) inferred that delayed admission to reception had no significant impact on pupils' performance in the phonics screening assessment.

The research by Cirin and Lubwama (2018) did remove pupils recorded with SEND before analysis. However, there was no further information on why pupils might have been delayed and the impact this may have had on their attainment, nor was there reference to SES factors. Although children with SEND were removed, the reasons

parents delayed their child's entry are not matched with the attainment data. Due to this research taking place at a time when the changes to the School Admissions Code (DfE, 2014a) had come into effect, it could be inferred that parents had strong motivations to delay their child's entry and navigate the new guidance in order to gain approval. Reasons for delay, the child's experience of nursery or pre-school (and exposure to phonics), teacher expectations of these delayed children, and parental value placed on phonics and formal learning could have an impact on attainment data. Comparison with long-term attainment data would be needed, when available, to see if there are any implications on attainment over time; ideally with the results matched to reason for delay.

The conclusions in much of the literature is that delaying entry to school may provide some initial academic benefits, but advantage is not sustained, and it is therefore not an effective way to improve academic attainment long-term (Dağli & Jones, 2013; Dobkin & Ferreira, 2006; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Stipek & Byler, 2001). Black et al. (2011) found no long-term impact on earnings in adulthood and Fortner and Jenkins (2017) comment on limited workforce participation and the impact on lifetime earnings. Policies allowing delayed entry are noted to be expensive, due to funding an additional year of early education and reduced workforce participation, and it is suggested that the lack of impact on outcomes means these policies are unlikely to 'pay off' (Stipek & Byler, 2001). Furthermore, some research suggests delay may actually be detrimental for other children entering school. Noel and Newman (2003) suggest that an increasingly older class may increase the demands to accommodate the older children, resulting in the younger summer-born children being increasingly disadvantaged. Further, Elder and Lubotsky (2009) suggest that the perceptions of the abilities of the youngest children may be affected due to comparisons made between the youngest children and their peers. These negative perceptions of abilities have implications for children's social and emotional outcomes, as well as rates of children identified with SEND.

2.2.2 Delayed school entry and social and emotional outcomes

If it is believed that those youngest in cohort have poorer social and emotional outcomes due to the 'relative age effect' and lower self-belief, then it is plausible that delaying the child's entry to make them eldest in the cohort will have a positive effect

on their social and emotional wellbeing. The literature in this area is very limited and is also impacted by reliance on parental and teacher reports of children's wellbeing. Suziedelyte and Zhu (2015) used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997), but suggested affluent parents were underreporting their child's behaviours, and noted that teachers were more likely to report increased externalising behaviours in children from single parent families. Findings are therefore biased by adults' perceptions of the child. Other studies include weak findings. For example, Stipek and Byler (2001) asked children to rate their feelings towards their teacher on a 5-point Likert scale and found that those older in their cohort had more positive feelings towards their teacher, loosely concluding that older children may be given more autonomy in the classroom which promoted positive feelings and wellbeing. However, even those youngest in the class did score the relationship positively and it is a stretch to draw inferences from such data.

Datar and Gottfried (2015) noted their research as being the first to utilise longitudinal data to look at the effects of school entrance age of social-behavioural outcomes. The study was also predominantly based on teacher reports on a survey but did include a large sample size ($n > 7000$). They found that being a year older at point of school entry correlated with teachers reporting decreased externalising problems ($d = -0.15$) and decreased internalising problems ($d = -0.25$), with these effects persisting until grade five. Effect sizes for both are small and the actual difference in scores on the survey were marginal, but the authors note the results are statistically significant and there is a consistent pattern over several years. The authors also found a similar correlation between school entrance age and positive ratings of children's "self-control, interpersonal skills, peer relations, and approaches to learning" (p. 342); again, with a small effect size ($d < 0.3$) that persisted until the end of fifth grade. Students also rated their own social-behavioural outcomes, with delayed entry correlating with students reporting lower externalising behaviours ($d = -0.15$), marginally lower internalising behaviours ($d = -0.04$), and more positive peer relations ($d = 0.1$) in third grade. The findings do suggest that teachers report slightly fewer concerns about children's social, emotional and behavioural needs when they have had delayed entry to school. However, there is no way to identify whether this is a result of *the delay*, and simply reflects teachers having a slightly more positive view of those oldest in cohort; something identified in the literature on 'relative age

effects'. Interestingly, there is suggestion that those children who experienced a delayed entry to school had a slightly more positive view of their own behaviours in third grade which may contribute to the thinking that being oldest in cohort has a positive effect on a child's self-perception, however, effect sizes were very small.

Research in Denmark by Dee and Sievertsen (2018) found a strong correlation between a one-year delayed entry into school and reduced inattention/hyperactivity in children aged seven (d = -0.73) based on mother's completion of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997). The authors suggest that extended exposure to pretend-play in the early years may aid self-regulation. However, it should be questioned how much the perception of 'inattentiveness' is simply developmentally appropriate behaviour from a younger child. In all of the research in this area, the findings are based on adults' perceptions and ratings, and it is perhaps that this is an overlooked variable; adults perceive older children more positively and younger children more negatively. It is therefore not necessarily the delay in itself which has the positive effect, but simply becoming eldest in cohort and therefore having a higher chance of being perceived more positively. This would likely have an impact on a child's social and emotional wellbeing, and self-perception, although measuring this without relying on adults' perceptions is evidently a challenge.

2.2.3 Delayed school entry for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

It is reported that those delayed in their entry to school are more likely to be later identified as having Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND). Fortner and Jenkins (2017) reported children being 1.75 times more likely to be identified as "disabled" relative to their peers who entered school on time (p. 52), and Graue and DiPerna (2000) reported delayed children were 1.89 times more likely to receive support from special education services; the correlation plausibly being related to the concerns parents might have had about their child's development which informed their decision to delay. In England, King and Hammond (2021) found over a third of parents cited concerns about their child's development informing their decision to delay, and it is therefore important for future research in England to identify whether delayed school entry may be of benefit to this group of children.

The research on whether there are benefits to delay for children with SEND is limited and variable. Datar (2006) found that on maths and reading assessments, children identified as having a disability who were delayed in their entrance to school (assessed aged 6) were able to perform on par with a peer who entered school on time (assessed aged 5). The same positive initial advantage was noted by Stipek and Byler (2001). However, in contrast Fortner and Jenkins (2017) found that children delayed who were later identified as having disabilities scored slightly more poorly in maths and reading when compared to children with disabilities who entered school on time (d = 0.05 worse in maths, 0.01 worse in reading). An issue with this research is the authors grouping children into two categories, 'disabled' or not, and not analysing by types of needs. The findings may therefore not be applicable to all children with SEND and might only reflect those with the most significant needs.

In a more specific piece of research by Fortner and Jenkins (2018), correlations in attainment were examined based on SEND classification subgroups. Using state-wide third grade maths and reading assessment data on a large sample (n = 262,000), they were able to compare the attainment of those delayed with those who entered school on time by specific category of disability. It should be noted that there continue to be limitations in the groupings, for example, not all children identified with 'cognitive disabilities' will have the same level of functioning. However, the results give more of an indication of which students might be advantaged or disadvantaged from delay. Fortner and Jenkins (2018) found that the only subgroup of children that benefitted from delayed entry were those with "speech-language disabilities" (p.175); they had stronger maths and reading achievement than their equivalent peers with speech and language difficulties that entered school on time (SD = 0.12 and 0.19); noted to be statistically significant for reading (p<0.01). Those with cognitive disabilities scored most poorly in maths and reading; one third of a standard deviation lower than comparable peers who entered school on time (SD = -0.35 and -0.32). Children with health impairments also scored lower in maths and reading than comparable peers (SD = -0.15 and -0.18). Fortner and Jenkins (2018) conclude that with the exception of children with speech and language difficulties, children with SEND are disadvantaged from delayed entry into school on test scores, suggesting that time out of school delays access to specialist advice and interventions which may aid progress (noting access to school psychologists). These findings are

interesting in the context of North America though some caution is needed in transferring them to an English context due to children's access to free early years education in England. Children in nursery also have the ability to access some specialist services in the early years, for example, having access to Educational Psychologists through requests for statutory assessment. Having access to data in England on children's attainment by category of SEND would contribute to the evidence base.

2.2.4 Delayed school entry for disadvantaged children and access to nursery/pre-school provision

It is known that clear attainment gaps persist over time for disadvantaged children. Whilst there remains a small gap in attainment at GCSE between those oldest and youngest in cohort, the gap is twice as large for those on Free School Meals (FSM) (DfE, 2010). The data suggests that the gap in attainment is most noticeable for summer-born boys who are on FSMs (DfE, 2010); with children further disadvantaged if they also have SEND. The impact of delayed school entry for children from disadvantaged backgrounds is therefore of interest.

Datar's (2006) study included looking at outcomes for children living below the poverty line and found that delaying entry by one year brought the maths attainment of these children in line with children who started school on time who did not live in poverty. The same effect was not seen for reading, but those delayed did score more highly if they had not been delayed. Whilst the test score gains are positive (1.7 points in maths, 1.5 points in reading), delayed children not living in poverty scored approximately 30% higher in maths and 70% higher in reading. Those living in poverty did therefore not gain the same level of positive impact from delay as their more affluent peers. Datar (2006) infers this is possibly due to children from low SES backgrounds having less access to preschool provision in the additional year out of school. Elder and Lubotsky (2009) draw the same conclusions. Whilst they found some benefits for delayed children from disadvantaged backgrounds (10.65 percentile point increase in reading scores), this was nowhere near in line with delayed children from the wealthiest quartile of their sample (23.66 percentile point increase in reading scores). Elder and Lubotsky (2009) also reported that any benefits seen in increased scores "fade out" quickly for the most disadvantaged children (p.662). They conclude that increased scores at point of entry was likely to

reflect skills acquired prior to school, and that the benefit was not as great for disadvantaged children who were unlikely to access quality provision. Elder and Lubotsky (2009, p.675) went on to conclude that children receiving “poor cognitive stimulation” prior to school would be “poorly served” by delaying entry to school by one year. This sentiment is shared by Suziedelyte and Zhu (2015) who concluded that children living in disadvantaged homes benefit from starting school at a younger age due to the stable and rich learning environment it affords.

Furthermore, in a North American context, both Graue and DiPerna (2000) and Fortner and Jenkins (2017) suggest that disadvantaged children may be missing early intervention and professional support by being kept out of school for longer. These concerns have also been shared by English local authorities who provided comments in King and Hammond (2021) research, with one local authority referenced as saying; “often it is felt that the reasons parents give for deferred entry are the very reasons that a child should be in school receiving professional support as soon as possible.” (p. 21).

An issue with drawing conclusions from global research on disadvantaged children is not being able to make comparisons with their early years funding systems and understanding how much provision children might be accessing prior to school. In England, children are eligible to a funded nursery place after their third birthday, with disadvantaged families receiving certain income support being eligible at age two (DfE, 2021b). However, there are some limitations as summer-born children receive two terms less funding than their autumn-born peers, and there are restrictions placed on how the funded hours are used (DfE, 2021b); they do not cover the full working week. Despite these limitations, in 2010 the DfE reported that children who were in an early years’ provision at age 3-4 scored at least five points higher on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile in school than those who had stayed home (DfE, 2010). It would therefore be vital to take account of a child’s access to early years education and whether the quality of this could offset a poorer home learning environment if the family wanted to delay their child’s entry to school.

2.2.5 Missing a reception year

In England, the wording in the statutory guidance has been developed in a way that the question is not ‘is it in the best interests of this child to delay their entry to

school?' but rather, once the parent has made the decision to delay their entry, 'is it in the best interests of this child to be entered into reception or year one?' (see DfE, 2021c). If the school admission authority do not agree to the request for a reception start, then the child is required to enter into year one at CSA and miss reception year.

The idea of missing a year of school conflicts with other advice from the DfE around absence from school, with DfE publications (DfE, 2015; DfE, 2016) reporting a clear correlation between pupil absence and lower assessment scores in Key Stages two and four; research that has been used in the press to dissuade parents from taking their children out of school in term time (Weale, 2015). The first of the two reports (DfE, 2015) was criticised for grouping all reasons for absenteeism together and not taking account of the reasons children miss school (Gorard, 2016); the attainment of disadvantaged young carers cannot be compared to those missing a week for a holiday due to many other variables impacting on attainment. The 2016 (DfE, 2016) improved the methodology by accounting for different types of absenteeism and controlling for prior attainment and pupil characteristics, and found that "overall absence had a statistically significant negative link to attainment -i.e., every extra day missed was associated with a lower attainment outcome" (p. 4). Concerns about time missed from school have also been part of the recent narrative in education due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with suggestion that disadvantaged children having lost the most time due to remote learning widening the gap in attainment (Ofqual, 2021). This has resulted in government education recovery support focused on catch-up funding for schools and additional training for early years staff to support children's development (DfE, 2022).

Historically, the amount of time spent in reception has been reviewed, with Cornelissen and Dustmann (2019) looking at outcomes for children when staggered entry into reception class was the norm. They found a negative impact of missing one or two terms of reception year, with the greatest negative effects for boys from disadvantaged backgrounds. Each additional month the child was in school before the age of five (reception year) increased end-of-reception test scores by 6-9 percent of a standard deviation. Crawford et al., (2007) found that it was actually more beneficial for all children to start school at the beginning of the academic year and have more exposure to schooling prior to attainment tests, with the positive benefit of

schooling outweighing any potential negative effect of starting school younger. This research influenced the Rose Review (Rose, 2009) which reported that “the preferred pattern of entry to reception classes should be the September immediately following a child’s fourth birthday” (p.22). This literature does not directly examine the outcomes for missing reception year of school for summer-born children; no such research exist in England. However, it does suggest concerns for time missed from school from which it could be inferred that missing a year from school would be disadvantageous to children.

2.2.6 Summary of delayed school entry and outcomes

The literature on correlation between delaying school entry and outcomes is limited; particularly in England. The findings are also significantly limited by not often accounting for the reasons parents chose to delay the child’s start at school. Outcomes may be very different between a high-SES family who wants their child to have an advantage from being oldest in cohort, and a family with concerns about their child’s developmental needs and a view that their child needs more time to ‘mature’ to manage school. Fortner and Jenkins (2017) note that it is possible these opposing reasons for delaying might actually cancel each other out; the child with developmental needs may score poorly and the child gaining advantage may score highly, but when outcomes are combined it appears there is no effect from delayed entry to school. It is therefore not possible to make generalisations as the outcomes will vary based on the reasons parents chose to delay their child’s entry to school. Trying to understand parents’ motivations, and then look at the child’s outcomes based on these motivations would help to improve the evidence base on the impact of delaying a child’s start at school, and for which groups there is most impact.

2.3 Chapter Summary

A review of the literature suggests that delaying entry to school may not have the same outcomes for all groups of children. It could be inferred that delaying entry into school may have a positive impact on academic attainment in the first few years of school for children from a high-SES background without SEND; plausibly because the delayed child is now oldest (relative age effect). However, other groups of children may be disadvantaged by an additional year out of school. For example, if children are not experiencing an educationally-rich environment either at home or in

nursery or pre-school. Additionally, children with SEND may experience further disadvantage if the additional year out of school delays their access to specialist services and intervention. At present there is insufficient data available which takes account of children's individual circumstances and the reasons why children might have been delayed.

Understanding parental reasons for delay is imperative. Conclusions cannot be drawn on whether the practice of delaying entry to school is a positive without understanding motivations. If it is identified that all parents are seeking an advantage for their child, and attainment data shows that advantage is minimal, then there are implications for long-term policy on the practice of delaying. If, however, parents report concerns about their child's social and emotional development, then using attainment data to measure whether delayed entry is beneficial may not be so helpful; understanding whether there is any benefit to children's social and emotional wellbeing would be needed. At present, there is limited English data on reasons parents are delaying their child's entry to school. The scope of this thesis is to therefore contribute to the existing literature. Long-term, exploration of the reasons parents chose to delay their child's entry to school, and measures of the child's outcomes would be of interest.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter sets out the intended methodology for this study. It explains the philosophical assumptions and reflects on how my personal experiences may impact on the research. It then details the study design, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the research tools, the pilot study, data collection procedures, characteristics of the sample, data analysis, credibility and trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Philosophical Assumptions

Epistemology is the nature of knowledge and what can be known, and ontology is the beliefs and assumptions held about reality (Biesta, 2010). It is important to establish which philosophical assumptions a researcher chooses to use to underpin their research as this will influence the design and justification of the findings (Biesta, 2010). At the initial stages of planning this research, I held a social constructionist perspective; my focus was on developing a rich understanding of the topic by exploring parents' stories. I was working with the view that individuals will have their own world view and construct of reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Robson & McCartan, 2016). This social constructionist stance holds the view that realities are constructed through social interactions and language, and that there is an absence of ultimate truth (Burr, 2015). Whilst I do not hold an opposing 'positivist' view that there are only objective knowledge and 'facts' to be measured (Robson & McCartan, 2016), during the course of planning this research I began to challenge the view that there is no shared reality. It is my view that there are social structures and realities that exist, regardless of our experience of them; an ontological assumption within critical realism (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020). My research needed to be rooted in the ontological assumption that there are layers of shared realities which shift and evolve; namely social and political structures that require children to be educated. The epistemological assumption is that there will be different perspectives of this reality, influenced by individuals' world views, but that it is possible to seek some shared understanding and identify common features in experiences. Once acknowledgement was given to a shared reality, a critical realist perspective was employed and was used in this research.

3.2 Reflexivity

It is considered ineffective for a researcher to state that they are objective in qualitative research (Yardley, 2000); my own life experiences will have some impact on the research, even if unconsciously. It is therefore important to provide transparency about my life experiences to the reader.

I am summer-born, I have a birthday in mid-late August, and was one of the youngest members of my academic cohort throughout school. I started school aged four in the Easter of reception year, at a time when staggered intakes were the norm. This was in direct contrast to the experience of my September-born brother, who is 11.5 months my senior, and who received two additional terms of reception. We were educated in the same cohort throughout school at polar ends of our cohort; him being the eldest and me the youngest. Whilst this seems stark now in the context of this research, I do not recall a sense of disadvantage when in school and progressed through school with relative ease, whilst my brother had a Statement of Special Educational Needs. I therefore bring to this research thoughts about the individual child, and awareness that birth date alone cannot determine what support a child might need in school.

My professional interest in this topic started when I was working as a qualified teacher in a primary school where in-class ability streaming was the norm, and where I noticed that the lowest attainment group consisted entirely of August-born boys. At the time some of these children were receiving interventions due to difficulties they were experiencing with learning. It was only later when commencing my EP training that I began to see patterns of schools sharing concerns about learning needs of August-born children. I began to reflect on my own assumptions I had made about these children when I was teaching, and whether I had sufficiently contextualised their attainment with being the youngest in the class. This is now something I am acutely aware of when receiving referrals for summer-born children as a Trainee Educational Psychologist.

My interest in this topic has been further prompted by my awareness of parent-led campaign groups advocating for changes to legislation that will write in law that summer-born children have an automatic right to a reception start if their parents choose to start them at CSA (https://summerbornchildren.org). Awareness of this

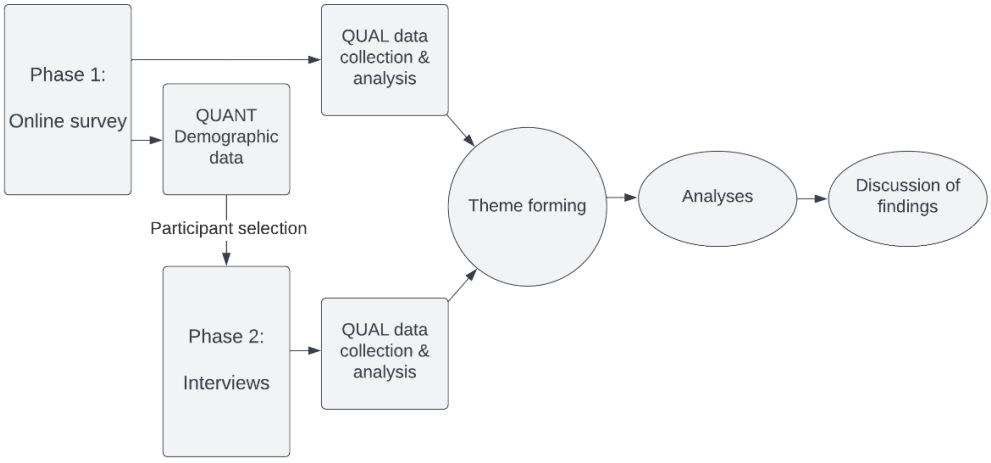
campaign has been alongside working with families with summer-born children who are not aware of relevant legislation and statutory guidance, and who have sometimes needed support in advocating for their child. I am committed to Health and Care Professions Council professional training standards (HCPC, 2015), including actively promoting equity in professional practice, and thinking about the impact of inequality, socioeconomic and cultural status, and disadvantage on access to resources and services. I have wondered about the equity in families' abilities to access support for their children.

