

Commentary

The Practice of Age-Grouping in English Schools: The Scope and Power of the Implicit Education Policy

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Abstract: *This paper considers the phenomenon of age-grouping in English Schools from the standpoint of the possible disadvantage experienced by younger children in a cohort. It is argued that conventional age-grouping is the combined result of an accident of history, political ideology and professional inertia, and that no formal policy exists in England which serves to prescribe how schools should be organised. Instead, the effects of other policies and legislation, influencing, for example, the curriculum and assessment, combine to make alternative forms of organisation difficult, if not impossible, giving rise to, what I have called, an 'implicit policy'.*

Implicit policies, I argue, can be as influential and constraining as explicit ones, and can sway professional attitudes and behaviour in subtle ways. In the case of the implicit policy on age grouping – what I have termed the age-group paradigm – my research has shown that teachers can be led through a form of professional misrecognition to misconstrue existing arrangements as arising from professional judgments rather than from political, social or economic pressures. Unquestioning acceptance of the paradigm can lead to potentially harmful labelling of children and the formation of assumptions about the abilities of younger pupils in a year group which may prevent their true potential being recognised.

Introduction

In this paper, I consider the practice which, in England, determines the way pupils are organised within schools. Although widely adhered to, it is an approach which is neither codified nor expressly stated, despite having a significant impact on individual pupils or groups, especially those who may be adversely affected because of their birthdate. In my professional experience I have seen many children disadvantaged because of their position on the age spectrum who may have benefited from flexible class organisation. This first-hand knowledge has stimulated my own keen interest in school organisation.

I examine two distinct aspects of the policy. Firstly, I explore the background, specifically to identify direct influences on its origin and apparent success as a determinant of practice. Secondly, I examine the research literature, assessing support for the view that 'conventional' age-grouping is detrimental to some pupils because of unrealistic expectations and challenges to which they might be subjected.

Background

Broadly speaking, policies divide into the explicit, resulting from the unequivocal, stated and codified aims of those in authority (Government, Local Authorities, Governors) and, those not overtly stated, which may be termed 'implicit' (Ahearne, 2009). The former arise from legislation. The latter, although often universally followed, may, initially, have no identifiable source and may appear to have arisen spontaneously. While not supported by law, implicit policies often have cultural value and are reinforced by informal sanctions, influencing practice as much as those which are. Paradoxically, because they form part of an underlying educational 'infra-structure'; accepted culture, custom and practice, they may be less open to challenge, and consequently more stubbornly unalterable. The organisation of schools into

year groups, with discrete cohorts based on birthdate, is an example of implicit policy. Age-grouping practices fall into a category described by Ball (2006, p 49) as a '*regime of truth*', exhibiting a species of self-perpetuating identity leading to an unchallenged permanency in the way things are done. There is, I argue, a 'taken for granted' element to such policies, an irrational, but tacit, notion that 'everyone knows it should be done in this way', that makes change difficult.

Research evidence suggesting that conventional age-grouping, as I shall refer to it, can have a negative effect on particular children (Armstrong, 1966; Goodman, Gledhill and Ford, 2003), has not served to change practice over time. This says much about the strength of compliance with, and support for, the underlying implicit policy, and the extent to which it is meshed subliminally into the everyday life of teachers and schools. In Foucault's words:

The individual is thus fabricated into the social order. People are woven into and woven out of discourse (Foucault, 1979, p 217).

Ball (2006, p 44) distinguishes between policy as text and policy as discourse, and suggests that policies are not just '*things*', but also '*processes*' and '*outcomes*'. Age-group policy is essentially a discourse falling into the latter two categories, since, as will become clear, it has no textual substance, but relies for its existence on what might be called the '*Age-Group Paradigm*' (Greenfield, 2009). This is relayed tacitly between teachers through discursively-induced work, endemic in schools, training establishments, and Government and Local Authorities, and serves to ensure alternative paradigms are viewed as suspect, damaging or difficult to manage. It also leads to what has been described by Richmond (2005) as '*professional misrecognition*' in teachers, a phenomenon whereby teachers are imbued with '*educational values*' enshrined in wider political ideologies and may come to '*misrecognise*' these values as emanating purely from their own occupational identities. Such is the degree of ideological immersion that they can come to see pedagogical ideas as representing their own independent thinking. Tilly (1991) identifies a similar phenomenon in the broader context of society, when he suggests subordinate groups comply with the pressures and policies of dominant groups, rather than resisting or rebelling, as a result of mystification, repression or the sheer unavailability of alternative ideological frames, leaving them unaware of their true interests. Recent research supports this view (Greenfield, 2009).

To be clear, I must define what I mean by 'conventional age-grouping'. In England, the majority of schools are organised to comprise discrete, but precise, age-groups. Membership of these groups is determined solely by date of birth, such that children born between September in a given year, and August in the following year are deemed to belong to a homogeneous cohort. As such, they are subject to the same curriculum and identical expectations in respect of social, intellectual and emotional development. Within this system they are, to all intents and purposes, children of the same age and teachers frequently come to view them as such (Greenfield, 2009). I refer to alternatives to conventional grouping, in which children are amalgamated in some other way, as multi-age systems.

Why is There No Stated Policy?

Literature reveals no regulations determining how schools in England must be arranged and classes structured, to suggest that this aspect of school organisation has ever formed part of Government or Local Authority policy. Laws exist which determine the starting and finishing ages for compulsory education, but the Law goes no further in this respect. Paradoxically, at a period when the curriculum and how it is planned, taught and tested, is highly prescribed by Government, there is no similar prescription about the grouping of pupils.

There are three reasons why this might be so. Firstly, it may have been concluded historically that the merits of the 'conventional' system are self-evident and no alternatives need be considered. Secondly, there may be subtle pressures within the system which conspire to keep schools following the implicit line for economic or pragmatic reasons. For instance, funding for schools may be based on assumptions about the way children are grouped leading to subtle penalties on schools making other arrangements. Similarly, transfer arrangements between phases of education make no concession to the differences in relative age between pupils, such transfers taking place at the end of Key Stages rather than at precise ages. Finally, there may be pressures from outside the system, for example, from parents and the media, which serve to sustain the *status quo* through a form of market force, and so to prevent moves towards innovation. Parents may boycott schools where 'unconventional' grouping is practised, and seek those offering arrangements with which they are familiar and which they perceive to be 'traditional'. These reasons may be summarised as historic, economic and political.

Considering these, it is apparent that conventional grouping has few purely educational merits (France and Wiseman, 1966; Bell and Daniels, 1990) while, at the same time, demonstrating a number of administrative advantages. The conventional system was driven originally by a need for managing large numbers of children rather than for meeting individual needs, and was an easy, assembly-line way of educating children (Cotton, 1997). Few, it seems, argue with the contention that teaching 'multi-age' classes is challenging, requiring more preparation and training (Walser, 1998) and, according to Veenman (1995) the kind of multi-age structures forced on schools and teachers for budgetary reasons are particularly prone to common problems and concerns. However, the *Procrustean* approach of shaping children to fit the system, and of corralling them into homogenous year groups, irrespective of their intellectual, social or emotional maturity, serves to disadvantage many children whose birthdays fall in the latter part of the school year (Meghir, Crawford and Dearden, 2007). Commenting on the ubiquitous and narrowly pedagogical nature of this approach, Katz remarks:

Although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them (Katz, Evangelou and Hartman, 1990, p 10).

At the extreme, statutory testing, which, in England, takes place at the end of Key Stages, (ie, after three years and seven years at school) without adjustment of raw scores to allow for relative age, not only represents a crude way of measuring progress but, it may be argued, does a disservice to the younger class members. Advocates of multi-age approaches are threatened by age-specific curriculum requirements and tests. In this respect, Hallam makes the point that:

Where, in the past, the benefits of vertical grouping may have been celebrated, the introduction of targets for each key stage has led schools to focus on pupil attainment in national tests. Grouping structures are perceived as enabling pupils to be prepared for the tests as thoroughly as possible (Hallam *et al*, 1999, p 7).

This view implies that the curriculum, including class organisation, is determined more by tests than *vice versa*, and illustrates the pervasive influence which the test culture has had on schools in England. Nevertheless, each grouping arrangement has its risks. While a risk with homogenous age-grouping is that some children will become acutely aware of failing to live up to normative expectations for behaviour and achievement, even mixed groups present the possibility of younger children becoming alienated or being overwhelmed by more competent, older classmates (Katz *et al*, 1990).