3.3 Study Design

This was a multimethod qualitative study in two phases; a survey followed by interviews (see Figure 1). The study was designed to contrast the methodology used in the only identified English research on this topic (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; King & Hammond, 2021) which used a questionnaire with predetermined closed questions to ascertain parents' reasons for their decisions. In contrast, this study was exploratory and prioritised the collection and analysis of qualitative data to fully explore participants' views. The Phase One survey was intended as a way to gain an overview of the topic, and to gather demographic information on families. This demographic information was used to inform participant selection for Phase Two where semi-structured interviews were then used to gain a richer understanding of opinions and attitudes. The two sets of data were later combined during the formation of themes and presentation of findings (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Visual model of study design



Note: QUANT = quantitative data; QUAL = qualitative data

3.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was developed and used during participant recruitment (Table 1). This was available on the Participant Information sheet (see Appendix D) and participants had to confirm they met these criteria at the start of the survey. As this study wanted to understand parents' experiences of the process from delayed entry to experiences in school, only those with a child already in school were included. Due to different admissions procedures (DfE, 2014b), those with an Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCP), or those in independent schools were not included. Adopted children or those in care were not included due to the potential for specific and personal reasons for wanting a delayed start which may have skewed the overall findings.

Table 1

Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria

Feature	Participants included	Participants excluded
Residence	Resident in England.	Resident in any other country.
Parental status	A person with parental responsibility (PR) and named on the child's birth certificate.	Adoptive parents, foster parents, special guardians, family members or any other carer for a child.
Child birth date	Parent of a summer-born child with a birth date between 1 April and 31 August.	Parent of a child born between 1 September and 31 March.
Parental decision	Parent made the application to the school's admission authority (local authority, governing body, or academy trust) for a CSA start.	The decision was made via the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) admissions.
	Parent requested that their child be admitted outside of their normal age group (included regardless of whether this was agreed or not).	Parent applied for an in-year admission and for their child to start school on entry to year one.
Child's schooling	The child started school on or before September 2020.	The child has not yet started school.
	The child attends a mainstream state school (community school, voluntary controlled school, voluntary aided school, foundation school, academy, free school).	The child attends a special school (including centre provisions) or an independent school.
Child's needs	The child did not have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), nor were they under statutory assessment for one, at the time of requesting delay.	The child had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), or was under statutory assessment for one, at the time of requesting delay.

3.5 Research Tools

3.5.1 Phase one: survey

The survey was designed using Qualtrics XM (https://www.qualtrics.com/uk) (see Appendix E). The priority for survey design was to collect demographic information regarding both the participant and their child (see Table 2). Wording was carefully constructed based on the wording of questions in the national census (Office for National Statistics, 2021b). Within these questions it was ensured that the participant met the inclusion criteria for the study. If they did not meet the criteria, for example, by indicating that their child was not born in a summer month, the survey was set to cease.

Table 2

Demographic information collected in survey responses

Parent demographics	Child demographics
• mother/father • age bracket • ethnicity • highest qualification • total annual household income (pre-tax)	• sex • single/ multiple birth • gestation at birth (week of pregnancy) • siblings • birth order • current year group • Reception or year one school start • local authority area of residence • local authority area of school • type of school • eligibility for free school meals (FSM)

It should be noted that although type of school and eligibility for FSMs were collected in the surveys, they later were excluded from the write up due to reports of types of school being inconsistent or missing. The wording around FSMs was perhaps unclear and captured all children on free lunches in Key Stage One and not those who meet the Free School Meal Entitlement. Further, information about a child's siblings and their birth order was collected but not used due to some parents failing to answer these questions.

Two free-text boxes with a 300-character limit were included in the survey, each addressing one of the research questions. The character limitation was imposed to restrict participants to their 'primary reason' for delay, and to ensure analysis of the

quantity of data could be effectively managed (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Participants were also asked to answer the following scaled question; “On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being very poor, and 10 being very positive), how would you rate your overall experience of the process involved in starting your child(ren) at school after their fifth birthday?”. However, this data was later disregarded as the scores did not always align with written comments; some appeared to have rated their decision rather than the process.

3.5.2 Phase two: semi-structured interviews

In phase two of the research, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed and used (Appendix F). This was felt to be most appropriate due to the focus on specific topics whilst also allowing flexibility to explore the views and perceptions of the participant (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The flexibility of the schedule allowed for probing questions to gain detailed responses from participants, and thus a rich understanding of their experiences in the context of known educational structures and procedures.

The interview schedule was developed with two overarching questions, addressing one research question each. The question wordings were carefully constructed to ensure they did not lead the participants, for example asking, “did you have any concerns which influenced your decision?”, as opposed to asking the participants to name their concerns. The wording of the questions was further refined through a pilot case study (see section 3.6), including adding a question focused on rapport-building at the start of the interview, and a reflective question at the end.

3.6 Pilot Study

The survey and interview questions were piloted with an acquaintance who I was aware had started her summer-born child at CSA, but with whom I had had no prior contact on the topic or the research. The participant gave their informed consent and was assured of data confidentiality. As a result of the piloting, amendments were made to the data collection methods (see Table 3).

Table 3

Amendments to data collection methods following pilot study

Lessons learnt	Amendments made
Terminology such as ‘delay’ may not been seen positively by some participants and may impact willingness to participate.	Terminology reviewed. Caveat included in introduction to explain why ‘delay’ is used.
There were a lot of demographic questions in the survey which may fatigue the participant before they can get to the ‘free text’ boxes.	The free text boxes have been placed in the middle of the survey with parent demographics collected before, and child demographics after. This is noted to be appropriate for reducing participant fatigue and ensure the most complex questions are covered in the middle of the questionnaire (Robson & McCartan, 2016).
There was not sufficient space in the survey for parents to add any further points.	An open question was added at the end, offering the participant opportunity to add anything that had not been covered.
The interview schedule did not include sufficient time for rapport building.	The language introducing the interview was reworded. An open question discussing the participants child was included at the start.
Some interview questions were perceived to be repetitive.	The interview schedule was reduced in length and put into two clearly defined sections; about participants’ reasons and then their experience. An explanation of the order of the questions was included at the start.
It was not clear if parents could participate if they had requested for their child to be educated ‘out of cohort’ but this had not been agreed.	A sentence clarifying that this group of parents could participate was included in the information sheet eligibility criteria.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

3.7.1 Phase one data collection

Social media was used for the recruitment of survey participants (see recruitment advert in Appendix G), specifically, Facebook and Twitter. This was deemed to be the most appropriate due to the need for convenience in making contact with a small subset of the population and limited other methods of sampling that could be used, for example, not having access to data on families that have been through this process. Voluntary response sampling was used. It is acknowledged that this gives an overview of the topic but may only capture those motivated to participate. Permission was sought from Facebook groups ahead of posting the advert, with one declining to have the advert posted. Parents were encouraged to circulate the advert

further with other parents and in smaller social media groups, such as those supporting parents from individual local authorities.

The advert posted on social media provided a link to the participant information sheet and a link to the survey. The consent form (Appendix H) was embedded on the first page of the survey. Participants were asked to confirm their eligibility to participate and their consent before proceeding. The survey was available for completion for one month from date it was posted (May 2021), with reminders posted on social media groups at weekly intervals.

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to create an identification code which they could reference if they chose to withdraw from the study, with the code also being used to match the survey responses with the later interviews. There was then the option for participants to volunteer in Phase Two of the study, with them asked to provide an email address if they wished to do so. The survey had a 'prevent ballot box stuffing' setting checked to prevent the same participant from taking the survey multiple times. Once the expiration date passed, the data was downloaded and stored securely, as per the procedure set out in the study's ethical approval application.

3.7.2 Phase two data collection

Information on the sampling of participants for Phase Two will be detailed in section 3.8.2. Participants that were selected were contacted via their provided email address to arrange a suitable date and time for interview. Participants were again provided with the participant information sheet for their records, along with the consent form which they were asked to sign and return. All consent forms were received back before interviews, printed, and stored separately, as per the procedure set out in the study's ethical approval application. Participants were asked to give verbal consent again at the start of the interviews and were informed they could opt out of any questions. Participants were given the option to have the interview by telephone or by a virtual platform. Interviews were not conducted in person due to the hoped geographic dispersity of the participants and ongoing restrictions from the coronavirus pandemic. Due to minimal research on the use of virtual platforms for interviews, participants were asked to turn their cameras off during interview to avoid unknown confounds, such as impacting on the participants' sense of privacy in their

own homes (Gray et al., 2020). A Dictaphone was also used to record the interviews, as a backup. After the conclusion of each interview, recordings were saved securely, and the interview was transcribed verbatim. A thanks and debrief letter was also sent to interview participants (see Appendix I).

A timeline giving an overview of the research and when key actions occurred can be viewed in Appendix J.

3.8 Sample of Participants

3.8.1 Phase one: survey participants

During the month that the survey was live (May 2021), 280 individuals accessed the survey link. Of these, 161 people completed the survey (57.5%). Once the survey had closed, all responses were screened, which resulted in eight participants being excluded, the reasons for which are presented in Table 4. This resulted in the data from 153 participants being used in the final analysis.

Table 4

Reasons for exclusion of completed survey responses

Number of participants (*n*)	Reason for exclusion
4	Did not identify that their child was currently attending school, and which year group they were in. The survey therefore ceased and was incomplete.
2	Identified that their child started school with their chronological year group and were later removed from school.
1	Did not clarify their relationship to the child and did not complete all fields.
1	Destroyed the free text boxes and did not provide a meaningful written response.

3.8.2 Phase two: interview participants

Of the 153 participants, 83 (54.2%) provided an email address and indicated they would like to volunteer to be interviewed. It was hoped that approximately 10% of the survey participants would be interviewed successfully (*n* = 15), with almost twice as many invited (*n* = 29) to account for some individuals not being able to participate or changing their minds.

Purposive sampling was used to select and invite participants; appropriate due to the attempt to achieve a specific purpose with the sampling (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

There was intent to make the sample as diverse as possible and ensure those with under-represented demographics had the opportunity to share their experiences. It was accepted that this sub-sample's views may not have been representative of the whole survey sample, but there was a desire to seek variation in experiences.

Demographic information was therefore screened to identify those not typical in the sample. This resulted in participants with the following characteristics being invited in the first instance (*n* = 17); those who identified as a father; those who identified their ethnicity as Asian/ Asian British, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, or Mixed/ multiple ethnic groups; those with an annual (pre-tax) household income of <£29,999; those whose highest academic qualification was Level 1 or 2. Of this group, three participants completed an interview. Participants were also randomly selected based on child demographic factors which were not typical in the sample (*n* = 6); the eldest and youngest set of twins, a child born prematurely, children with April and May birthdates, and a child attending a school in a different local authority from their home address. Of this group, four completed an interview. Of the remaining 60 participants who had stated that they would like to participate in an interview, 10% of the sample (*n* = 6) were randomly selected by choosing every tenth person on the list. Of this group, three completed an interview.

In total, ten participants completed an interview (between July and October 2022). Nine of these took place via virtual platform, and one via the phone. Rounded to the nearest minute, the interviews varied in length between 36 and 74 minutes (*M* = 51 minutes; *SD* = 12 minutes).

3.9 Data Analysis

The demographic information from the Phase One survey was collated in the first instance as this was used to inform participants selected. Information was presented in frequency tables (see Appendix K-M) with patterns commented on in the findings (see section 4.1.1).

The qualitative data from both the survey written comments, and interview transcriptions, were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step analysis (see Table 5). This approach was felt to be most appropriate due to the exploratory nature of this research and the intent to identify patterns and commonalities within

participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Consideration was given to content analysis for survey responses, measuring the number of features present in text (Robson & McCartan, 2016). However, this was felt to be inappropriate due to small recording units (for example, individual words or short phrases) which may have not captured all of the meaning in the text.

All coding was inductive in nature. There was no attempt to fit the data to any pre-defined assumptions, and no theoretical model was imposed on the data. This was due to the desire for the themes to originate from the participants' experiences and views. However, it is acknowledged that my own assumptions and values will have had some impact on the coding, and there could have been a deductive researcher-driven element in the process. To mitigate this, a reflective journal was kept for the duration of data collection and analysis where potential biases were recorded.

Coding of the survey and interviews were completed concurrently to reduce the bias of having the results from one methodology impact on the coding of the other data. NVivo software was used to facilitate the coding process, with the data separated by methodology and by relevance to each of the two research questions. There was coding of "anything and everything of interest or relevance" to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 206). Although one survey question asked for participants' 'primary reason' for delaying their child's school start, many participants gave several reasons, and anything of relevance was coded. Codes varied in length depending on the meaning of what was being said. In the survey these codes tended to be short phrases, whereas codes were usually several sentences in interview responses.

During the analysis, it was evident that there was an overlap in codes and meanings in the data from each phase of the research. Where there were differences between the two data sets these were due to specific examples from individual interviewees. The decision was taken to remove these anomalies so that the resulting themes were not skewed by the experiences of individuals and represented both data sets. Cluster themes have therefore only been included when there was relevant data in both the survey and interview responses. Additionally, reflective comments which were not relevant to the two research questions were removed. These included participants' reflections on their child's progress in school, current needs, or

difficulties, hopes or worries about the future, and their hopes for change in the system.

The resulting data presented reflects the frequency and percentage of participants that made reference to each cluster theme. Thought was given to presenting the frequency of codes that had been used during analysis, but this was biased by repetition in participants' responses, particularly in interviews. As noted by Loffe and Yardley (2004), increased frequency of a coded category in speech may reflect the person's ability to talk in depth about the topic and does not necessarily represent the importance of what is being said. Therefore, the number of participants mentioning each theme are referred to in the presentation of the findings.

Table 5

Six-Step Process of Thematic Analysis

Stage of analysis	Process: Survey data	Process: Interview data
1. Familiarisation with the data	• Data exported from Qualtrics. • All responses were read. • Participant responses that did not meet the inclusion criteria were removed (see Table 4).	• Audio recordings transcribed verbatim. • Transcriptions checked to confirm accuracy against audio. • Transcriptions carefully read through, and 'initial noticing' comments written on each interview (see Appendix N). • Initial thoughts on data shared in thesis supervision.
2. Generating initial codes	• Data imported into NVivo. • Data coded in meaningful chunks (down to keywords where relevant). • Data sorted into the two research questions.	• Transcriptions imported to NVivo. • Data of interest and relevance to the research questions coded (see example, Appendix O). • Began to group similar or overlapping codes and refined code names to ensure clarity. • Data sorted into the two research questions.
3. Searching for themes	• Codes actively examined and sorted using NVivo. • Codes grouped into cluster themes. • Reflective comments removed where not relevant to RQs.	• Codes actively examined and sorted using NVivo (see Appendix P). • Codes grouped into cluster themes. • Reflective comments removed where not relevant to RQs.
	Data sets combined • Folders of data combined together on NVivo. • Anomalies identified where cluster themes were not present in both sets of data. • Mind maps drawn to help visually organise and clump the sub-theme folders into groups (see Appendix Q). • Cluster themes organised on NVivo into sub-themes folders.	

4. Reviewing themes	• Tables created showing number of participants that made reference to each theme, sub-theme, and cluster theme (see Appendix R-S). • Cluster themes removed where only relevant to <2 participants in either data set. • Themes reviewed with thesis supervisors.
5. Defining and naming themes	• Theme names reviewed and renamed to ensure clarity. • Theme names reviewed with thesis supervisors. • Thematic maps created.
6. Producing the report	• Themes and sub-themes described in findings, with clear examples selected for each theme across participants. • Examples reviewed to ensure telling of clear narrative.

3.10 Validity of the Research

This research is qualitative in nature and will therefore have a degree of subjectivity (Robson & McCartan, 2016). However, steps were taken to enhance the validity of the study, informed by Yardley (2017) (see Table 6).

Table 6

Steps taken to enhance validity of research

Procedure for enhancing validity	Detail of steps taken
Sensitivity to context	• Literature review sets out theory already known around topic. • Existing studies of relevance identified and critiqued. • Research questions address gap in research literature.
Commitment to rigour	• Detailed description of recruitment procedures. • Purposive sampling to select participants for interview who will have a range of views. • Researcher personally conducting all interviews. • Interviews transcribed verbatim by researcher to ensure familiarity. 'Initial noticings' written onto transcripts to support familiarisation. • Research diary kept recording potential bias. • Reflexivity statement.
Transparency of analysis	• Clear paper trail and transparency in the methods taken in analysis (see Table 5 and Appendices N-Q). • Explanation of how final sub-themes and themes were formed, with frequencies presented to ensure clarity (see Appendix R-S). • Findings qualified using quotes from the data.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

This study was registered with the UCL Data Protection Officer in February 2021, and approval was obtained by the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee in April 2021. There has been adherence to the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2018) and HCPC Guidance on Conduct

and Ethics for Students (HCPC, 2016) during the design and undertaking of this study.

The methodology and tools were carefully designed to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. No highly sensitive personal information was collected, and demographic information was kept to a minimum. Demographic information has not been presented in a way that allows individuals to be identified. Participants have been given codes which relate to the order of survey and interview completion; information only known by the researcher. For the purpose of anonymity and safeguarding, participants were asked to not provide identifiable details, or were asked to use a pseudonym, in both the survey and interviews. Any references to specific individuals were anonymised at point of transcription. Email addresses were only collected for the purpose of arranging interviews and were given by individuals on a voluntary basis. After the interviews had taken place, and debrief letters were sent, they were removed from record.

It is acknowledged that the topic of discussion could have potentially caused some distress to participants if there were emotive reasons or concerns which resulted in them choosing to delay their child's entry to school. However, the questions asked for general information about the participants' experiences and the participants could disclose as much or as little information as they felt comfortable with. Participants were reminded at all stages of the study that they had the option to withdraw at any time without reason, using identification codes which they created at the end of the survey. These codes asked participants to use the first two letters from their mother's maiden name, along with their day of birth; felt to be memorable whilst also reducing the likelihood of identifiability (Schnell et al., 2010). No participants withdrew in the course of the study.

Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter will present the research findings. It will begin by explaining the demographics of the participants at both stages of data collection. It will then present the themes identified in this research by addressing each research question in turn. As explained in section 3.9 (data analysis), a decision was made to combine the two data sets at the analysis stage due to similar views being shared in survey and interview responses. The presentation of the findings therefore moves between the two data sets for each theme discussed; firstly, giving an overview of the survey findings and the context of the whole sample, before presenting extended quotations from interviewees which offer a richer explanation. Themes are addressed in turn. Sub-themes are bold and underlined, and cluster themes in bold.

Short quotes drawn from survey data will be marked with an ‘s’ followed by an id number. The number indicates the participant’s position in completing the survey (1 being the first person to complete and 153 being the last). Quotes drawn from interviews will be marked with an ‘i’ followed by a number which indicates the participant’s position in being interviewed (1 being the first to be interviewed and 10 being the last). Throughout, quantitative data is used to report the number and percentage of participants’ views that were used in formation of each cluster theme (see Appendix R-S). This will be presented in the text as *nsurvey* and *ninterview* when referring to each data set.

4.1 Reported Demographics of the Participants

4.1.1 Demographics of survey participants

Demographic information was collected as part of the survey and collated for the 153 participants included in the study (see Appendix K for detailed information). In summary, the majority of the participants identified themselves as mothers (*n* = 151; 98.7%). Almost all reported themselves as of White ethnicity (*n* = 144; 94.1%), compared to 84.8% of the population of England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Of the participants that disclosed their annual (pre-tax) household income per year (*n* = 132), 87.4% reported an income in excess of £30,000; more than the pre Covid-19 pandemic median UK household income of £29,900 (Office for National Statistics, 2021a). A fifth of the participants (*n* = 31; 20.5%) reported an

annual income in excess of £90,000; significantly above national average. Self-reported education levels were also largely above the UK average, with 123 participants (80.9%) reporting themselves to have at least an academic qualification at Level 4 (e.g., a Higher Diploma). This compares to 43% of the working population in the UK (aged 16-64) thought to have a qualification at Level 4 or above (Office for National Statistics, 2021c).