In England, there are many pressures on schools to resist change and follow the age-grouping convention. Many of these follow from stated, explicit government policy, such as

the National Curriculum, school targets, statutory tests and the National Strategies, since each has been presented as a universal template for teachers' use in the classroom. These ideas are, at least partly, predicated on an assumption that schools are organised into discrete year groups, a state of affairs summarised by Ball when he says:

[T]he cumulative and general effects of several years of multiple thrusts of educational reform on teachers' work have been profound (Ball, 2006, p 50).

implying that teachers, as professionals, have only limited means of controlling their practices.

Other pressures may arise from sources external to schools, such as parents and the media, who, may have no direct experience of education in any form other than the 'traditional', and may be suspicious of the unfamiliar. It is also fair to say that any benefits arising from changes in educational practice are slow to work through the system. This is suggestive of rigid conservatism, originating outside the educational community, towards the way schools and curricula are organised (Ball, 1990), and implies that the structure of education is largely created in an historical way by repeating unquestioningly what has been done before, basing today's action on what has been done in the past (Bassey, 1992). This way of creating education discounts the alternative of asking questions and searching for evidence, by identifying alternative strategies and maintaining and evaluating outcomes. Ball recognises a widespread suspicion of, and contempt for, education research and experts among politicians and the general public when he says:

The role of expert knowledge and research is regarded as less dependable than political intuition and common sense accounts of what people want (Ball, 1990, p 32).

He also refers to:

The messy realities of influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, conflict, compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism in the policy process (*ibid*).

Conclusions drawn from research, he argues, can be irrelevant to politicians and others who have different fundamental beliefs about how things should be done. Fitz-Gibbon emphasises still further the weak roles that empirical research and professional judgement play in determining educational policy when she says:

Education remains largely a product of plausible belief and convenient practice, admixed, particularly in recent years, with the need to adhere to policies that are mandated politically (Fitz-Gibbon, 2000, p 83).

Such literature reasonably provides a number of explanations why alternatives to conventional pupil grouping have generally been neither encouraged nor successful over time. From a strictly organisational point of view, conventional structures are relatively efficient and inexpensive and, because they appear to work well for some pupils (usually the oldest in the cohort), many believe they are effective in general (Barker Lunn, 1970; Glass, 1977). Parents and the wider community frequently lack understanding of the concept of multi-age education and its advantages, giving rise to suspicion and mistrust, fuelled by those with a particular agenda. Publishers have structured their products for use in conventional settings, a trend strengthened by government initiatives like the National Curriculum and Strategies, which have spawned teaching materials based on conventional structures.

Teachers have normally not received specific training in methods for working with multi-age classes and may resist change, fearing classroom challenge, or greater preparation time (Hallam *et al*, 1999). Berry and Little (2006, p 71) cite the three most commonly perceived challenges of mixed-age teaching as curriculum organisation, assessment and ability range. The first two of these arise almost solely from the Government-imposed curriculum and assessment requirements. In certain types of multi-age arrangements, ability range should not pose a significant problem if children are carefully grouped and whole-class teaching is kept to a minimum. In this respect, an important distinction must be drawn between class arrangements where children of varying ages are grouped together according to some arbitrary criterion, and those where attempts are made to match the levels of development of members of the same class group, or what Berry and Little (2006, p 79) call *ability homogeneity*. Grouping by ability alone, however, raises a whole range of additional problems, and may not be an ideal solution, it being arguably more important for teachers in any class grouping arrangements to be aware of age differences and the potential for disadvantage that they bring (Barker Lunn, 1970). Current research evidence suggests this is not the case (Greenfield, 2009).