The participants were geographically dispersed and were drawn from 83 different local education authorities in England (out of 153 education authorities). There were no more than 6 participants from any one local education authority. When grouped into regions of England, the distribution of participants were as follows; North East (*n* = 10; 6.5%), North West (*n* = 12; 7.8%), Yorks and Humberside (*n* = 17; 11.1%), East Midlands (*n* = 12; 7.8%), West Midlands (*n* = 15; 9.8%), Eastern (*n* = 21; 13.7%), South East (*n* = 25; 16.3%), South West (*n* = 19; 12.4%), Greater London (*n* = 22, 14.4%). There were eight participants that reported their child going to a school in an authority other than the one they lived in.

4.1.2 Demographics of children reported on in survey responses

The majority of survey participants (*n* = 141; 92.2%) made reference to a child from a singleton pregnancy (see Appendix L). Of these children, almost two-thirds were male (*n* = 90; 63.8%). The largest proportion of children were August-born (*n* = 83; 58.9%), followed by July-born (*n* = 28; 19.9%). There were 12 sets of twins (7.8% of all responses) commented on in the survey responses (see Appendix M).

4.1.3 Demographics of interview participants

All of the interviewees (*n* = 10) identified as a mother, 80% recorded themselves as being of White ethnicity (*n* = 8). Most of the sample had at least a Level 6 academic qualification (*n* = 7; 70%), with two of these participants having a PHD or Doctoral degree. Almost all reported an annual (pre-tax) household income per year of £40,000 or more (*n* = 9; 90%). These statistics are largely representative of the survey sample besides education level, which was higher in those interviewed.

The participants were geographically dispersed, besides two who lived in the same East Midlands local education authority. The children discussed by the interviewees were mostly from singleton pregnancies (*n* = 9; 90%), with one set of August-born

male twins. One child was born prematurely (27-34 weeks gestation), with the remainder born at term (>37 weeks). Two-thirds of the children from singleton pregnancies were male (*n* = 6; 66.7%). Children were typically born in August or July (*n* = 5; 55.6% and *n* = 4; 44.4% respectively). One child was born in May.

Although the questions asked specifically about one child, two participants have since started a younger summer-born child at CSA and made reference to their younger child during interviews. Participants were asked to focus on their eldest child when describing their reasons for delay (RQ1), and only data relevant to their eldest was used. It is accepted that these participants having gone through the process twice will have had an impact on their narrative and descriptions of the process. As it was not always possible to separate their views and experiences of the process for each child, anything of relevance to RQ2 (experience of the process) was coded.

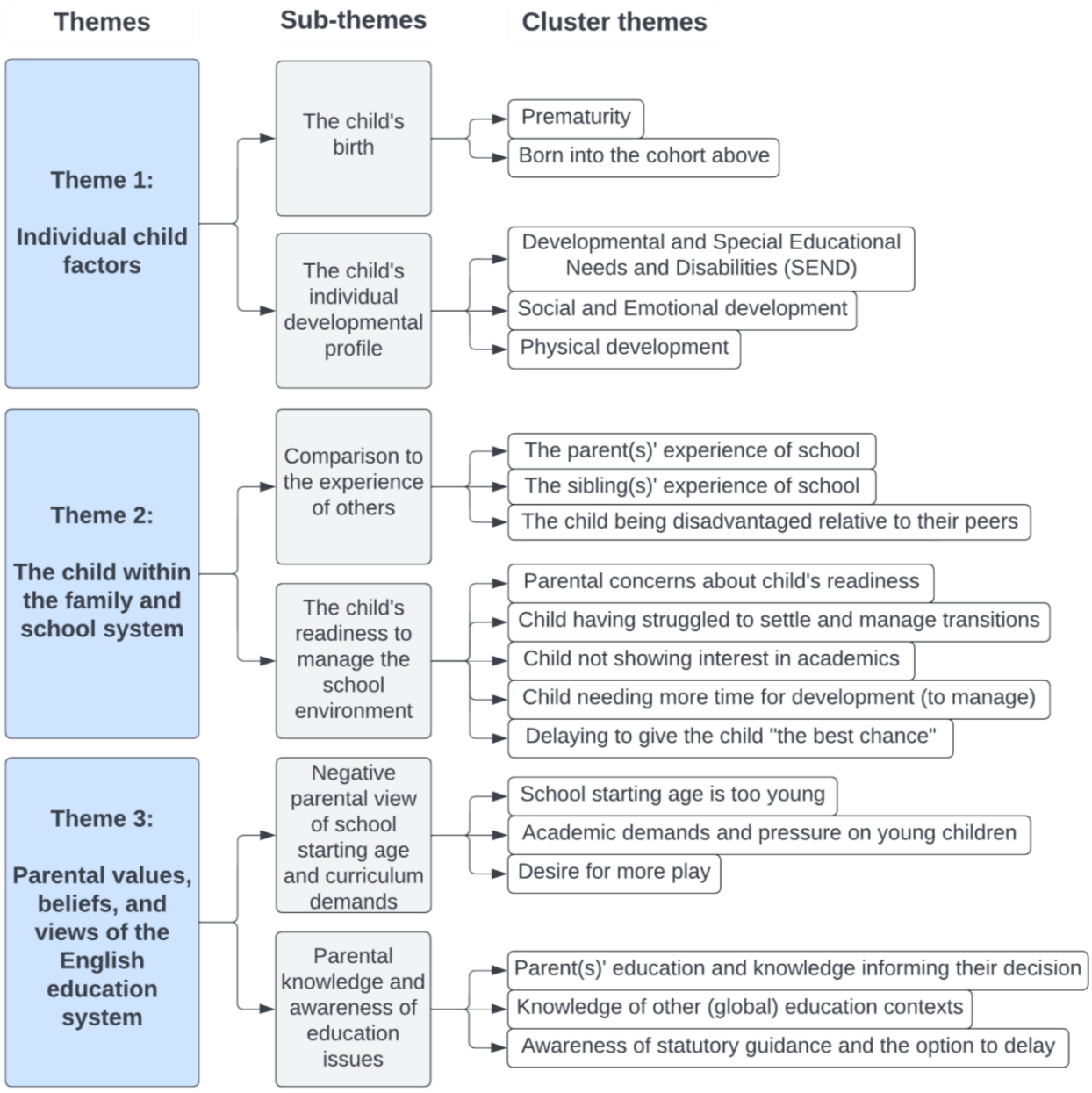
The age-range of the children was dispersed, with at least one child in each year group from reception to year five in the 2020-2021 academic year. One participant's child was in year seven, having started school at CSA in September 2013. This was before the changes to the School Admissions Code, and it is therefore accepted that their experience of the process may have varied from the other participants. Another parent was applying for a CSA start in the academic year that the Code was updated. It had not been an intention of the recruitment process to have a sample which included older cohorts of children. However, the resulting sample may be representative of parents who went through the process some time ago and have a strong view of their experience. Two parents spoke openly about becoming part of parental campaign groups since their own experience. It is acknowledged in this research that the experiences may not represent current practices in all of the local education authorities these participants are drawn from.

4.2 Research Question One: Overview of Themes

Research question one was; ‘Why did parents choose to wait until their summer-born child was aged five (i.e., of Compulsory School Age, CSA) before starting them at mainstream school?’. Thematic analysis of all data relevant to RQ1 resulted in three overarching themes, each with two sub-themes (see Figure 2). In the below findings, each theme will be addressed in turn.

Figure 2

RQ1 Themes, sub-themes, and cluster themes



4.2.1 Individual child factors

The first theme relevant to RQ1 is individual child factors. Comments included in this theme were made by over half of the survey participants and all interviewees (*nsurvey* = 90, 58.82%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). For some, factors around their **child's birth** influenced their decision to delay their child's start at school (*nsurvey* = 11, 7.19%; *ninterview* = 4, 40%). Specifically, some parents made reference to their child's **prematurity** as a concern (*nsurvey* = 5, 3.27%; *ninterview* = 2, 20%). Parents also made specific reference to their child being **born into the cohort above** (*nsurvey* = 14, 9.15%; *ninterview* = 3, 30%). This was not always due to significant prematurity and was also a concern for parents where their child had been born a matter of days earlier than due, with one parent stating that their child "crossed the line with school years" (i5).

Most notable within individual child factors, was **the child's individual development profile** (*nsurvey* = 81, 52.94%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). The criteria for participation in the survey detailed that children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), or those under statutory assessment for one at the time of requesting delay, were not eligible to participate. Although families might not have been at the level of requiring a statutory assessment, many reported concerns about their child's **development and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)** (*nsurvey* = 24, 15.69%; *ninterview* = 6, 60%). It should be noted that some participants went on to comment on diagnoses and support later received when their child was in school. Comments included "developmental milestones [being] met late" (s74), "early developmental issues with hearing, vision and speech" (s83) and "sensory difficulties" (s93). Notable in the survey responses in this cluster-theme were references to speech and language delays. When speaking about her youngest child, one interviewee explained her child's speech and language difficulties and her concerns about school, saying;

> *I feel like she's going to be starting school this September now in reception [when] this time last year she had only just started to learn to talk by then.* (i4)

Most notable in relation to their child's development were parental concerns about their child's **social and emotional development** (*nsurvey* = 60, 39.22%; *ninterview* = 7, 70%). Survey participants reported their child being "emotionally immature"

(s33) or “not ready emotionally or socially” (s34). In interviews there were references to the child being “nervous in groups” (i10), or their “social skills [being] a bit more immature” (i6). One parent expressed how difficult it was to explain and evidence social and emotional needs when their child did not have additional learning needs, stating;

> *It was never about the academic side of things because a lot of people have said to me “he's quite bright”, but that that was kind of… that just wasn't part of the thinking.* (i3)

For a small number of parents, it was their child’s **physical development** which was of concern (*nsurvey* = 21, 13.72%; *ninterview* = 2, 20%). In the survey responses these concerns were centred around their child still napping (*n* = 7), being small (*n* = 5), or not being fully toilet trained (*n* = 8). In interview, these concerns were relevant to two participants, with a brief mention of naps and toileting which they stated they used in the application process when needing to give evidence on their reasons.

4.2.2 The child within the family and school system

Theme two details the child within the family and school systems; including the child compared to others in their lives, and them existing within the school context. Half of survey participants and all interviewees made reference to points that were grouped within this theme (*nsurvey* = 78, 50.98%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). **Comparisons to the experience of others** were made (*nsurvey* = 42, 27.45%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). For a small number of participants this was in reference to **parent(s)’ experience of school** (*nsurvey* = 3, 1.96%; *ninterview* = 5, 50%); largely reflecting on their own difficulties. Those that commented on this in interview tended to share their own experiences of struggling as a summer-born child. For example, one interviewee commented;

> *[…] me and my partner we’re both summer born […] So we've kind of got first-hand experience of going through school, being the youngest. And whilst we we’re both academically able in a lot of ways, we're… we still struggled. My earliest memories of school are just kind of not really knowing what was going on. And I remember like being babied a lot by the other children in the class, 'cause I was quite small as well.* (i7)

Comparison to **the sibling(s)' experience of school** were also made (*nsurvey* = 12, 7.84%; *ninterview* = 3, 30%). Survey participants made reference to either summer-born children having "struggled" (s64), or autumn and winter born children having experienced "benefits of having two years at preschool before starting school" (s56). In interview, all three participants made lengthy comparisons to a sibling's experience of school. When speaking about her youngest, one interviewee said, "there's an opportunity to do something different for her" (i1) and this was motivating her to request a reception start at CSA.

More notable were comparisons between their child and their peers and references to **the child being disadvantaged relative to their peers** (*nsurvey* = 28, 18.30%; *ninterview* = 5, 50%). One survey participant stated; "we thought he might be disadvantaged by being almost a year younger than others in his class" (s101), and another suggested this might result in comparisons to others, writing; "I did not want her at any point to compare herself or be compared with a child older now or in future exams" (s88). In the interviews, where participants could share their stories in more details, the majority emphasised how their decision was based on their individual child and was not a comparison to others. However, half the interviewees did make reference to their child being disadvantaged in some way; particularly around "pressures to speed up and catch up" (i7).

Views of the child within the school system were also discussed, specifically **the child's readiness to manage the school environment** (*nsurvey* = 45, 29.41%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). **Parental concerns about their child's readiness** were shared (*nsurvey* = 22, 14.38%; *ninterview* = 6, 60%), with comments around how their child "did not seem ready for school" (s132). One interviewee stated;

> *[…] just looking at my son who was three, I just, I just knew he wasn't… he was months away from starting school and I just couldn't see that happening.* (i3)

Another interviewee explained the sense of being 'forced';

> *So I thought, well, this is crazy like because he's going to be in a position where we're going to have to force this on him before he's ready.* (i5)

The concerns parents shared were sometimes grounded in experiences of preschool and nursery, with a small number of references to their **child having struggled to settle and manage transitions** in these settings (*nsurvey* = 4, 2.61%; *ninterview* = 3, 30%). One interviewee stated;

> *I can't see how he would have just turned four and he will transition to school when he still has trouble transitioning to the day at nursery* (i3).

A small number of references were also made to their child simply **not showing an interest in academics** (*nsurvey* = 6, 3.92%; *ninterview* = 2, 20%). There were references to the child not being "interested in reading or writing" (s107) or not being "interested in picking up a pencil" (s145). Some parents reported their **child needing more time for development** in order to manage school (*nsurvey* = 7, 4.58%; *ninterview* = 5, 50%). From survey participants there were short descriptions of giving their child "an extra year of brain development" (s3). Interviewees whose stories are based on their child having additional needs, emphasised the importance of needing more time, for example;

> *It wasn't something that I think I would have started to look into if it hadn't been for his speech and language difficulties, but when that became clear that, you know, he wasn't going to bounce back as quickly as maybe we might have hoped, it felt like giving him a bit of extra time before starting reception would be a good idea for him.* (i2).

Another parent explained;

> *I was doing a lot of deep reading on, you know, why my child wasn't reaching milestones, and I thought she needs time. She just needs extra time […] I needed more time to help my child.* (i6)

This parent emphasised the need for more time throughout their interview, and that having more time could only be a 'good' thing for her child. When later discussing the significant barriers she faced in getting a reception start at CSA agreed for her child, she equated her child having more time for development with being a positive for the school due to her likely needing less support when she did start.

In reference to their child's ability to manage school, many parents made references to **delaying to give the child "the best chance"** (*nsurvey* = 18, 11.76%; *ninterview* = 6, 60%). In the survey responses fifteen comments included the word 'thrive', for example, "I wanted to give her the chance to thrive in school rather than just survive" (s138). These views were also noted in interviews with participants explaining their desire to give their child opportunities and the best chance. These comments tended to be emotive and focused on what the parent could do to support their child. One interviewee stated that;

> *I felt like I wanted to do all I could to make sure that […] my children coming through had the best possible start and the best possible chance that I could give them.* (i8)

Another interviewee referred to wanting her child to have "as much opportunity to flourish" as possible, and reflected that;

> *I've done the best I can within the constraints of a) what I can afford and b) what is available for [my child].* (i1)

There were mentions throughout about parental desire to mitigate any negatives the child might experience.

4.2.3 Parental values, beliefs, and views of the English education system

Theme three is 'parental values, beliefs, and views of the English education system'. More participants made comments under this theme than the other two so far presented for RQ1 (*nsurvey* = 95, 62.09%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). Over half of survey participants and all interviewees reported **negative parental views of school starting age and curriculum demands** (*nsurvey* = 82, 53.59%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). Most notable was the view that the **school starting age is too young** in England (*nsurvey* = 53, 34.64%; *ninterview* = 7, 70%), including comments such as "I don't believe formal education is necessary before 7" (s73). Comments in interviews were also to this effect, with generalised views including "I think they all start school too young" (i10) and "you don't need to get them into formal education at that age" (i4). There were also specific views of the **academic demands and pressure on young children** when they start school (*nsurvey* = 31, 20.26%; *ninterview* = 7, 70%). In the survey views included; "too much testing and too much pressure" (s49), and views that this pressure is "detrimental" (s46) and "stressful"

(s93) for young children. There were specific concerns expressed about the "massive leap to formal learning in year 1" (s63), and how their concerns were not just about the reception year in school. In interview one parent made specific reference to expectations and the pressure on children "achieving targets", stating "I'm going to do all I can to protect my kids from it" (i8).

In line with the view about academic demands, there were comments on the **desire for more play** (*nsurvey* = 27, 17.65%; *ninterview* = 5, 50%). In the survey, there were comments on wanting an "extra year of play" (s122) and to "continue play-based education for as long as possible" (s7). One interviewee expressed;

> *[…] they've still got kind of lots of developing to do and that play is kind of the best way to meet a lot of their needs at that age* (i7).

Many of the parental values and beliefs about the education system were intertwined with reflections about their own child's development and how the system did not suit their child. It is not possible to report whether the participants would hold the same values and beliefs about the education system if they had not had a summer-born child.

The last sub-theme is **parental knowledge and awareness of education issues** (*nsurvey* = 27, 17.65%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). This sub-theme included 20.85% of all interview coded data in relation to RQ1 and was spoken about at length**,** likely due to participants having the space to reflect on their own knowledge and awareness and share their life stories in more detail. Whilst the survey questions did not use reflective questions, some participants referred to their own knowledge when explaining the reasons for their decision to delay their child's start at school until CSA. **Parent(s)' education and knowledge informing their decision** was referred to (*nsurvey* = 18, 11.76%; *ninterview* = 7, 70%), focused on their awareness of research and the outcomes for summer-born children, and how this contributed to their decision. Although not known at the time the interviewees were selected, during interview, five (50%) of the participants revealed that they work, or have previously worked, in education in some capacity (for example, as a teacher or teaching assistant). Interviewees therefore referred to experiences of working with summer-born children, awareness of research and literature on summer-born children, and experience of different school systems. One interviewee explained their awareness

that summer-born children tended to be assessed as working at lower levels, stating; "I saw how generally the younger in the class were at the younger levels" (i8).

Additionally, **knowledge of other (global) education contexts** were commented on (*nsurvey* = 8, 5.23%; *ninterview* = 9, 90%). In the survey, this comprised of references to "Scandinavian countries" (s90) and "play-based European systems" (s142) and comparisons to the English school starting age. Interviewees shared their knowledge of other education systems and research they had undertaken, with one participant sharing;

> *I had done the research. I looked at Finland's model, the happiest children in the world, the best education in the world. I looked at Singapore, as a maths… you know, we follow now the Singaporean system, for example in maths, and I know that they start through play*. (i6)

Another interviewee contextualised their decision within this understanding of global education systems, saying;

> *Like you know, if you look at other countries and when they start educating and the pressure that children are under here, it's not actually that unreasonable to say, "I want my 4-year-old to have another year of play before they start school.* (i3)

Another interviewee explained their knowledge of other school systems, and how this knowledge is an exception, stating;

> *I feel like there's a real tunnel vision in this country, like people are very blinkered. Like they think the British way is the only way and they don't realise it's not universal.* (i5)

Some participants simply commented on their **awareness of statutory guidance and the option to delay** (*nsurvey* = 4, 2.61%; *ninterview* = 7, 70%). There was one survey participant who noted their reason as utilising the extra year their child was "entitled to" (s23). In interviews, comments were centred around opportune timing in changes to the admissions code and parental awareness that "the rules had just changed" (i2), with some feeling like this opened an opportunity;

> *It wasn't something I even knew you could do before then. Like I said, we'd already put our […] we'd already put our school's application in. It didn't even occur to us to do it until we found out that you could.* (i10)

In interviews, there were no participants who cited the option to delay as being the main reason; all had multiple other reasons for why they wanted a CSA start for their summer-born child.