Another way of looking at the divide between 'conventional' and 'alternative' school organisation is to see them as indicators of the 'traditional' and 'subject centred', or the 'progressive' and 'child-centred' (Richmond, 1973). In the field of education these terms have, over time, become synonymous with opposing and mutually exclusive paradigms (Moore, 2004). In England during the 1960s and 70s, and strongly influenced by the 'Plowden Effect' (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967), primary schools moved to introduce different forms of groupings. Vertical Grouping, where classes in schools were arranged in strict age-order irrespective of 'conventional' year-group, and Family Grouping (Ridgway and Lawton, 1968), where different age groups were deliberately mixed to form classes comprising a balance, became widespread organisational models, being seen, by their advocates, as alternative, educationally beneficial approaches which removed the stigma or disadvantage from the youngest children, while offering opportunities for children to develop at different rates in an independent way (Piaget, 1929). These changes went hand-in-hand with other manifestations of educational 'liberalisation' – eg, open-plan schools (Wilson, Stuckley and Langvin, 1972; Brogden, 2007), the Initial Teaching Alphabet, team-teaching (Dewhurst and Tamburini, 1978), the integrated day (Brown and Precious, 1968) – and the English primary education system became a model of practice emulated around the world (Bennett, 1976). Opportunities arose for creativity in the way schools were structured and classes organised which matched the growing interest in developmentally based education, that is, pedagogy focused on the developmental stage reached by each child rather than the median age of the class. Pedagogy in these environments was characterised by a personalised approach allowing children to work and develop at a pace appropriate to them. Interestingly, the notion of personalised learning recently re-emerged as a part of Government policy in England (DfES, 2004). However, it should not be overlooked that there was also an element of pragmatism involved in the adoption of multi-age grouping in England and other countries at this time, in that it came about as much from the need to utilise educational resources, such as teachers and classrooms, more efficiently in a time of economic hardship and falling rolls, as from any educational ideal (Veenman, 1995).

The largely political and media motivated moves during the 1970s and 1980s against liberalisation began with the 'Black Papers' (Cox and Boyson, 1971), and led, through a 'discourse of derision' (Ball, 1990, p 18) to the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) which introduced the National Curriculum, Key Stage testing and Ofsted. This key piece of legislation blended radical New Right individualism with strong centralism so that schools became embroiled in a market culture and were seen to be competing for custom with alternative suppliers (Bottery, 2000). Although the 1988 Act was silent on how schools should be organised, the National Curriculum and testing implied that any form of grouping other than the traditional would disadvantage schools and children, and involve greater

challenge to teachers. Teaching and learning became stratified and hierarchical once more, and the rigid nature of the National Curriculum, and the pressure of market forces (exemplified by league tables, parental choice and a culture of accountability) led many schools to reappraise their positions and re-organise along conventional lines. This was also seen by some as a return to the philosophy of the early days of public education when a simpler notion of 'covering the work' was paramount. It was based on a belief that there is only so much knowledge in the world and that if people keep learning long enough they will know it all (Benjamin, 1977). So, too, the 'Back to Basics' movement, led by the Major Government (1993), provided a focus for the retention of 'traditional' approaches to education, including the way pupils were grouped, and reduced both the willingness and opportunities to introduce or sustain alternatives.

Although the ERA contained no explicit policy relating to pupil grouping, an implicit policy evolved from within its provisions constraining schools to adopt or retain a particular style of organisation. At the same time, non-statutory guidance to schools which followed tended to assume the use of conventional year group structures and left those which did not, or could not, at a disadvantage (DFEE, 1998; DFEE, 1999). Teachers found the National Curriculum challenging to teach in mixed-age classes, and it could be argued that no explicit policy was necessary as the ambient conditions, together with pragmatism (Moore, 2004), and the market place (Bottery, 2000), more or less compelled schools to follow a particular line. The existence of Ofsted as a monitoring agent, and the threat and fear of opprobrium and sanctions for schools falling foul of their judgements, left those which did not adopt conventional approaches having to work hard to demonstrate the validity and value of their methods. To move against the flow at this point in history would have been, to say the least, courageous.

Paradoxically, at a time when moves towards evidence-based policy in many areas of public life were gaining momentum in England, much of what happened in education was based on assertion, conviction, 'common sense', and a mass of quasi-evidence originating from pseudo-scientific sources, such as Ofsted, right-wing 'think tanks' and pressure groups (Fitz-Gibbon, 2000). Many damaging statements aimed at schools and teachers from outside the world of education were based, not on significant evidence but, as Bassey (1992, p 5) points out, on '*unsubstantiated assertion and argument-by-selected-instance*'. There has also, in recent years, been an atmosphere of increasing public and political scepticism towards the actions of professionals providing public services, perhaps none more so than teachers. It may be argued that a teaching profession, weakened by constant criticism from politicians and the media, and overwhelmed by directives and advice from central and local government, was in no position to implement policies which bucked the trend or changed the *status quo*, no matter how much those policies relied on professional judgement or cited studies claiming empirical validity.