4.2.4 Research Question One concluding comments

This research question intended to understand why parents chose to delay their summer-born child's start at school until CSA. The analysis resulted in three themes; individual child factors, the child within the family and school system, and parental values, beliefs, and views of the English education system. For some families it was evident that there were concerns related to their child's development, with some describing how their child later went on to be identified with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities. Some families also emphasised their concerns about their child relative to others and their ability to manage school. Parents also emphasised their own political, social, and sometimes professional views of the English school system. It was initially intended to identify what parents' primary reasons for delay were (as per the survey question wording), however, parents rarely detailed a single reason, even when it was directly asked of them. In interviews, one participant stated that "there was a number of factors" (i1) involved in their decision. Another stated;

> *It wasn't just one thing. It was <u>definitely</u> a combination of things that led to that decision.* (i8)

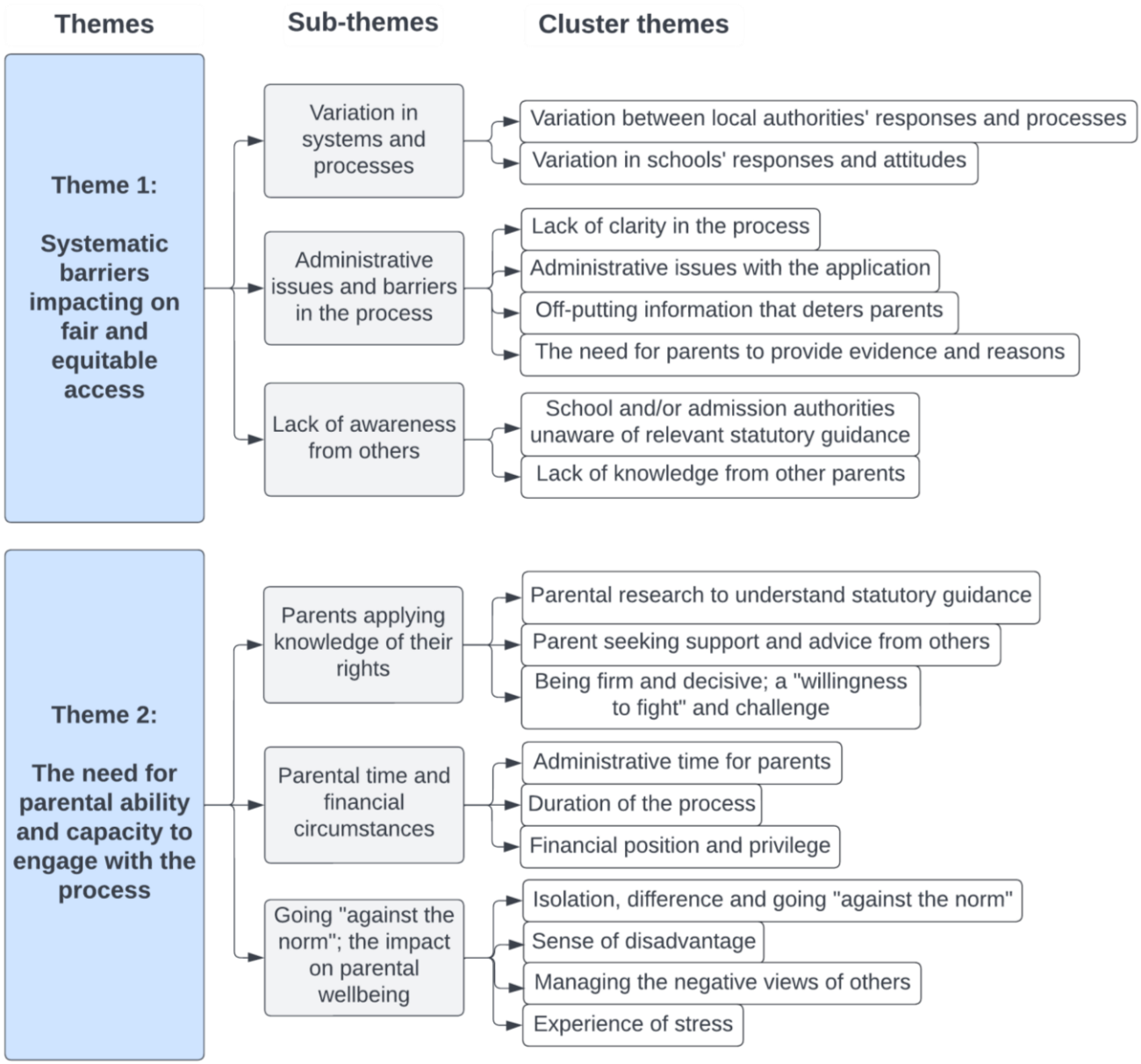
The themes detailed in relation to research question one should therefore be viewed as an overview and with the understanding that parental views do not fit discreetly into one of these themes.

4.3 Research Question Two: Overview of Themes

Research question two was; 'What were parents' experiences of the process of starting their summer-born child at mainstream school at Compulsory School Age?'. Thematic analysis of all data relevant to RQ2 resulted in two overarching themes, each with three sub-themes (see Figure 3). In the below findings, each theme will be addressed in turn.

Figure 3

RQ2 Themes, sub-themes, and cluster themes



Unlike the findings in Research Question One, there is an imbalance in the findings for this research question, based on the methodology used. The survey responses, which were restricted to a 300-character answer, tended to briefly describe parents encounters with schools and local authorities, and included less reflective comments. In contrast, interviewees had the space and time to reflect on their experiences and therefore spoke at increased length about the impact the process had on them. This resulted in a larger proportion of interview data being used in the development of theme two.

4.3.1 Systematic barriers impacting on fair and equitable access

Theme one is ‘systematic barriers impacting on fair and equitable access’ and captures some of the barriers encountered in gaining agreement for a reception start at CSA (*nsurvey* = 136, 88.89%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). It should be noted that not all participants reported barriers, with some reporting an overall positive experience. However, due to complexities in the system, it was not possible to separate the data into groups of entirely positive or negative experiences. Many of those who reported gaining agreement easily still commented on perceived barriers in the process. More often, participants commented on variation and barriers within their own experiences (for example, positive interaction with a local authority but negative interactions with schools). Others reported a predominantly negative experience. These varied experiences are represented in the sub-theme ‘**variation in systems and processes**’ (*nsurvey* = 110, 71.90%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). Variation in experiences with local authorities, and then with schools, will be addressed in turn.

Local authorities are not the admission authority for all types of schools (DfE, 2021a) and some parents will not have had contact with local authorities, for example where the school’s admissions are managed by the governing body or Academy Trust. However, when asked about their experience of the process, 43% of survey participants made direct reference to their experience in communicating with their local authority. The sub-theme **variation between local authorities’ responses and processes** (*nsurvey* = 66, 43.14%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%) represents the variation of descriptions shared about these interactions. In survey responses some parents used words such as ‘easy’ (*n* = 19, 12.42%) and ‘straightforward’ (*n* = 14, 9.15%) to describe their communications with their local authority. This was in direct contrast to others describing their local authority as ‘unhelpful’ (*n* = 5, 3.27%) and reports of having their application rejected (*n* = 10, 6.54%). Some survey participants showed awareness of this variation in experiences (*n* = 11, 7.19%), describing it as a “postcode lottery” (s150). One interviewee had tangible experience of the difference between local authorities due to a house move, explaining;

> *I've applied twice in two different education authorities and so I've got two different experiences of it. So, [first local authority], um were actually relatively straightforward but then I had to apply all over again […] and [second local authority] was a completely different kettle of fish.* (i8)

This participant explained her assumption that her request would be agreed on the basis of her previous local authorities' decision. Other participants showed awareness of each local authority making their own decision, with one participant expressing thoughts about moving in the future but saying;

> *…this is another consequence and complication. If I move local authorities, then I'm going to have a problem.* (i6)

In line with the variability between local authorities, parents reported vast **variation in school responses and attitudes** (*nsurvey* = 76, 49.63%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). Despite DfE guidance (2021b) stating that "the view of the head teacher must be taken into consideration", not all participants reported needing a school's agreement when they went through the process; whereas others spoke of meeting with six different schools in the process. Many referred to variability and "mixed responses" (s50), with one participant explaining "one school gave an instant yes and another was a flat out no" (s37). This variability was also expressed in interview, as seen in one participant's story;

> *We went to four different primary schools in the local area […] One of them was a complete just, you know, "no" to it. No matter how much I kept battling […] Another one was <u>really</u> against it but she eventually <u>very</u> reluctantly agreed to it. […] I had this one other school which… so we had a meeting. They weren't particularly keen during the meeting about it, but afterwards then, they sent an email saying "yes, okay, we understand, that's fine".* (i4)

Parents spoke about choosing schools based on the Headteacher's response and attitude to their request; sometimes choosing a school they might have not otherwise selected. One interviewee shared;

> *But we had a difficult time getting agreement from the school that I <u>thought</u> my kids would go to, the most local one. So, then it was a case of, "okay, if that's not the right school, what other options are there?"* (i2).

In addition to variation within the systems and process, when asked about their experiences participants described **administrative issues and barriers in the process** (*nsurvey* = 45, 29.41%; *ninterview* = 9, 90%). This included **lack of clarity in the process** (*nsurvey* = 27, 17.65%; *ninterview* = 6, 60%). In the survey responses this largely consisted of emotive language, describing the overall process as "complicated" (s7), "very complex" (s12) or "confusing" (s121). Four survey participants (2.61%) used the phrase "jump through hoops" when describing obstacles in the process (s5, s10, s46, s119). In interview, one participant described there being "mysteries" (i3) in the decision making and it being "so woolly and so non-transparent" (i3) that it was difficult if wanting to make a complaint. In addition, some parents commented on **administrative issues with the application** (*nsurvey* = 8, 5.23%; *ninterview* = 9, 90%). This primarily described computer systems not recognising CSA starters and needing to "complete a paper application" (s82) and then "decline the offer and reapply the following year" (i5), which interviewees referred to as another thing for the parents to manage.

A small number of survey responses referred to **off-putting information that deters parents** (*n* = 6, 3.92%), with one response stating that their local authority "send information which sounds intimidating" (s69). Whilst references in the survey were minimal, this sense of being deterred was prominent in the interviews (*n* = 8, 80%). There were references to local authority admission teams sending letters or emails, which one participant described as "scaremongering" (i1). Another stated;

> *[The email] basically sets out this massive list of "are you sure you want to do this? Because of this this, this, this and this?" […] there's a whole list of you know, "what if your child hits puberty early?", "what if they get picked on?"* (i10)

Two interviewees spoke in detail about schools' attempts to "dissuade" (i9) them, again with examples given about children potentially "feeling out of place" (i4). They both reported schools incorrectly informing parents that their child will have to skip a year and this being off putting.

DfE guidance (2021b) states that it is "reasonable for admission authorities to expect parents to provide them with information in support of their request", for example, a parental statement. **The need for parents to provide evidence and reasons** was commented on briefly in survey responses but occurred with increased frequency in

interviews (*nsurvey* = 9, 5.88%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). Some explained preparing a "strong case" (i4) and the challenge of this;

> *[The application form] was like, "what are the exceptional circumstances?" you know, like "why are you applying for this?". I couldn't just apply and say, "I'm applying because I believe this to be the best thing for my son".* (i3)

One parent explained that she "catastrophized things" to secure agreement, and shared;

> *…you feel like you need to present the worst possible picture in order to get the agreement… That's heart-breaking to have to do as a parent, and I hope that my son, and daughter, never stumble across the letters that I wrote to get this for them.* (i2)

A 'barrier' in the system which was described by parents was **lack of awareness from others** (*nsurvey* = 31, 20.26%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). There were specific references to **schools and/or admission authorities (being) unaware of relevant statutory guidance** (*nsurvey* = 29, 18.95%; *ninterview* = 7, 70%), with general comments around school and local authorities being "ill-informed" (s12). More specifically, participants reported schools lacking awareness of statutory guidance with one participant stating; "none of the schools I approach[ed] knew it was a possibility, so had to explain" (s81). This lack of awareness was also described amongst interviewees, with a view that it contributed to such variation in experiences;

> *Everyone's story is different in itself, is because some local authorities will be adamant, some don't know the law, some teachers don't, you know, the heads don't know the law.* (i6)

Although only mentioned twice in survey responses, interviewees spoke about **lack of knowledge from other parents** (*nsurvey* = 2, 1.31%; *ninterview* = 9, 90%) and the "myths" (i5) and misinformation shared by other parents at the time these families went through the process.

4.3.2 The need for parental ability and capacity to engage with the process

Theme two is 'the need for parental ability and capacity to engage with the process' (*nsurvey* = 62, 40.52%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%), something that was prominent within interviewees stories. Following on from comments about others' lacking awareness

of relevant statutory guidance, participants referred to **parents applying required knowledge of their rights** to navigate and manage the process (*nsurvey* = 37, 24.18%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). **Parental research to understand statutory guidance** was mentioned in a small number of survey responses but commented on at length in interviews (*nsurvey* = 6, 3.92%; *ninterview* = 9, 90%). Parents spoke about having to "become experts in the law" (s12) with one interviewee stating;

> *I got to the point where I probably could have quoted the admission code in my sleep.* (i7)

Parents spoke about the importance of knowing the "question they are legally required to answer" (i10) and remembering to clearly ask this when in discussions;

> *[You should] make sure that you're asking the right question. Make sure you are clear of what your rights are and that you are not, you're not asking their permission to send [child] at the age of five, you're asking their permission to have a reception place at the age of five.* (i1)

Some interviewees shared the skills they needed to understand the statutory guidance and navigate the process, and questioned potential inequality in the system;

> *[It] involved a certain level of having to be able to plan all that. You know, the skills to be able to write that and put it all together [and] to be able to explain what we want, what we wanted, and why we wanted it to all those different professionals and be able to get them on board with it. And it did make me wonder how that experience would be fair for people who perhaps didn't have the skills that I had in that area, and I was left really feeling like that. That actually it was quite an unfair system.* (i8)

Perhaps unsurprisingly due to the way participants were recruited for this study, there were references to **parents seeking support and advice from others** (*nsurvey* = 12, 7.84%; *ninterview* = 7, 70%). When speaking about the formation of online support groups, one interviewee commented;

> *…we like supported each other and backed each other up. I might not have been as assertive without that support. I have to admit it was...I think that support was invaluable.* (i7)

Emotive comments were shared by parents around **being firm and decisive (and have) a "willingness to fight" and challenge** (*nsurvey* = 24, 15.69%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). In survey responses the words 'fight' (*n* = 7, 4.58%) and 'battle' (*n* = 5, 3.27%) occurred with references to complaints made and the escalation of some of these to the Government Ombudsman. References to having to 'fight' were spoken about in interviews with one parent saying;

> *I just felt in me that I would fight them all the way. So there was no way I was ever going to back down.* (i8)

When describing the need to 'fight', interviewees spoke of a power imbalance between parents and schools, with one parent reflecting;

> *Why should the school have power? Because this is what is coming out. The school has more power, or equal power to the local authority. But it is your child*. (i6)

Another parent commented on the ability to challenge this, stating;

> *Saying to an authority, "I know better than you" is almost what you're doing. Well, it kind of feels that way…* (i3)

One interviewee made a lengthy reflective comment on this ability to 'fight and challenge' and how she perceives this to be resulting in inequality;

> *… it is not even close to fair. No, no. To be able to access this, first you got to know about it, then you've got to stand your ground against people who don't want you to do it, and then finally you may have to fight […] This is not something that people find easy to access… if they don't have English as a first language, or if they are themselves learning disabled, or if they're already holding down two jobs and just don't have time. […] This is why the legislation has to be changed. This is not… the the the current system is not fit for purpose because you have to fight to get it. You have to know about it, and then you have to fight for it.* (i10)

As suggested in the above comment, participants made direct reference to **<u>parental time and financial circumstances</u>** needed to manage the process (*nsurvey* = 16, 10.46%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%). This included references to **administrative time for parents** (*nsurvey* = 10, 6.54%; *ninterview* = 7, 70%), with participants stating that "the process is time consuming" (s92). Interviewees described "weeks and weeks of

emails" (i7) and time spent on research, talking with schools, and chasing up responses. One parent stated;

> *It shouldn't be about how serious you are and how much time you've got to devote to this.* (i3)

Others referred to the overall **duration of the process** (*nsurvey* = 5, 3.27%; *ninterview* = 7, 70%), with survey responses commenting on it being "long" (s7). Concerningly, some parents interviewed spoke about not receiving a decision until after the summer holidays when their child would have ordinarily been invited to start school, and the resulting sense of being in "limbo" (i3) while waiting. One participant explained other parents giving up on the process and starting their child at school due to the "uncertainty" (i8).

A small number of participants made reference to **financial position and privilege** (*nsurvey* = 3, 1.96%; *ninterview* = 6, 60%); centred around choosing to pay for independent professional reports or moving house to get into a different school catchment area. In addition, in interviews participants spoke about the cost of an additional year of childcare and how the 30 hours government funded childcare does not cover the cost of a full-time nursery place. One parent stated;

> *…there is also a financial aspect to it. It depends how many hours you're working. But for some people they need their child in school to stop paying for nursery.* (i10)

The last sub-theme **'going "against the norm"; the impact on parental wellbeing'** (*nsurvey* = 31, 20.26%; *ninterview* = 10, 100%) captures the emotional experience parents shared of going through the process of requesting a CSA reception start for their child. **Isolation, difference and going "against the norm"** was an emotive aspect of some parental reports (*nsurvey* = 8, 5.23%; *ninterview* = 9, 90%). In the survey, parents reported being "made to feel wrong" (s33), with one stating; "despite my strong convictions, this is a lonely path to walk" (s51). Interviewed parents spoke about their request going "against the norm" (i4), going "against the status quo" (i7), and their perception of being out of cohort being "frowned on" (i5). One participant spoke about their culture and the difficulty managing the views of others, explaining; "it's a taboo to put your child back" (i6), even though she felt strongly this was in the best interest of her child. Some parents reported their general **sense of**

disadvantage (*nsurvey* = 4, 2.61%; *ninterview* = 4, 40%) for having had to experience the process at all. One interviewee shared;

> *And you know, three weeks later for [my son], and two weeks later for [my daughter], and I wouldn't have had to do this journey. And it feels unfair. It just feels unfair. Maybe I'm just slightly resentful. You know that August parents have to go through this if this is the route we choose.* (i2)

In addition to perceived disadvantages, participants spoke about **managing the negative views of others** (*nsurvey* = 9, 5.88%; *ninterview* = 9, 90%). Survey respondents referred to “friends and family questioning the decision” (s24) and “negative opinions” (s114) from other parents. In interview, there were numerous references (*n* = 44) to others sharing negative views and opinions. These ranged from views of the parents “babying” their child (i3) or “holding [their] child back” (i1, i2, i3, i9). Overwhelmingly the interviewees described this “defensiveness” from others (i1), and sometimes a sense that other parents were “jealous” (i6). This was often referenced where others had experience of being summer-born themselves or having an older summer-born child, with examples given of Headteachers refusing requests based on their own life experiences. Parents spoke about the difficulty managing these views, stating;

> *[At first] I talked myself out of it because of these kind of conversations that were going on around me.* (i3)

Perhaps unsurprisingly within this narrative, the **experience of stress** was reported (*nsurvey* = 18, 11.76%; *ninterview* = 8, 80%). In the survey, participants directly referred to the process being ‘stressful’ (*n* = 18), with one adding that it was “emotionally gruelling” (s46). Parents shared their personal feelings during interviews, including; “the impact on my time and my mental health was huge” (i2), “it's affected my mental wellbeing” (i6), and “I feel very bitter about it” (i7).

4.3.3 Research Question Two concluding comments

This research question intended to understand parents’ experiences of delaying their summer-born child’s start school until CSA. The analysis resulted in two themes; systematic barriers impacting on fair and equitable access, and the need for parental ability and capacity to engage with the process. There was no intent to search for negative experiences or perceived barriers in the process, and it is acknowledged

that there were many participants who did report a positive overall experience. However, the variability between participants and within the systems and process formed a dominant sub-theme; with some parents suggested that this variability is a barrier which prevents parents having equal access to the statutory guidance. The second theme was centred around parents' capacity and ability to manage; particularly reported by those interviewed. The discussion chapter will reflect on these reported difficulties and the potential implications for equality of access for families.

Chapter 5. Discussion

This final chapter will present key points for discussion arising from this study, with references to existing literature made where relevant. This chapter will go on to discuss the potential implications for Educational Psychologists, implications for policy, and suggested areas of future research. The chapter will conclude with a reflection on the strengths and limitations of this study.

5.1 Discussion of Findings

5.1.1 Complexity of parental reasons for delay

This study aimed to understand why parents choose to delay their summer-born child's start at school until CSA, and what their experience of the process was of doing so. An interesting finding of this study is that parental reasons are complex. Parents found it difficult to report a 'primary' reason in the survey and often gave multiple reasons, despite the character-limit imposed when collecting their responses. This study found that allowing parents the opportunity to express their experiences in their own words, through the use of interviews, resulted in a rich picture of the multiple reasons impacting parents' decisions to delay their child's entry to school. The finding that parental reasons are complex is at odds with much of the existing literature. The only other identified research which highlights the complexity of reasons informing parental decisions is the doctoral research by Dougan (2014), based in a North American context. Research using surveys, such as the Department for Education surveys by Cirin and Lubwama (2018) and King and Hammond (2021) have perhaps been too prescriptive in assuming parental reasons can fit within pre-determined categories. Other literature has attempted to categorise parents by their main reason, for example, Noel and Newman (2003) stating that reasons could be viewed within two groups; those who based the decision on variables relevant to their child, and those with personal philosophies relevant to child development and schooling. The findings in this study oppose the idea that parental reasons can be so simply categorised; parents typically stated that there was a multitude of factors informing their decision.

Aspects of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory can be drawn upon when looking at the findings in this study; helping to understand the complexity of parental reasons. In particular, Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which posits the view that an individual exists within a wider context; there are multiple layers of influence surrounding each person. For some participants, there was a focus on the birth or development of their child, for example, with prematurity being cited as reason for delay. However, very few parents spoke of this in isolation, and often referred to the context around their child, such as how they would manage the school environment and the academic demands that may be imposed on them.

In addition to the school environment, parents also commented on their child within the family system. This included making comparisons with siblings' experiences of school or the parent(s)' experiences, typically where there had been a negative experience. Albanesi (2019) proposed that parents with a negative experience of school might be more inclined to delay their child's entry, and Mergler and Walker (2017) suggested that parents felt more able to justify their decision where they had their own negative experience. Due to the small number of parents that commented on their own experience, it is not possible to infer if those with negative experiences are more likely to delay their child. However, it is interesting to think about the parental experience, their perception of school, and the impact this has on the way they support their child; an interaction which can be viewed within the 'mesosystem'. For some parents this meant they made the decision to delay when their child was very young, and it could be inferred that their decision was more about parental experience of education than their child's individual needs.

Parental values and beliefs were an interesting finding which will be discussed more thoroughly in section 5.1.2. Within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), parental views of government policy can be viewed within the 'exosystem', with attitudes towards the English education system and changes to legislation and statutory guidance over time in the 'chronosystem'. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) helps to understand the complexity of parent reasons to delay their child's entry into school and how the reasons occurred across different systems around the child. This was

not anticipated during the design of this study. Existing research suggests that factors influencing parents' decisions can be reduced a small list of reasons (Bellisimo et al., 1995; Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; King & Hammond, 2021), and do not always account for the parental experience of school and their values and beliefs. Based on this existing literature, this study was therefore designed with an attempt to understand participants' 'primary' reasons via the survey; something that was not possible. This study therefore contributes to the existing literature by challenging the idea that parental reasons can be simplified into a list of reasons. Instead, this study suggests that parental reasons are complex and influenced not only by the needs of the individual child, but also by parents' perceptions of their child's ability to manage the school environment, the parent(s) and sibling(s)' experiences of school, and the parents' views of the English education system.

5.1.2 Parental values and beliefs

It was surprising in the findings how much of the data was relevant to parental values, beliefs, and views of the English education system. This has not been captured by the published English research (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; King & Hammond, 2021), with their surveys not providing options which allowed parents to state that their own personal values and beliefs contributed to their decision. In other research, parental beliefs are captured, but are often focused on the parents using their knowledge of education to gain an 'advantage' for their child; a view that parents are "gaming" the system (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017). In this study, parental views and values were not explicit in mentioning 'advantage', but rather focused on a negative perception of school starting age and curriculum demands; a subtle difference between 'gaining an advantage' and 'mitigating a disadvantage'. It was further interesting that amongst the interviewees, 50% reported working in education in some capacity, and perhaps their experience of working with summer-born children informed their view that these children are disadvantaged. An over-representation of teachers were also in Dougan's (2014) sample of parents choosing to delay their child (n = 14; 70%). It may be that those working in education are more willing to contribute to research on this topic, or that direct experience of working with summer-born children has contributed to their view that there is a disadvantage. It would be interesting to identify whether those working in education are generally over-represented in parents choosing to delay their child's start at school.

Considering the profession of some of the participants involved in this study, it was interesting that there was a dominant narrative in the findings around readiness to manage school, desire for more play and concerns about academic pressure. The dominant view in the findings was that a child needs time to develop and mature in order to manage. This view of child development aligns with maturation theory and the sense that child development is linear and needs time to progress, as noted in Piaget's (1959) theories on human development. The majority of participants spoke about their child developing at their own pace without referencing how children learn through interactions with others. This idea of interactions being needed can be viewed within Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which suggests that it is the adult's guidance and interaction with the child which helps them make progress on from what they are able to do independently (Vygotsky, 1978). Only one interviewee spoke openly about their child needing specialist intervention before starting school due to their developmental needs, with participants otherwise commenting on a desire for their child to have more time to develop. The idea that parental reasons for delaying their child's start at school is on a continuum from maturation theory to a Vygotskian perspective is noted in the literature on delaying entry to school (Diamond et al., 2000; Eisenhart & Graue, 1990; Noel & Newman, 2008); in this study, the parents tended to align with the former. Potentially this parental view of development is at odds with schools who may be focused on adapting the environment for the child and providing adult-led support and interventions. Acknowledging that there may be different views on child development would help when conversations between parents and schools are held on delaying entry to school.

5.1.3 Comment on demographics

The demographics of the research participants were also a point of interest in this study and help to give insight into the families that are choosing to delay their child's start at school. It is acknowledged that the demographic information may simply represent the parents willing to participate in research and are not necessarily representative of all of the families delaying. However, the demographics of the survey respondents in this study align with the demographics of participants in the two published English reports in this field (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; King & Hammond, 2021) (see Table 7).

Table 7

Participant demographics compared with DfE research reports

	Number of participants	Annual income >£50,000*	White ethnicity**	August-born child	Male child	Prematurity (<37 weeks gestation)	Twins
This study	153	64%	94%	59%	64%	19%	8%
King and Hammond (2021)	804	52%	84%	53%	62%	17%	5%
Cirin and Lubwama (2018)	196	47%	85%	53%	-	15%	-

**Household income per year pre-tax.*
***In this study parents were asked to report their ethnicity. In the other two studies, parents were asked to report their child's ethnicity.*

In all studies, parents of White ethnicity with a higher-than-average annual income were over-represented. The view that high-SES families of White ethnicity tend to be overrepresented in those delaying entry to school is noted in global research (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Dee & Sievertsen, 2018; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Hanly et al., 2019; Huang, 2015). It is unfortunate that Cirin and Lubwama (2018) and King and Hammond (2021) did not collect information on parental education levels, as the sample in this study had education levels which exceeded the national average. It would be interesting to identify whether this may be representative of parents choosing to delay their child's start at school as it may have implications for policy and practice. Global research suggests that the reasons families from lower-SES backgrounds are not delaying is due to the view that the additional year of childcare is "prohibitively expensive" (Bassok & Reardon, 2013, p. 294). It is unclear whether this may be a reason in an English context where there is some universal funding available for the additional year in nursery. Alternatively, it could be that parents with higher education levels are more likely to have knowledge which could be used to positively impact their child's education; something discussed by Cirin and Lubwama (2018). There is opportunity for further research to be undertaken in this area on the socioeconomic aspects of delayed school admissions.

5.1.4 Parental ability to access and navigate the system

A novel contribution of this study is the in-depth exploration of parents' views of the process in gaining agreement for a reception start at CSA. To date, the only known

English research which makes comment on parents' experiences is King and Hammond (2021), which allowed parents to provide open feedback which highlighted that; parents' views of the process varied, some viewed it as a "lottery", there were varying practices in whether the requests would be treated "favourably" or not, and there was a general sense of lack of awareness and understanding (King & Hammond, 2021, p.9). The findings in this current study align with some of these views. However, the in-depth exploration of parents' views, and the thematic analysis has provided more detail to contribute to an under-researched area of literature.

It is acknowledged that participants of this research went through the process some time ago, and the views shared may therefore not fully represent the process at the current date; it is known that more local authorities are now automatically agreeing requests (King & Hammond, 2021). However, parents had concerns about the inequality in the system, particularly between admission authorities; parents perceived that the complexity of the process was directly related to where they live and the leniency of their local authority. Parents also shared awareness of the DfE guidance which states that "an admission authority is not required to honour a decision made by another admission authority" (DfE, 2021a). This caused concern for families about being able to move home in the future and move into a different local authority.

In addition to geographical inequality, parents perceive there to be inequality in parents' ability to understand their rights and navigate the systems in order to delay their child's entry into school. Parents reported feeling that they need to have knowledge of statutory guidance and their rights. Specifically, parents made reference to needing to know the "golden question"; that is, 'based on the best interests of my child, when my child starts school at CSA should they be admitted to reception or year one?' and not 'is delayed entry in their best interests?'. Whilst this question is embedded in the statutory guidance (DfE, 2021a), it is perhaps unclear to parents who have not read all of the guidance documents in their entirety or sought advice from others on the process. This reported need for thorough knowledge of the statutory guidance poses a concern about equality of access and potentially discriminates against families such as those that have literacy or learning difficulties, English as an additional language, unfamiliarity with the English school system, or

other demands on their time which restrict administrative time they may have available. This discrimination will be particularly prevalent in admission authorities where information on delayed admission to school is not routinely available for parents to guide understanding of the process.

Furthermore, parents reported needing the skills to manage meetings in school and challenge the views of others, particularly where there was perceived misunderstanding over parental rights. There was a sense that parents felt they were challenging power dynamics between schools and parents, and challenging the way schools routinely support summer-born children. It was again reiterated by parents of the skills needed to do this, particularly expressive language skills and assertiveness. This again raises concerns about equality and whether all families have the time to attend meetings in school and the ability to verbally justify their decisions. There was a perception that many families would be put-off by the process and would conform to what is typical in the English system; that being, adhering to the views of schools and conforming to the typical admission dates. In addition to managing meetings, there were references made to needing financial resources to manage the system, and also examples of parents selecting a different school for their child when their local school did not agree to a reception place at CSA. This further suggests some privilege with these families having the means to access an alternative school, something that is unlikely to be viable for all families.

It is known that the participants in this study were largely more affluent and more educated than the national average. It therefore needs to be acknowledged that they are looking at this issue through the lens of their own life experiences and values. There was an assumption made by parents that some families, perhaps those disadvantaged, would be deterred by the complexity of the system and not be able to navigate the process. This could be the case, but there is no data available on how many families have been interested in delaying their child's entry but put off by the process. Additionally, there is no data on how many have been unsuccessful with their request and not challenged the decision. It therefore cannot be inferred that parents with a higher education level are more likely to be successful in gaining agreement. Conversely, it is not known whether certain groups of parents, such as those from a disadvantaged background would want to delay their child's entry into

school if the process was simpler or automatic. It is also not known whether more parents would take up the opportunity to delay if it was easily available. There is potential for further research to be undertaken in this area which specifically looks at equality of access and the demographics of families utilising the right to request a reception school start at CSA.

5.2 Implications for Educational Psychologists

It is imperative that EPs are aware of key education legislation and statutory guidance relevant to the context within which they work (BPS, 2017; HCPC, 2015). This includes understanding policies at a local level, such as the admission of children to school within their local authority. Although EPs may not work directly with all summer-born children who experience a delayed entry to school, their work across different contexts means that they need to have awareness of this practice and the potential implications that it could have. This includes having awareness of literature on the practice of delaying and the research on its impact; understanding that there is not currently a robust evidence base on whether delayed entry is a positive for all children.

EPs' work across different contexts can also be viewed within Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, specifically the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). At the individual child level, EPs employed by local authorities will likely encounter summer-born children within Early Years settings, for example, when being asked to provide statutory assessment advice. When working with these children, EPs should be aware of the option to delay entry and think about whether this could be something to discuss with the family; taking account of their development, background, and access to quality provision and support. This would need to be done with some caution due to the lack of evidence on the impact of delayed entry, and the importance for Educational Psychology practice to be informed by a robust evidence base (BPS, 2017; HCPC, 2015).

When working with parents in these instances, it is important for EPs to understand the families' views, values, and beliefs and not make assumptions about the views held by others; something that is particularly important when promoting equality and diversity (BPS, 2017). As noted by Dougan (2014), helping parents to work through their own beliefs around education would help them to navigate the decision-making

process for their child. Using a consultation model (Beaver, 2011), EPs have the skills to ask questions about parents' experiences of school, the lens through which they view education and school systems, and the support they feel their child needs. Furthermore, EPs are in a position to open a dialogue between families and schools on how these systems interact (mesosystem), such as understanding different perspectives on education and child development and the support a child may require.

Whilst instances of working with summer-born children in the Early Years may be few, there are broader implications for EP practice in their work with schools. EPs are well placed to monitor referrals received and identify vulnerable groups of children. As it is noted that summer-born children may be over-referred for support for Special Educational Needs (Crawford et al., 2007), attention should be given to this group and how their needs are being perceived by schools. EPs are in a position to be curious about how schools are understanding the behaviour of children and help to contextualise their learning and development. For example, by focusing on the child's individual strengths in their development, and not simply their presentation relative to their peers. EPs are in a position to question school systems and structures which may be disadvantaging certain groups, for example, the impact in-class ability grouping may have on those youngest in cohort, and how to make the classroom more inclusive. It may be that EPs help schools to think about the provision and support in place for summer-born children. Furthermore, when working with schools EPs need to be aware of the demographics of the school context, and it would be helpful for them to know if there are children in the school who have experienced delayed entry, and what the impact of this may be on other children in cohort. For example, further contextualising the behaviours and needs of those youngest in class if there is a skewed distribution in the age range in a cohort, something that is particularly relevant in the earliest years of schooling.

At a local authority level, EPs are in a role to be involved in multi-disciplinary decisions. Although not mandatory, the DfE guidance for admission authorities (2021a) suggests that decision-making panels may be sensible when reviewing applications for delayed entry, and suggested panel members include EPs. It is

therefore important that EPs understand the relevant legislation and statutory guidance in case of needing to provide a view.

5.3 Implications for Policy

The School Admissions Code (2021c) details that admission authorities decisions must take account of parental views. However, it is known that some local authorities are automatically agreeing requests (King & Hammond, 2021) with blanket policies not focused on the needs of the individual child. Participants of this study also shared opposing experiences, with refusal of requests without understanding parental reasons. It is noted by King and Hammond (2021, p. 9) that local authorities "do not always collect data in a consistent way", and at present this results in variation in how requests for delayed school starts are handled, and whether parental views are taken into account. Consistency is needed across local authorities including; more transparency on the process and how parents access it, clearer information around how decisions are made, and whose views are taken into account in the decisions.

Clearer policies could be put into place across all admission authorities when there are definitive reasons for delay, such as prematurity resulting in the child being educated in the cohort above the one they might have otherwise been in. King and Hammond (2021) note this policy currently exists in 63% of local authorities, leaving a third with varied approaches on how they handle this circumstance. Further, clarity around how decisions are made when there is not obvious 'evidence' pertaining to the needs and development of the child is needed. Parents in this study reported subjective decision making, often based on the views of Headteachers who do not know the child. Gaining agreement from such Headteachers was reported to be onerous by parents, with some having multiple meetings with different headteachers; again, potentially dissuading some families for pursuing the option. King and Hammond (2021) noted that some local authorities reported finding it difficult to make decisions on the best interests of the child when they are unknown to the schools; begging the question of whether a school who do not know the child should be informing the decision. More clarity is needed on how decisions should be made, removing some of the current subjectivity. This may include clearer direction that a view from a child's nursery or pre-school (where relevant) are taken into account, or

decisions should be made at a local authority multi-disciplinary panel. Certainly, it should be ensured that parental views and reasons for delay are sufficiently captured and taken into account by all admission authorities.

Sufficiently documenting parental reasons for delay also has wider implications for policy and practice, and recording of reported reasons for delay would help researchers to identify which factors occur most frequently in this population group. For example, if concerns about child development and SEND continue to appear frequently, then there are implications for policy on how these children are best supported in the early years, including how these children receive specialist support if they are kept out of school for an additional year. Analysis of reported reasons could also help to understand how many families make the decision based on their own views of the education system, and their desire to give their child the 'best chance' and mitigate disadvantage. If a notable proportion of families do fall into this category, then thought needs to be given to the long-term implications of allowing parents to delay their child's entry into school, such as increasing expectations in the classroom for older children potentially having negative implications for those youngest in class. Fundamentally, thought would need to be given to a policy shift from 'which year group is in the best interests of this summer-born child when the parents have chosen to delay?' to 'is a delayed entry into school in the best interests of summer-born children?'. Admission authorities collecting data from all parents on their reasons for delay would help contribute to a currently under-researched area of education policy.

5.4 Future Research

Due to the limited existing research in this area, there are extensive possible areas for future research. Based on the discussion section of this study, the following areas of future research would seem most pertinent; further research on parental reasons for delaying their summer-born child's entry to school, clearer understanding of the demographics of families who are delaying, understanding the reasons parents may choose not to delay, and the outcomes for children with delayed entry into school and the potential long-term implications of this practice.

Due to limited available research on the reasons parents are delaying their child's entry into school, further research is needed in this area; ideally expanding on the

sample sizes seen in Cirin and Lubwama's (2018) and King and Hammond's (2021) research to gain a nationally-representative sample. This could be done through the requirement for all admission authorities to record parental reasons for delay, as suggested in 'implications for policy' (section 5.3). Caution is needed in the way parental reasons are collected to ensure that they are not reduced to a 'primary' reason and sufficiently capture the complexity of parental reasons, which is something that was highlighted by this study. If survey formats are used then it should be ensured that they sufficiently capture the wide variation of reasons, including understanding parents' beliefs and values and the impact these might have on their decision. It also needs to be ensured that there is support available for families to help them document their reasons so that this requirement does not contribute to inequality of access. In addition to capturing parental reasons, it would be of interest to understand which reasons generally result in agreement for a reception school start at CSA, and which result in decline. Having this information from across England could also provide information on the leniency of admission authorities and the geographic disparity; raising questions on how to make admissions more equitable across the country. This could inform updates to DfE guidance for local authorities of the admission of summer-born children into school.

The second proposed area for future research is understanding more information about the demographics of the families requesting Reception school starts at CSA; something that would help to contribute to discussion about potential long-term implications from this practice. To date, research suggests that parents from a high-SES background are those choosing to delay their child's school admission (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Dee & Sievertsen, 2018; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Hanly et al., 2019; Huang, 2015), but it is not clear whether this is skewed by those wishing to participate in research. It would therefore be of interest if a national picture of the families gaining agreement for a reception school start at CSA could be obtained via requests made to admission authorities. Additionally, improved recording of requests not agreed, and the demographics of these families, would be helpful in ascertaining if there are any correlations between background of families and likelihood of gaining agreement; further adding to the discussion around equality of access. This study identified that parents with a higher-than-average education level, and those directly working in the education sector, were over-represented in the population group. It

would be of interest to identify whether this is typical and why this might be, for example, whether those with a higher education are more likely to be able to navigate the systems, or whether they have certain values which result in their request for delayed admission.

Research is currently based on the voices of parents from a higher-SES background and caution is needed to ensure that national policy decisions are not made based solely on the views of this affluent section of the population and the choices they wish to make for their children. Policy decisions need to account for the voices of other families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It would be of interest to understand the views of families with children in the early years who do not wish to delay their child's start at school. Within this, the demographic information of participants should be collected to identify if there is a difference between the groups of those delaying and not. If there is a difference then further thought would need to be given to the experience of children in school and the implications for the youngest children in cohort admitted to school in their 'normal' year group, who may be from a lower-SES background. Discussion would need to be had on whether the practice of delaying some children results in further disadvantage for others. This would be particularly pertinent if the process of gaining a reception start at CSA becomes automatic for families. There needs to be some ability to forecast which types of families may utilise this automatic right and the impact this could have. If it is forecast that affluent families, with the means and resources to have their child in nursery for an additional year, are more likely to delay entry, then thought would need to be given to what the implications may be on the other children in cohort.

The last area for proposed research is the outcomes for summer-born children who experience a delayed entry into school. There is currently a lack of attainment data for this group of children in England, and there is potential for this to be explored when the results of the Key Stage Two SATs are made available after this academic year (2021/2022), as noted by King and Hammond (2021). It would be of interest to see the outcomes by child characteristics, for example, by category of SEND needs. Long term, longitudinal studies could aim to investigate correlations between parental reasons for delay and attainment data, if parental reasons were adequately

captured; as suggested above. This longitudinal research may contribute to understanding of the potential advantages and disadvantages of delay on different groups of children. Furthermore, research is needed on the social and emotional outcomes for children experiencing a delayed entry to school. This was something of concern to many of the participants in this study, and something not adequately researched to date. Whilst perhaps this poses more of a challenge methodologically, it would be of interest to gain a sense of whether parents and children have more positive self-perceptions, and longer term more positive social and emotional outcomes, after experiencing delay. Thought would need to be given to parental values and beliefs and the impact this could have on a child's self-perception.

5.5 Strengths and Limitations

5.5.1 Strengths of the study

A strength of this study is that it contributes to a significant gap in the literature in England on why parents choose to delay their child's entry to school. It is the first known piece of research which has been undertaken independently from the Department of Education. The qualitative inductive approach used provided exploration of the participants experiences from their point of view. This is in contrast to the DfE research reports (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; King & Hammond, 2021) which used prescribed questionnaires, imposing reasons for delay on participants. The findings from this study would suggest that there are reasons that motivated parents to delay their child's start at school which were not captured via the DfE research (for example, on parental values and beliefs on school starting age). Furthermore, this is the only known piece of research which has looked at parents' experiences of going through the process in delaying their child's start at school. It was a strength that there was geographic dispersity of participants which gave a view of the process across the country. The use of semi-structured interviews made a particular contribution to this research question; with time to elaborate on their experiences in a conversational interaction, the participants shared the personal impact the process had on them.