The educational framework which led to the strengthening of the implied policy on age-grouping has been reinforced by the actions of subsequent governments, without any obvious attempt to make it explicit. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, both non-statutory, but implicitly underwritten by Ofsted's power to comment adversely and damagingly on practices, made non-compliance a less preferred option. Many aspects of Government Strategies, together with QCA subject guidelines, work best in situations involving whole-class, single age-group teaching, and have all been heavily promoted as examples of good practice by Government and LAs (DfES, 2003). Schools have therefore been funnelled into compliance, largely as a result of pedagogical requirements of strategies introduced by Government (Richmond, 2005). Age-grouping, as currently practised, can be seen as a consequence of Government reforms carried out over a number of years. What is not clear, however, is the extent to which this is an unintended outcome or deliberate engineering by the Government.

At present, approximately a quarter of primary schools in England operate mixed-age classes. This is, however, largely a function of school size rather than policy, the mixed-age classes being formed by the simple amalgamation of two or more conventional year groups with the children within them still segregated according to National Curriculum year-group because of the requirement to comply with statutory orders (Little, 2006a). Schools in which year-grouping is impractical, such as those that are very small, or with fractional forms of entry, are seen as exceptions to the rule and may be viewed by some as a deficit model (Bouri and Barker Lunn, 1969; Hallam *et al*, 1999). It can be argued that this form of organisation serves to exacerbate the disadvantage to the young, and the challenge to the teacher, by making the extremes of age difference within the class more pronounced.

What is the Research Evidence?

The rationale for implementing multi-age structures in schools comes largely from two research bases. Firstly, there is research on child development and learning, and secondly, empirical research on the relative effects on children in conventional and multi-age systems.

Segregating children according to sex, ethnic or socio-economic differences is widely accepted as unethical, immoral or illegal, yet segregation on grounds of age is accepted as normal, with little thought given to the implications. Whereas concern is quite justifiably expressed about low levels of achievement among specific groups of pupils, because of their sex or ethnic origin, and efforts concentrated on addressing the perceived problems, and raising teacher awareness, no similar programme exists in respect of 'underachievement' resulting from age alone. This appears to be the case despite a strong body of experimental evidence, which attests to a relationship between birthdate and educational performance and progress, and which demonstrates clearly some of the disadvantages suffered by younger children in year groups both in the course of their formal education, and in later life (Russell and Startup, 1986; Bell and Daniels, 1990; Borg and Falzon, 1995; France and Wiseman, 1966; Hauck and Finch, 1993; Reijneveld *et al*, 2006). The practice of admitting children to school using the birth date criterion has been criticised for ignoring the possible effects that different rates of cognitive and emotional development among children may have on their educational performance (Kinard and Reinherz, 1986).

The influence of relative age within a class group on pupil achievement has been well documented over many years (Pidgeon and Dodds, 1961; Dickenson and Larson, 1963; John, 1964; DeMeis and Stearns, 1992). The distinction is most marked in the early years of schooling, where children born shortly after the cut-off date are up to a full year older than late born children in their respective year group, whereas children born shortly before this date are promoted to a higher age group almost a year earlier than those born a few days later. Some children in Reception Classes may be 25% younger, and, by implication, 25% less developed than some of their classmates (Thompson, 1971; Sharp, 1995; Goodman, Gledhill and Ford, 2003).

Several UK studies have addressed questions about the impact of age and length of schooling on children's academic attainment and progress at school (Jackson, 1964; Jinks, 1964; Pidgeon, 1965; Freyman, 1965; Crone and Whitehurst, 1999). These studies enquired whether younger children in a class are slower to attain literacy skills, and whether teachers rate them as behaving less well.

The long term effect of age in a rigid, curriculum-led environment, depends, to a degree at least, on the ability of a child to make up that difference. Research evidence suggests that teachers frequently make assumptions about the ability of children to do this (Greenfield, 2009). However, mental development compares unfavourably with physical development in this respect, it being generally accepted that significant phases of physical development

occur at a fairly constant time after birth. In the case of intellectual and social development, however, it is less possible to determine range or limit in advance and, because of the hierarchical and sequential structure of most of the curriculum, the damaging effects of age can have long term consequences (Wendt, 1974; Meghir, Crawford and Dearden, 2007).