The use of two methodological approaches (survey and semi-structured interviews) was a strength of this study. The survey provided an overview of parental views and breadth of the 'problem'; something that could not have been obtained if using semi-

structured interviews alone. The interview data then provided depth of understanding. Of notable strength is how the data from both methodological approaches aligned. Although this was not the intention from the outset of this study, the homogeneity of the data helped contribute to the credibility of the results.

Whilst the methodological approaches could be viewed as an improvement on the prescribed surveys used by the DfE (Cirin & Lubwama, 2018; King & Hammond, 2021), there were similarities between this study and the existing research. Furthermore, the demographics of the sample in this study closely aligned with key demographics reported by Cirin and Lubwama (2018) and King and Hammond (2021). Therefore, although there were some limitations in the recruitment of participants for this study, it could be inferred that the participants are from a similar population group to those who have previously completed the DfE surveys.

5.5.2 Limitations of the study

This study does not claim to have findings which can be generalised to a wider population. The sample size was small, and all participants were obtained via social media, therefore only capturing those who have access to this; potentially missing families from backgrounds with less access to technology and the internet (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The recruitment of participants means that only those who have engaged with online forums which provide support on the process of delaying entry to school would have participated. This may represent a certain population of parents including those who experienced difficulties and were therefore reaching out for support. Furthermore, the sample was based on parents who chose to engage with the survey and will be biased by the reasons parents wanted to volunteer and talk about the subject. There were no parents who reported regretting their decision to delay their child's start at school. It could be suggested that some confirmation bias exists in the study with parents speaking positively about parental decisions they have made. Results therefore need to be read with the understanding that the findings are subjective and based on how parents choose to present their stories.

The resulting sample of participants was homogenous despite an attempt to include participants from diverse backgrounds in the interviews. The research therefore lacks understanding of the experience of people from varied backgrounds and whether there is any variation in views and experiences. Furthermore, many

participants made reference to working in education (50% of interviewees) and this may have influenced a stronger reported view of the English education system. It could be that those working in education felt particularly strongly on talking about this topic. There is no known data on whether parents working in education are over-represented in those families that delay their child's entry to school. The sample also intentionally excluded some families, such as those not attending a mainstream school. One parent who did not meet the inclusion criteria made contact to explain that she experienced such difficulty with the process that she chose for her child to attend an independent school. This research is therefore missing parents who have chosen to use the independent school sector. The study also intentionally excluded families where children had an EHCP or were going through statutory assessment prior to starting school due to the view that these families might have different reasons for delay. I propose this is a specific area for future research.

This study was retrospective and asked parents to think back to the time when they made the decision to delay. For some parents, this was over seven years ago. One participant reported engaging with the process before the final publication of the changes to the Schools Admission Code (2014) and will have therefore had a different experience from parents who wish to delay their child's entry to school now. The participants' memory and recall would have had an impact on their description of events and reasons, particularly for those who went through the process many years ago. Two of the parents reported going on to join parental campaign groups to challenge the existing legislation and statutory guidance. Their strong views may be influenced by this current campaigning as well as the experiences with their child.

There are further limitations in the use of qualitative research and the way in which data was collected. The interviews were conducted online, both due to the geographic dispersity of the participants, and ongoing restrictions due to Covid-19 at the time the interviews took place. It is acknowledged that there are some drawbacks to using online interviews, particularly where there were some connection difficulties which occasionally resulted in the conversation being stilted. It is noted that in-person interviews can result in a smoother flow of conversation (Salmons, 2015). However, it was appropriate given the practical limitations.

5.5.3 Note on Covid-19

This study was started in September 2020 and has spanned the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. It was always the intention to understand the experiences of families who had already been through the process, and therefore included children who started school on, or before, September 2020. The latest these families could have applied for delayed entry was in the 2019/2020 academic year. For this reason, it was anticipated that the impact from the coronavirus pandemic may have been too recent to have any significant impact on the participants and the resultant findings due to the way data was being collected on participants' retrospective experiences. However, it is acknowledged that everybody has experienced vast changes since September 2020, and time missed from education and concerns about child development may be prominent in findings if this research were to be repeated. The research report by King and Hammond (2021), collected survey responses relevant to parents/carers who had applied for their child to start school in either September 2020 or 2021, and noted that there was some concerns that Covid-19 might impact on increasing numbers of families requesting delayed entry to school; particularly due to concerns around lost learning time or where there were existing health or SEND concerns and appointments had been missed or delayed. At the time of their survey, one in eight of the parents mentioned Covid-19 as a factor in their decision. It should therefore be understood that it would not be possible to generalise the findings to a more current population who may have experiences directly relating to Covid-19 which have informed their decision.

5.6 Concluding Comments

This research has made a contribution to the small body of existing literature on why parents choose to delay their child's start at mainstream school. It is the first identified piece of research on this topic in an English context which has not been undertaken by the Department for Education. Further, it is the first piece of known research which uses a predominantly qualitative approach to data collection which allows for depth of understanding of parental voice. The research identifies that parents report complex reasons for delaying their child's entry into school, and variable experiences of the process of doing so. The demographic details of the participants in this study were of particular interest and suggest parents of White ethnicity, with a higher-than-average salary and education level, may be more

inclined to delay their child's entry into school. Further research is needed in this area to understand more about the families who are delaying their child's entry to school and the potential long-term implications of this.

This research has also highlighted that the literature base on the outcomes of children with delayed entry into school is limited. It is therefore not possible to infer outcomes for this population group and whether delayed entry into school would be in the best interest of all summer-born children. This has implications for Educational Psychology practice when working with summer-born children whose parents may be considering a delayed entry into school. Whilst it is not possible to advise based on the evidence base, there is a role in valuing the parental voice and understanding their view on what they feel is in the best interests of their child.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Approach to identifying literature on why parents delay

A systematic search of literature was used to identify existing research based on the question, ‘what are the reasons parents give for delaying their child’s start at school?’.

The question did not make reference to terminology specific to English policy such as ‘Compulsory School Age’, nor did it refer to ‘summer-born’ children due to school cohort cut-off points varying globally. The search terms arose from the systematic review question and the database thesaurus option in PsychINFO was used to generate alternative terms (see Table A1). Initial searches using these terms resulted in a large quantity of irrelevant records. The Boolean for “near” was therefore used within each database to keep the terms ‘school’ and ‘delay’ within five words of each other.

Table A1

Terms used in systematic search of literature

Target term	Alternatives (OR) included in the search
parent	mother, father, carer
reason	decision, choice, explain
delay	defer, postpone, wait
start	entry, entrance, enrol, admit, attend, register
school	educat*, kindergarten

Searches took place using the following databases: British Education Index, ERIC, JSTOR, PsychArticles and PsychINFO. These databases were deemed to be appropriate due to their coverage of education and psychology journals. Searches were also conducted using UCL Explore service. A snowballing strategy was also used to identify any further articles of relevance by screening the reference lists of relevant results in search of any other studies that may meet the inclusion criteria.

An inclusion and exclusion criteria was developed (Table A2). Due to limited peer-reviewed articles, it was felt to be appropriate to include dissertations and theses which had collected new participant data relevant to the search questions.

Table A2

Inclusion and exclusion criteria applied in systematic search of literature.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
The research: Is written in English.	**The research:** Is in reference to policy or practice without capturing parental views.
Is relevant to Westernised education systems.	Is in reference to children who have started school and then been 'held back' or 'repeated' a year.
Is presented in any format, including published articles as well as dissertations/ theses.	Is focused only on children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
Presents results on parents' views, experiences, and reasons.	
Uses at least one measure to capture parental views and experiences.	

The research identified via this systematic search of the literature is presented in Appendix B.

Appendix B: Literature on why parents delay their child's start at school

Author(s)	Year	Country	Title	Source	Methodology	Conclusions
King, J., & Hammond, C.	2021	England	Delayed school admissions for summer born pupils (2020): Surveys of local authorities and of parents and carers.	Government Social Research, Department for Education	* Online survey of 804 parents asking them to select reasons informing their decision to delay.	Main reasons selected were; (lack of) school readiness, evidence about summer borns, medical or developmental reasons, advice from preschool.
Daro, A. M.	2020	USA	School entry timing: Connections between parents' school readiness beliefs, academic redshirting, and children's reading achievement.	Doctoral dissertation	* Used secondary national data set (ECLS-K:2011) which included parental ratings of 'school readiness' on a simple questionnaire of six 'readiness' behaviours scored on a 5-point Likert scale.	Two groups of parents were identified; those who think academic readiness is 'essential' before school, and those who prioritise 'behavioural' readiness over academics.
Albanesi, H, P.	2019	USA	Tilting the playing field: 'Redshirting' kindergarten boys in the US and the competition for hegemonic masculinity.	Gender and Education	Interviews with 60 parents of preschool children in two schools who had not yet decided whether they would delay entry. (Article using data from larger research project).	Parents perceived youngest children in cohort to be disadvantaged relative to others, with boys at an unfair academic disadvantage relative to girls, and boys needing to be more 'mature' to 'compete' with other boys.
Cirin, R., & Lubwama, J.	2018	England	Delayed school admissions for summer born pupils: DfE Research report.	Government Research Report, Department for Education	* Online survey of 196 parents asking them to select reasons informing their decision to delay.	Main reasons selected were; (lack of) school readiness, evidence about summer borns, advice from preschool, medical or developmental reasons.
Mergler, A & Walker, S.	2017	Australia	'This is possibly THE hardest decision a parent has to make.' Deciding when your child is ready to start Prep.	Australasian Journal of Early Childhood	* Qualitative analysis of comments in an online parenting forum where delayed entry was discussed (129 text comments analysed).	Parents' decisions based on child's DOB close to cut-off date, child's social and emotional development, concerns about issues that might arise in later schooling, parents' experiences of school.
Dougan, K.	2014	USA	The Effects of Kindergarten Redshirting from a Parental Perspective.	Doctoral Thesis	* Semi-structured interviews with 20 parents recruited via social media. Note: 14 parents were teachers.	Multiple factors influenced parental decisions; child's DOB close to the cut-off date, view that being youngest is disadvantageous, comparison to siblings struggling, advantage in physical maturity, perception that boys are not 'school ready'.
Bassok, D & Reardon, S. F.	2013	USA	"Academic Redshirting" in Kindergarten: Prevalence, Patterns, and Implications.	Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis	* Used secondary national data set (ECLS-B) which included parental surveys of a child's behaviour, social skills, maturity, and child's proficiency of basic academic skills prior to school.	Study could not infer reasons for delay as it identified no correlation between delay and parent reports of lower social skills or lower academic skills.
Noel, A. M & Newman, J.	2003	USA	Why delay kindergarten entry? A qualitative study of mothers' decisions.	Early Education and Development	Interviews of 15 mothers who had delayed their child's entry to school in 1996-1997.	Two groups of mothers identified; those who based the decision on variables relevant to their child, and those with personal philosophies relevant to child development and schooling.
Bellisimo, Y. Sacks, C, H. & Mergendoller, J, R.	1995	USA	Changes over time in kindergarten holding out: parent and school contexts.	Early Childhood Research Quarterly	* Interviewed 74 parents (separated into those delayed and not) in 1988 and 1991 about concerns parents may have had before starting their child at school.	In the earliest set of interviews, parents were concerned about school expectations and their child's ability to manage in school.

**Methodology focused on parental reasons for delaying entry into school was only one part of the overall research design.*

Appendix C: Approach to systematic search of literature

When conducting the literature review, a systematic approach was used to identify research of relevance. Two questions of interest to the literature review were used to inform the search of the literature:

1. What are the outcomes for children youngest in their school cohort?

2. What are the outcomes for children who delay entry into school?

Reference to being ‘summer-born’ was not used due to an interest in capturing global research and the acknowledgement that academic year cut-off dates vary globally. Terms used can be seen in Table C1.

Table C1

Terms used in literature review search

Target term	Alternatives (OR) included in the search
child	student, pupil
young	
school	educat*, kindergarten
outcome	
start	entry, entrance, enrol, admit, attend, register
delay**	defer, postpone, wait, redshirt*

***Search term ‘delay’ and associated terms used in relation to second search question.*

Searches took place using the following databases: British Education Index, ERIC, JSTOR, PsychArticles and PsychINFO. Searches were also conducted using UCL Explore service. For accessibility reasons, only those written in English were included.

Articles were initially screened for relevance by reading the abstracts. Those deemed most relevant to the search question were read. Once the term ‘relative age effect’ was of noted importance, further searches were undertaken using this term. This allowed for greater specificity in the search. The search then involved taking the studies of most relevance and using a snowballing strategy to access further research from the articles’ references. The resulting literature was then screened and divided into sub-categories depending on the specific focus of the study. Articles were organised on Zotero (reference management software).

Appendix D: Participant information sheet

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Summer born children starting school after their 5th birthday: An exploration of parents' views and experiences of waiting until Compulsory School Age.

(January 2021 – August 2022)

Information sheet for parents of summer-born children

My name is Jennifer Hunter, and I am inviting you to take part in my study about why some parents of summer-born children chose to wait until their child was of Compulsory School Age (CSA) before starting them at school (i.e., the September following their fifth birthday).

I am a student at UCL Institute of Education (IOE), undertaking a three-year professional training doctorate in Educational Psychology with a view to qualifying as a Chartered Educational Psychologist. This research is for my doctoral thesis, supervised by IOE staff with expertise in education and social science research.

Please take time to read the information below which explains the study and who is eligible to take part. If you are eligible, I very much hope that you will agree to participate. You can email me any questions at any time:

Who is carrying out the research?

This work is being conducted by myself, under the supervision of Dr Bonamy Oliver (Associate Professor in Developmental Psychology at IOE) and Dr Karen Majors (Professional Educational Psychology Tutor at IOE).

Why am I being invited to take part?

You are being invited to take part because you are a parent who made the decision to wait until your summer-born child was of Compulsory School Age before starting them at school. You are eligible to participate if:

- You and your child are residents in England.
- You have parental responsibility for your child and are named on their birth certificate.
- Your child was born between 1 April and 31 August.
- You made a formal request to the school's admission authority (local authority, governing body, or academy trust) for your child to be educated out of their chronological cohort. *You may participate regardless of whether this was or was not agreed.*
- Your child started school after their fifth birthday.
- Your child is enrolled at a mainstream state school, not an independent or special school (including centre provisions).
- Your child did not have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), nor were they under statutory assessment for one, at the time you decided to delay their start at school.

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What will happen if I choose to take part?

This study has two phases. Phase One is a short (approximately 10-minute) online survey and can be completed by anyone who meets the above criteria. I will ask you for some basic demographic details, and then ask about your reason for choosing a CSA start for your child, and your experience of the process of requesting this. All responses will be anonymous.

At the end of this survey, you will be asked if you wish to volunteer for Phase Two, an individual follow up interview conducted via your preference of phone or by a virtual platform (video function will not be used). If you wish to volunteer, you will be asked to provide your email address at the end of the survey for the purposes of arranging a date and time for interview. The interview will ask more detailed questions about your decision to wait until CSA and your experience of the process. I estimate that the interview will last **up to 60 minutes**. With your permission, I will **record the interview** for analysis. Be assured that all information you provide will be kept in the strictest confidence.

Will anyone know I have been involved?

You will not be asked to provide any identifiable information as part of the survey. If you choose to provide your email address, this will only be used for the purpose of arranging interviews. Any identifiable information given during interviews (for example, reference to specific individuals) will be anonymised and will not be used in the write-up. Your answers will be kept confidential and will not be shared. Information would only be shared in the exceptional circumstances where a person is felt to be at risk.

Could there be problems for me if I take part?

There are no direct risks to you as a participant, and I generally find that participants enjoy research of this kind. However, if you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions asked, then you can stop at any point. Anyone who provides consent is still free to withdraw at any time up until the point the data is analysed[1], and without giving a reason. You will be asked to create a memorable ID code at the end of the survey and will be asked to reference this if you wish to withdraw from the study.

What happens to the results of the research?

The results of the research will be used in the write up of my doctoral thesis. The thesis will be available at IOE and may be published in an academic or practitioner journal. It is hoped that these research findings will inform Educational Psychologists' understanding of this topic and could help to inform future policy.

Data from the surveys and interviews will be kept securely. All data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

[1] It is estimated that the survey data will be analysed in August 2021, and the interview data will be analysed in October 2021.

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Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you whether you take part. You can decide if you want to be involved in all, some, or none of the components of this research. For example, you might decide to do the survey only. You do not have to volunteer to do the interview.

What should I do next?

If you agree to take part, please provide your consent – I cannot use your information without your consent.

Contact for further information

If you have any further questions before you decide whether to take part, you can email me at

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Jennifer Hunter

Supervised by:

Dr Bonamy Oliver
Associate Professor in Developmental Psychology at IOE & UCL Principal Supervisor

Dr Karen Majors
Professional Educational Psychology Tutor at IOE

This project has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.

Appendix E: Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Welcome

Thank you for considering taking part in this study about your decision for your child to start school after their fifth birthday (i.e., Compulsory School Age, CSA).

Please find attached a participant information sheet which provides details about this study and aims to answer any questions you might have. Please read this before proceeding.

Phase one of this study involves completing this short online survey which will take you around **10 minutes**. Responses to this survey will remain anonymous. This survey will be available for completion online until **Friday 21st May 2021**.

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Eligibility

Eligibility

Please read the following statements and confirm your eligibility to participate:

Notes:
The eligibility wording is in reference to a single child. If your children are twins or from a multiple birth, then you are welcome to participant as long as you meet the inclusion criteria. Questions relating to twins and children from multiple births are included in the survey.
If you have more than one summer-born child that has started school at Compulsory School Age (CSA), please complete this survey in relation to your eldest child.

- ☐ My child and I are residents in England.
- ☐ I have parental responsibility for my child and are named on their birth certificate.
- ☐ My child was born between 1 April and 31 August.
- ☐ I made a formal request to the school's admission authority (local authority, governing body, or academy trust) for my child to be educated 'out of cohort'. *You may participate regardless of whether this was or was not agreed.*
- ☐ My child started school after their fifth birthday.
- ☐ My child is enrolled at a mainstream state school, not an independent or special school (including centre provisions).
- ☐ My child did not have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), nor were they under statutory assessment for one, at the time I decided to delay their start at school.

End of Block: Eligibility

Start of Block: Consent

Consent

If you are happy to participate in this phase of the study, please read each of the below statements and tick to confirm you agree.

- [ ] I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the opportunity to consider the information.
- [ ] I understand that my responses are confidential and will not be shared. I understand that in the exceptional circumstances where a person is felt to be at risk, the researcher's duty of care would result in a break of this confidentiality.
- [ ] I understand that if I make reference to any individuals, places, or schools in my answers then they will be anonymised and not used in the write up of this research.
- [ ] I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I have the option to withdraw my data at any time, up until the point that the data is analysed (estimated August 2021).
- [ ] I understand that if any of my words are used in reports or presentations, they will not be attributed to me.
- [ ] I understand that the results will be used to write a doctoral thesis and this will be available at UCL Institute of Education.
- [ ] I understand that the results may be published in an academic or practitioner journal.

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Single or multiple

Please confirm:

Will you be referring to a single child or children from a twin or multiple birth?

- ○ I will be referring to a single child.
- ○ I will be referring to children from a twin or multiple birth who started school at the same time.

End of Block: Single or multiple

Start of Block: About your child

Section 1/4: Some short **anonymous** questions about your child

What is your child's sex?

- ○ Female
- ○ Male

In which month was your child born?

- ○ April
- ○ May
- ○ June
- ○ July
- ○ August
- ○ Other

Skip To: End of Block If In which month was your child born? = Other

At what week of pregnancy was your child born?

- ○ Before 27 weeks
- ○ 27 weeks through 33 weeks 6 days
- ○ 34 weeks through 36 weeks 6 days
- ○ 37 weeks through 41 weeks 6 days
- ○ 42 weeks or more

Does your child have siblings?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Skip To: Q6 If Does your child have siblings? = No

Is your child the eldest or youngest of their siblings?

- ○ They are the eldest child.
- ○ They are the youngest child.
- ○ They are a middle child and have both older and younger siblings.

Which school year group is your child currently in?

▼ Reception ... Other

Skip To: End of Block If Which school year group is your child currently in? = Other

Was delayed entry to school agreed?

- ○ Yes. My child started Reception after their fifth birthday.
- ○ No. My child missed Reception and started school in Year One.
- ○ Other. Please specify: _____

In which local education authority area does your child live?

- ○ (drop down list)

Does your child go to school in the same local authority area in which they live?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Skip To: Q11 If Does your child go to school in the same local authority area in which they live? = Yes

In which local education authority area does your child go to school?

- ○ (drop down list)

What type of state-funded mainstream school does your child attend?

- ○ A community or voluntary controlled school.
- ○ A foundation or voluntary aided school.
- ○ An academy or free school.
- ○ Unsure

Is your child eligible for free school meals?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ They were in the past. They are not currently eligible.
- ○ Unsure

End of Block: About your child

Start of Block: About your children

Section 1/4: Some short **anonymous** questions about your children

Please confirm:
Will you be referring to twins or children from a multiple birth?

- ○ Twins
- ○ Children from a multiple birth of 3 or more

Display This Question:
If Section 1/4: Some short anonymous questions about your children Please confirm: Will you be referr... = Twins

What sex are your twins?

- ○ Female, Male
- ○ Female, Female
- ○ Male, Male

Display This Question:
If Section 1/4: Some short anonymous questions about your childrenPlease confirm: Will you be referr... = Children from a multiple birth of 3 or more

What sex are your children?
E.g. Female, Female, Male

_____

In which month were your children born?

- ○ April
- ○ May
- ○ June
- ○ July
- ○ August
- ○ Other

Skip To: End of Block If In which month were your children born? = Other

At what week of pregnancy were your children born?

- ○ Before 27 weeks
- ○ 27 weeks through 33 weeks 6 days
- ○ 34 weeks through 36 weeks 6 days
- ○ 37 weeks through 41 weeks 6 days
- ○ 42 weeks or more

Do your children have any other siblings?
In addition to the sibling(s) born from the same multiple pregnancy

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Skip To: Q6 If Do your children have any other siblings? In addition to the sibling(s) born from the same multip... = No

Are your children the eldest or youngest of their siblings?

- ○ They are the eldest children.
- ○ They are the youngest children.
- ○ They are middle children and have both older and younger siblings.

Which school year group are your children currently in?

▼ Reception ... Other

Skip To: End of Block If Which school year group are your children currently in? = Other

Was delayed entry to school agreed?

- ○ Yes. My children started Reception after their fifth birthday.
- ○ No. My children missed Reception and started school in Year One.
- ○ Other. Please specify: _____

In which local education authority area do your children live?

- ○ (Drop down list)

Do your children go to school in the same local authority area in which they live?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Skip To: Q11 If Do your children go to school in the same local authority area in which they live? = Yes

In which local education authority area do your children go to school?

- ○ (Drop down list)

What type of state-funded mainstream school do your children attend?

- ○ A community or voluntary controlled school.
- ○ A foundation or voluntary aided school.
- ○ An academy or free school.
- ○ Unsure

End of Block: About your children

Start of Block: About your decision

Section 2/4: About your decision

For the purpose of anonymity and safeguarding: Where possible, please do not provide identifiable details about your child. Please be assured that if reference is made to any specific children, individuals, or schools, the details will be anonymised and not included in the write-up of the research.

Please use the space below to explain your **primary reason** for choosing to wait to start your child(ren) at school after their fifth birthday.

_____
_____
_____

Is there anything else you would like to say regarding your decision?

_____
_____

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being very poor, and 10 being very positive), how would you rate your **overall experience of the process** involved in starting your child(ren) at school after their fifth birthday?

	Very poor								Very positive	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Overall experience										

Please use the space below to explain your **overall experience of the process** involved in starting your child(ren) at school after their fifth birthday.

_____
_____
_____

End of Block: About your decision

Start of Block: About you

Section 3/4: Some short **anonymous** questions about you

Which term best describes your parental role?

- ○ Mother
- ○ Father
- ○ Other. Please specify: _____

How old are you?

▼ under 20 years old ... Prefer not to say

What is your ethnic group?

- ○ White
- ○ Mixed/ multiple ethnic groups
- ○ Asian/ Asian British
- ○ Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British
- ○ Other ethnic group
- ○ Prefer not to say

Skip To: Q5 If What is your ethnic group? = Prefer not to say

Display This Question:
If What is your ethnic group? = White

Which of the following best describes your White background?

- ○ English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British
- ○ Irish
- ○ Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- ○ Any other White background. Please specify:
  _____

Display This Question:
If What is your ethnic group? = Mixed/ multiple ethnic groups

Which of the following best describes your Mixed or multiple ethnic groups background?

- ○ White and Black Caribbean
- ○ White and Black African
- ○ White and Asian
- ○ Any other Mixed/ multiple ethnic background. Please specify:
  _____

Display This Question:
If What is your ethnic group? = Asian/ Asian British

Which of the following best describes your Asian/ Asian British background?

- ○ Indian
- ○ Pakistani
- ○ Bangladeshi
- ○ Chinese
- ○ Any other Asian background. Please specify:
  _____

Display This Question:
If What is your ethnic group? = Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British

Which of the following best describes your Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British background?

- ○ African
- ○ Caribbean
- ○ Any other Black/ African/ Caribbean background. Please specify:

Display This Question:
If What is your ethnic group? = Other ethnic group

Which of the following best describes your Other ethnic group background?

- ○ Arab
- ○ Any other ethnic group. Please specify:

What is your highest level of qualification?
If the exact qualification is not listed, please select the closest equivalent.

- ○ No formally recognised qualifications.
- ○ 1-4 O levels/ CSEs/ GCSEs (any grades), Entry Level, Foundation Diploma.
- ○ NVQ Level 1, Foundation GNVQ, Basic Skills.
- ○ 5+ O levels (passes)/ CSEs (grade 1)/ GCSEs (grades A*-C), School Certificate.
- ○ 2-3 AS levels/ VCEs, Higher Diploma.
- ○ NVQ Level 2, Intermediate GNVQ, City and Guilds Craft, BTEC First/ General Diploma, RSA Diploma.
- ○ Apprenticeship.
- ○ 2+ A levels/ VCEs, Higher School Certificate, Progression/ Advanced Diploma.
- ○ NVQ Level 3, Advanced GNVQ, City and Guilds Advanced Craft, ONC, OND, BTEC National, RSA Advanced Diploma.
- ○ NVQ Level 4-5, HNC, HND, RSA Higher Diploma, BTEC Higher Level.
- ○ Foundation Degree.
- ○ Degree (for example, BA, BSc).
- ○ Higher Degree (for example, MA, MSc, PGCE).
- ○ PHD or Doctoral degree.

What is your total annual household income? (before tax deduction)

- Less than £10,000 per year
- £10,000 - £19,999 per year
- £20,000 - £29,999 per year
- £30,000 - £39,999 per year
- £40,000 - £49,999 per year
- £50,000 - £59,999 per year
- £60,000 - £69,999 per year
- £70,000 - £79,999 per year
- £80,000 - £89,999 per year
- £90,000 - £99,999 per year
- Over £100,000 per year

End of Block: About you

Start of Block: Identification code

*

Section 4/4: Steps to complete this survey

In order to complete the survey, please create an **identification code** using the 1st and 2nd letter of your mother's maiden name, with the day of the month on which you were born (as a 2-digit number).

For example: maiden name SMITH for a person born on 6th day of the month would have the code SM06.

You will be asked to reference this code if you wish to withdraw from this study. If you wish to withdraw from the study then you are free to do so without providing reason up until the time that the data is analysed (estimated to be August 2021).

_____

End of Block: Identification code

Start of Block: Phase 2

Would you like to volunteer to take part in Phase Two of this study?

Phase Two will involve an individual follow up interview conducted via your preference of phone or by a virtual platform (video function will not be used). The interview will ask more detailed questions about your decision to wait for your child to start school after their 5th birthday (i.e., Compulsory School Age, CSA), and your experience of the process.

I estimate that the interview will last **up to 60 minutes.** With your permission, I will **record the interview** for analysis. Be assured that all information you provide will be kept in the strictest confidence.

- ○ I **would** like to volunteer for a follow up interview.
- ○ I **would not** like to volunteer for a follow up interview.

Skip To: End of Survey If Would you like to volunteer to take part in Phase Two of this study?Phase Two will involve an ind... = I would not like to volunteer for a follow up interview.

Thank you for volunteering.

Please **provide your email address** in the space below.

Email addresses will only be used for the purpose of contacting participants to arrange a convenient date and time for interview. I will be in touch in due course if you are selected for interview.

_____

End of Block: Phase 2

Appendix F: Semi-structured interview schedule

Introduction and notes to the participant:

- Thank you for volunteering to take part. This interview may last up to an hour and I really appreciate you giving up this time.
- This interview is very much about your personal experiences and your story.

During the interview, you may feel that you need to refer to your child, other people or current and/or previous schools by name. If you would prefer, please feel free to use a pseudonym. Please be assured that any names used will be anonymised and not used in my write up.

- I intend to record this interview so that it can be transcribed. I will be storing this information securely. Can you please state whether you are happy for the interview to be recorded?
- If you feel uncomfortable at any point in the interview, you can state that you would like to move on to the next question. You have the option to withdraw from the interview at any time.

1. Can we start by you telling me a little bit about your child?

- How old are they?
- In which month were they born?
- Were they born on time?
- Did they have any medical needs when they were born?
- What year group are they in?
- Are they being educated out of cohort? How has that been?
- How are they doing with school?

Thank you for sharing.

I am now going to be asking you about your journey from make the decision to wait to start your child at school after their 5th birthday, and then through to your experience of them getting a school place, and later your reflections on the experience.

2. I would like to start by asking you to think back to the time you made the decision to for them to wait until after their 5th birthday, that is Compulsory School Age, to start school. I am keen to hear about any factors that might have influenced your decision. I wonder if you could talk me through the reasons for your decision?

- Did you have any concerns which influenced your decision? What were they?

- Did you feel there might be any advantages from your decision? What were they?
- Did any other people have an influence on your decision?
- What were others' views of your decision? Did you feel supported?
- Had you considered other options such as deferring the school start until the spring or summer term?
- Is there anything else?

3. I would now like to ask you more about the process that you went through to have your child start school at Compulsory School Age. Could you please talk me through where you started and what steps were involved in the process?

- How did you know about this being an option?
- From where did you get information?
- Did you receive any support?
- Did you encounter any barriers? If so, what were they?
- Do you foresee any issues in the future?

4. What are your overall feelings about the process that you went through to have your child start school at Compulsory School Age?

- Is there anything you would change about the process?

5. Looking back, how do you now feel about the decision you made to wait until your child was Compulsory School Age before they started school?

- Do you feel you made the right decision for your child?
- If you could go back in time, would you make the same decision again?
- Do you feel your opinion on this has changed in any way?

6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that you feel like I should know?

FINISH

That is the end of my questions. Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this research. If you have any further questions, please see the information sheet provided in which my contact details can be found.

Appendix G: Recruitment advert

The survey was advertised on the closed Facebook group ‘Summer born children at school’ with permission gained from the group administrators in advance. The advert was also shared on Twitter using the following description:

NEW doctoral research on #summerbornchildren starting school at #compulsoryschoolage. Opportunity for parents to share views and experiences. #summerborn #CSAreceptionstart #delayingschoolentry #summerborncampaign @sb_campaign. Kindly RT. Survey here: https://uclioe.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_dd6FtLFfVAuCwDA

Appendix H: Consent form

Institute of Education

UCL

Summer born children starting school after their 5th birthday: An exploration of parents' views and experiences of waiting until Compulsory School Age.

Participant Consent Form

This consent form is in relation to Phase Two of the above named study, individual interviews. If you are happy to participate in this phase of the study, please complete this consent form by ticking each item and return to the researcher on the contact details below.

		Yes	No
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these questions adequately answered.	☐	☐
2.	I understand that my responses are confidential and will not be shared. I understand that in the exceptional circumstances where a person is felt to be at risk, the researcher's duty of care would result in a break of this confidentiality.	☐	☐
3.	I understand that if I make reference to any individuals, places, or schools in my answers then they will be annonymised and not used in the write up of this research.	☐	☐
4.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I have the option to withdraw my data at any time, up until the point that the data is analysed (estimated October 2021).	☐	☐
5.	I know that I can refuse to answer any or all of the questions and that I can withdraw from the interview at any point.	☐	☐
6.	I agree for the interview to be recorded. I understand that recordings will be kept securely and destroyed at the end of the project. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	☐	☐
7.	I understand that if any of my words are used in reports or presentations, they will not be attributed to me.	☐	☐
8.	I understand that the results will be used to write a doctoral thesis and this will be available at UCL Institute of Education.	☐	☐
9.	I understand that the results may be published in an academic or practitioner journal.	☐	☐

Name: **Signature:**

Date:

Please return your signed form to:
Jennifer Hunter, Trainee Educational Psychologist, UCL Institute of Education

Appendix I: Thanks and debrief letter

Institute of Education

UCL

Summer born children starting school after their 5th birthday: An exploration of parents' views and experiences of waiting until Compulsory School Age.

(January 2021 – August 2022)

Dear participant,

I am writing to thank you for taking part in my study about why some parents of summer-born children chose to wait until their child was of Compulsory School Age (CSA) before starting them at school (i.e., the September following their fifth birthday). I am extremely grateful for the time you spared and the experiences you were able to share. The answers you have given me have helped to provide me with insight into the experience of parents, and I appreciate hearing your honest view.

Please remember that your responses are confidential and anonymous. However, you are free to withdraw your data from the study at any time, up until the time the data is analysed. It is anticipated this will be in October 2021. If you decide to withdraw or ask any questions about this project, please contact me at:

What happens to the results of the research?

The results of the interviews are now being analysed as part of my doctoral thesis. When completed, the thesis will be available at UCL Institute of Education and findings may be published in an academic or practitioner journal.

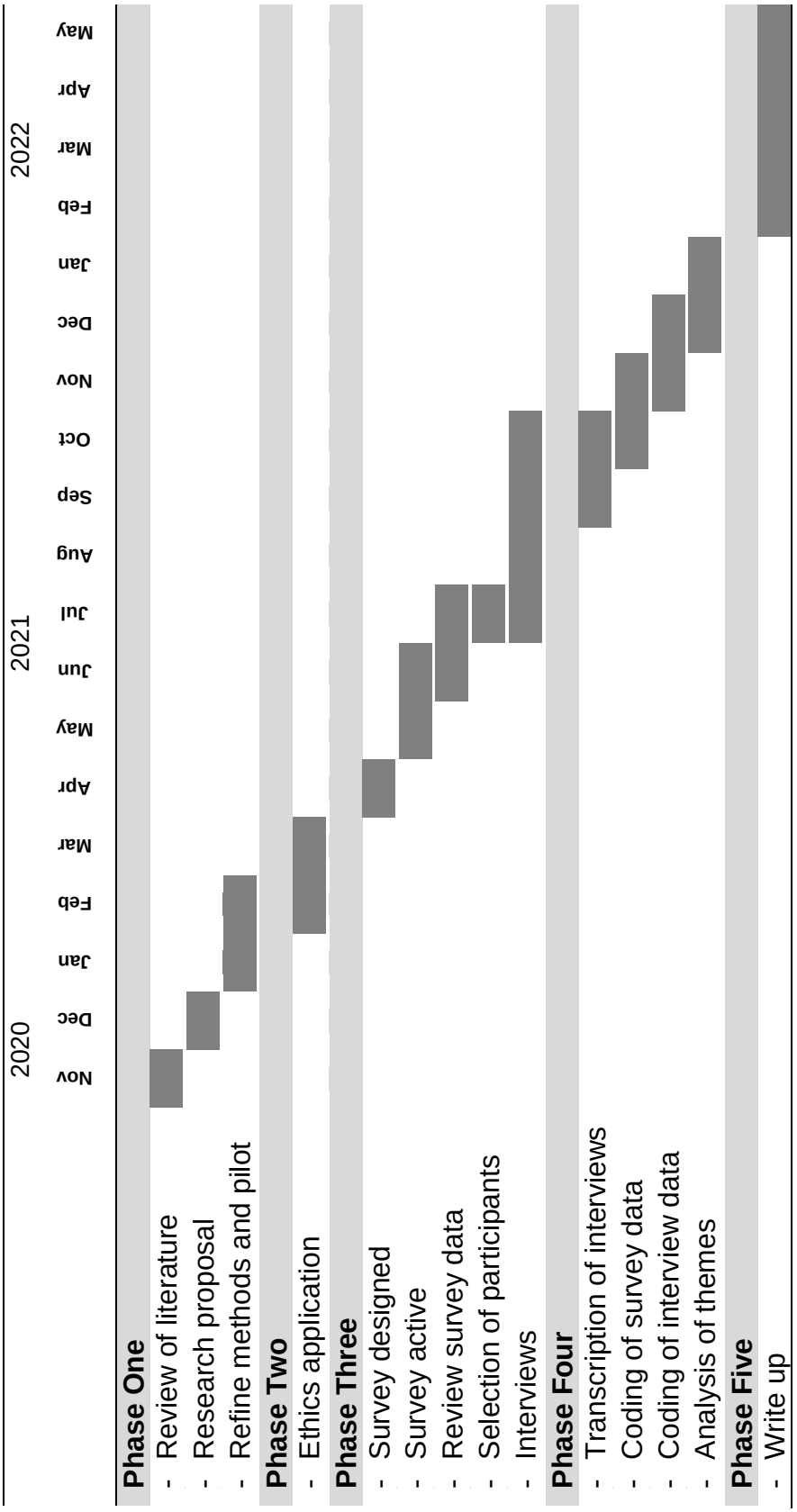
If you would like to receive a summary of the research findings, please do let me know by contacting me on the above email address.

Many thanks again for the time you gave. It is very much appreciated.

Kind Regards,

Jennifer Hunter

Appendix J: Gantt chart detailing research timeline and key actions



Appendix K: Demographics of survey participants

Characteristic	Frequency *(n)*	% of responses
Self-identified role		
Mother	151	98.7%
Father	2	1.3%
Age range		
25-29 years	2	1.3%
30-34 years	19	12.4%
35-39 years	55	35.9%
40-44 years	61	39.9%
45-49 years	16	10.5%
Ethnicity		
White	144	94.1%
English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	117	76.5%
Any other White background (including Irish and Gypsy or Irish Traveller)	27	17.6%
Asian/ Asian British	7	4.6%
Mixed/ multiple ethnic groups	1	0.7%
Prefer not to say	1	0.7%
Education (highest level of qualification)		
Level 1 qualifications	2	1.3%
Level 2 qualifications (e.g., GCSEs, Level 2 NVQ, Level 2 Diploma, apprenticeship)	10	6.6%
Level 3 qualifications (e.g., AS levels, A levels, Level 3 NVQ, BTEC National)	17	11.2%
Level 4 qualifications (e.g., Level 4 NVQ, HNC, HND, Higher Diploma)	3	2%
Level 5 qualifications (e.g., foundation degree)	2	1.3%
Level 6 qualifications (e.g., BA, BSc (Hons) Degree)	59	38.8%
Level 7 qualifications (e.g., Masters, PGCE)	47	30.9%
Level 8 qualifications (e.g., PHD or Doctoral degree)	12	7.9%
Prefer not to say	1	0.7%
Annual household income per year (pre tax)		
<£19,999	7	4.6%
£20,000 - £29,999	12	7.8%
£30,000 - £39,999	20	13.1%
£40,000 - £49,999	15	9.8%
£50,000 - £59,999	23	15%
£60,000 - £69,999	13	8.5%
£70,000 - £79,999	17	11.1%
£80,000 - £89,999	13	8.5%
£90,000 - £99,999	8	5.2%
£100,000,000+	23	15%
Prefer not to say	2	1.3%

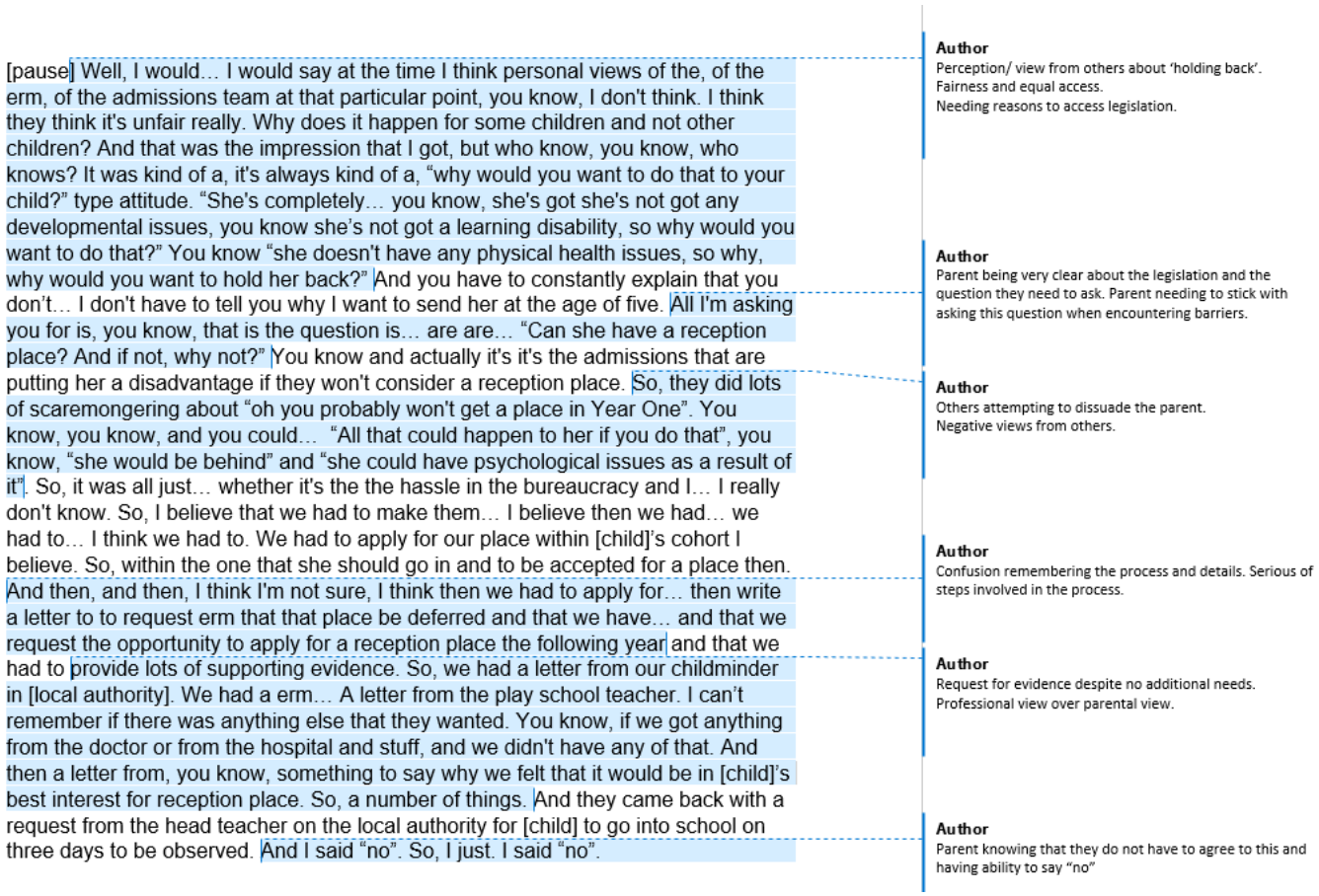
Appendix L: Demographics of children from singleton pregnancies

Characteristic	Frequency *(n)*	% of responses
Total singleton children	141	
Sex		
Female	51	36.2%
Male	90	63.8%
Month of birth		
April	5	3.5%
May	4	2.8%
June	21	14.9%
July	28	19.9%
August	83	58.9%
Week of gestation born at		
Before 27 weeks	1	0.7%
27 weeks through 33 weeks 6 days	4	2.8%
34 weeks through 36 weeks 6 days	12	8.5%
37 weeks through 41 weeks 6 days	105	74.5%
42 weeks or more	19	13.5%
Birth order and siblings		
Only child	25	17.7%
Eldest child with younger siblings	62	44%
Middle child	16	11.3%
Youngest child	38	27%
Year group *(as of June 2021)*		
Reception	64	45.4%
Year 1	37	26.2%
Year 2	21	14.9%
Year 3	13	9.2%
Year 4	3	2.1%
Year 5 +	3	2.1%

Appendix M: Demographics of children from multiple pregnancies

Characteristic	Frequency *(n)*	% of responses
Total responses	12	
Total children referred to	24	
Sex of twins		
Female, Female	4	16.7%
Female, Male	12	50%
Male, Male	8	33.3%
Month of birth		
April	2	8.3%
May	0	
June	2	8.3%
July	10	41.7%
August	10	41.7%
Week of gestation born at		
Before 27 weeks	0	
27 weeks through 33 weeks 6 days	2	8.3%
34 weeks through 36 weeks 6 days	10	41.7%
37 weeks through 41 weeks 6 days	12	50%
42 weeks or more	0	
Birth order and siblings		
Only children	12	50%
Eldest children with younger siblings	2	8.3%
Middle children	0	
Youngest children	10	41.7%
Year group *(as of June 2021)*		
Reception	8	33.3%
Year 1	10	41.7%
Year 2	2	8.3%
Year 3	4	16.7%

Appendix N: Example of 'initial noticings' during familiarisation with transcripts



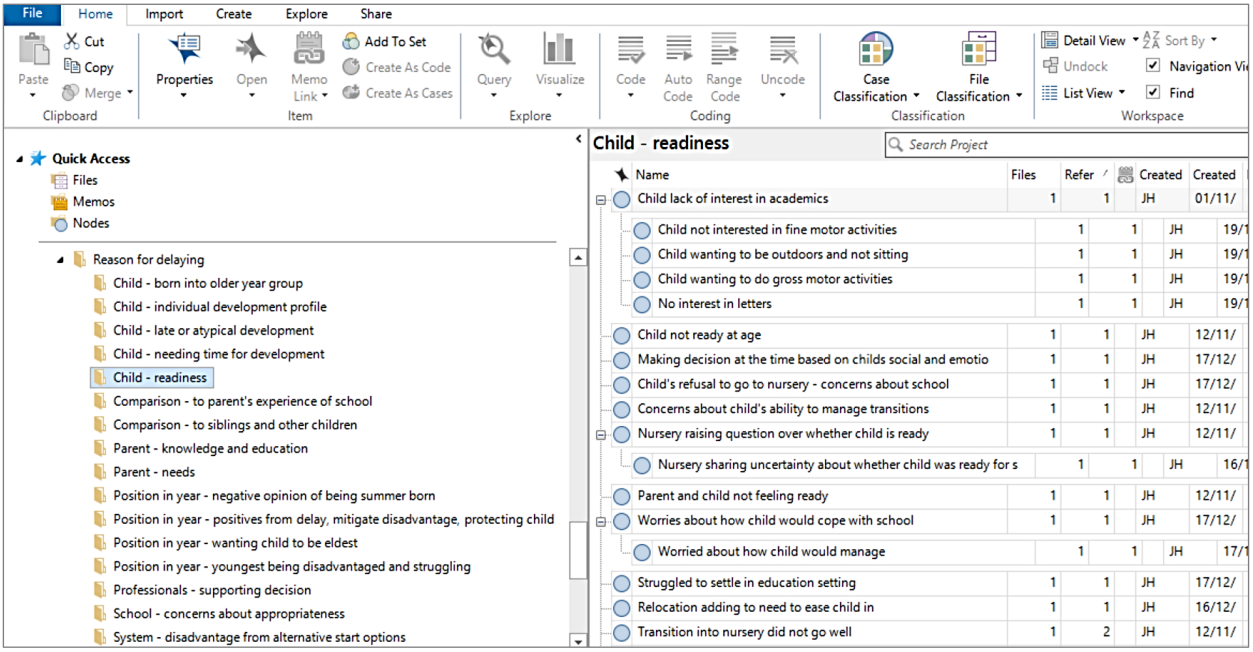
Appendix O: Excerpt of coded interview transcript

Interview	Assigned codes
JH: I'm wondering if you can talk me through where you started and then how you got the information, how you knew what to do and then the steps that were involved in your process?	
i7: Yeah. Yeah, so first thing I did once I found out that had options was rang the Council and explained the situation. Said that I wanted my son to start in reception class at compulsory school age. I quoted the admissions code. And with the Council said, "we don't follow that, we follow local guidance" [laughs]. I quoted again, I quoted the admission code and was told by the admissions officer that I spoke to that he didn't know anything about the admissions code [laughs], so we didn't get off to a very good start. Erm so I put it in writing. I sent an email, nobody replied. Erm I contacted the school and then they asked us to come in for a meeting. Again, they said they followed their own, their own, policies and not the admissions called. Again, tried to kind of talk us round to how… they said that they had a cohort of quite a lot of summer borns and that traditionally summer born children in their school actually did quite well. Erm and they said "we're really lucky this year. We've got a lovely class. You might not be so lucky next year". So lots of like negative comments and ways to try and persuade us round. But I was kind of adamant at this point in all that this was the right decision for him.	Parental research into options Parent contacting council Parent citing key terminology Council stating they do not follow admissions code Parent reiterating knowledge Council lack of awareness Parent making request in writing No reply Parent initiate contact with school Parent meeting with school Variation in policies School dissuading Perception of negative commends to dissuade Parental adamance

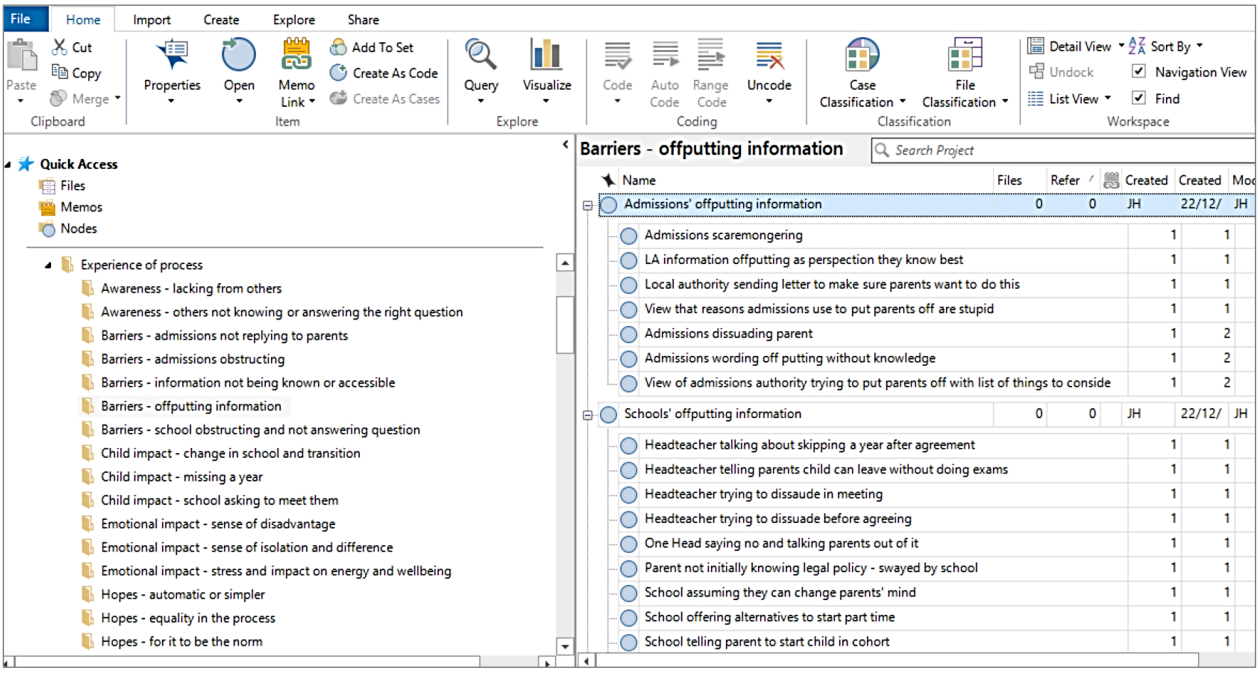
Appendix P: Example of how codes were actively searched and sorted

Process involved:
1. Data coded in NVivo
2. Similar or overlapping codes grouped into clusters
3. Clusters organised into initial folders relevant to each research question

Example for RQ1:



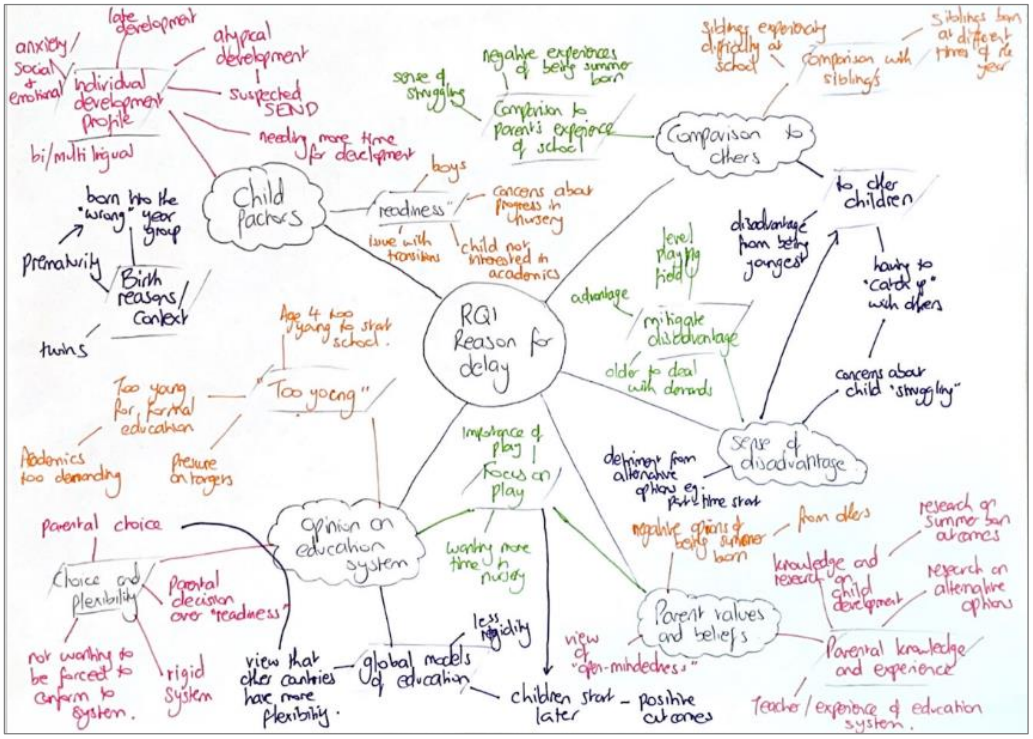
Example for RQ2:



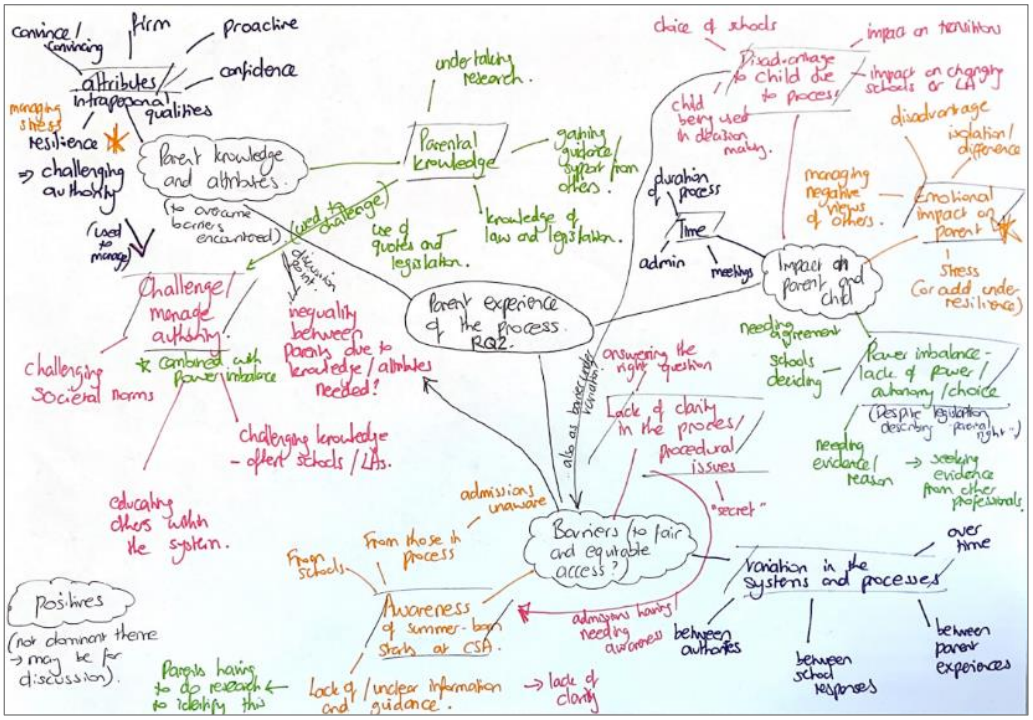
Appendix Q: Themes and sub-themes organised in mind maps

Mind maps used to help begin organising themes and sub-themes based on the folders of cluster codes that had been developed in NVivo.

RQ1:



RQ2:



Appendix R: RQ1 frequency of participants that made reference to each theme, sub-theme and cluster theme

	Survey participants		Interview participants	
Research Question One Themes	**No. of participants**	**% of participants**	**No. of participants**	**% of participants**
1. Individual child factors	**90**	**58.82%**	**10**	**100%**
The child's birth	**11**	**7.19%**	**4**	**40%**
Prematurity	5	3.27%	2	20%
Born into the cohort above	14	9.15%	3	30%
The child's individual development profile	**81**	**52.94%**	**10**	**100%**
Development and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)	24	15.69%	6	60%
Social and Emotional development	60	39.22%	7	70%
Physical development	21	13.72%	2	20%
2. The Child within the family and school system	**78**	**50.98%**	**10**	**100%**
Comparison to the experience of others	**42**	**27.45%**	**10**	**100%**
The parent(s)' experience of school	3	1.96%	5	50%
The sibling(s)' experience of school	12	7.84%	3	30%
The child being disadvantaged relative to their peers	28	18.30%	5	50%
The child's readiness to manage the school environment	**45**	**29.41%**	**10**	**100%**
Parental concerns about child's readiness	22	14.38%	6	60%
Child having struggled to settle and manage transitions	4	2.61%	3	30%
Child not showing interest in academics	6	3.92%	2	20%
Child needing more time for development (to manage)	7	4.58%	5	50%
Delaying to give the child "the best chance"	18	11.76%	6	60%
3. Parental values, beliefs, and views of the English education system	**95**	**62.09%**	**10**	**100%**
Negative parental view of school starting age and curriculum demands	**82**	**53.59%**	**10**	**100%**
School starting age is too young	53	34.64%	7	70%
Academic demands and pressure on young children	31	20.26%	7	70%
Desire for more play	27	17.65%	5	50%
Parental knowledge and awareness of education issues	**27**	**17.65%**	**10**	**100%**
Parent(s)' education and knowledge informing their decision	18	11.76%	7	70%
Knowledge of other (global) education contexts	8	5.23%	9	90%
Awareness of statutory guidance and the option to delay	4	2.61%	7	70%

Appendix S: RQ2 frequency of participants that made reference to each theme, sub-theme and cluster theme

	Survey participants		Interview participants	
Research Question Two Themes	**No. of participants**	**% of participants**	**No. of participants**	**% of participants**
1. Systematic barriers impacting on fair and equitable access	**136**	**88.89%**	**10**	**100%**
Variation in systems and processes	**110**	**71.90%**	**10**	**100%**
Variation between local authorities' responses and processes	66	43.14%	10	100%
Variation in schools' responses and attitudes	76	49.63%	10	100%
Administrative issues and barriers in the process	**45**	**29.41%**	**9**	**90%**
Lack of clarity in the process	27	17.65%	6	60%
Administrative issues with the application	8	5.23%	9	90%
Off-putting information that deters parents	6	3.92%	8	80%
The need for parents to provide evidence and reasons	9	5.88%	10	100%
Lack of awareness from others	**31**	**20.26%**	**10**	**100%**
Schools and/or admission authorities unaware of relevant statutory guidance	29	18.95%	7	70%
Lack of knowledge from other parents	2	1.31%	9	90%
2. The need for parental ability and capacity to engage with the process	**62**	**40.52%**	10	100%
Parents applying knowledge of their rights	**37**	**24.18%**	10	100%
Parental research to understand statutory guidance	6	3.92%	9	90%
Parent seeking support and advice from others	12	7.84%	7	70%
Being firm and decisive; a "willingness to fight" and challenge	24	15.69%	10	100%
Parental time and financial circumstances	**16**	**10.46%**	**10**	**100%**
Administrative time for parents	10	6.54%	7	70%
Duration of the process	5	3.27%	7	70%
Financial position and privilege	3	1.96%	6	60%
Going "against the norm"; the impact on parental wellbeing	**31**	**20.26%**	**10**	**100%**
Isolation, difference and going "against the norm"	8	5.23%	9	90%
Sense of disadvantage	4	2.61%	4	40%
Managing the negative views of others	9	5.88%	9	90%
Experience of stress	18	11.76%	8	80%