A strong argument supporting the contention that the age-grouping practice widespread in English schools is not 'natural' but is rather the consequence of an implicit 'policy', comes from the realisation that some countries, particularly in the industrialised world, use other approaches. Indeed, in many countries the organisation of students within schools is determined by legislation and stated government policy (Sargent, 2002; Walser, 1998; Pratt, 1986; Katz *et al*, 1990).

Historically, multi-age grouping preceded the introduction of the age-group paradigm in every country of the world (Little, 2006a). The organisation of schools based on the age-group paradigm arose principally in industrial areas as a result of rural-urban migration and the need to accommodate larger numbers of children within existing structures. Although this system has remained in place in parts of the world, some countries have reverted to a multi-age structure for what are claimed to be pedagogic reasons (Pavan, 1992).

Internationally there are many different ways in which schools and classes are organised. Learning and teaching in 'multigrade' classes is an extensive feature of countries in the developed world, but is by no means limited to these countries (Little, 2006a).

There is a distinct element of compromise in many of these cases redolent of the comment by Taylor that:

Educational policies do not emerge in a vacuum but reflect compromises between competing interests expressed by the dominant interests of capitalism on the one hand and.....various social movements on the other (Taylor, Rizul, Lingard and Henry, 1997, p 4).

This implies that no one method of school organisation is the natural order of things. The principal distinction between the ways many countries organise their schools and the way things happen in England appears to hinge on the existence in many countries of explicit policy and stated reasons for particular approaches where there is generally a clearly defined government policy setting out the required structure, and there is frequently no equivocation about the fact that arrangements exist for economic or political purposes. However, the age-group paradigm is still widely regarded as the norm by teachers in other countries, and many regard mixed age teaching as a poor relation. Little makes the crucial point:

For children to learn effectively in multigrade environments teachers need to be well trained, well-resourced and hold positive attitudes to multi-grade teaching. However, many teachers in multi-grade environments are either untrained or trained in mono-grade pedagogy..... (Little, 2001, p 477).

This emphasises the importance of multi-age structures being carefully thought-out, properly funded, and staffed with appropriately trained teachers. Veenman (1995) draws a distinction between classes where two or more conventional year groups are taught by one teacher and which are formed for administrative or economic purposes, and those classes where the combination of ages is for, what he calls, cognitive and non-cognitive benefits. Little criticises the lack of information internationally about the extent of multi-grade teaching and suggests that policy makers are simply unaware of the extent and nature of such groupings. She comments that:

Since curriculum, educational materials, teacher preparation and assessment systems are predicated on monograded schools and classes, it is hardly surprising that many teachers hold negative attitudes towards their role in the multigrade class (Little, 2006b, p 340).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate two things in respect of school organisation. Firstly, there is nothing normative about any particular way of organising children into classes, nor is there anything significant about cut-off dates used to determine year group membership. Preferences for different types of structure – eg, age-grouped or mixed age, depend upon factors as diverse as economic necessity, administrative convenience, political ideology, expediency, perceived pedagogic advantage or simple inertia (Bottery 2000). This view empathises with Ball's suggestion that:

Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence..... and ultimately, recreation in contexts of practice (Ball, 1998, p 126).

Secondly, in order to be widely accepted and effective, policies do not have to be mandated, but can arise spontaneously as a consequence (intended or unintended) of other policies or practices, which serve to make compliance with an implicit policy more or less obligatory. Implicit policies of this sort, I have argued, can be just as constraining and imperative as those resulting from legal frameworks, and can sustain their dominance in the face of strong theoretical and empirical arguments put forward in opposition.

With these facts in mind, and drawing on both my professional experience and comparisons with other industrialised countries (Little, 2001; 2006a), it seems to me that the English education system is out of step with systems in some other parts of the industrialised world, where explicit policies are more widespread and may result from, or take account of, professional experience, current research and successful practice, claiming, at least, to be based more on scientific evidence than assertion and opinion.

By contrast, the way English schools are organised, and in particular the way in which pupils within an age-group cohort are regarded, is largely founded on tradition, implied policy, political opportunism and ideology, supported by enforcing systems like Ofsted and League Tables. Within this framework, professionals have less scope to utilise research evidence or to apply their judgement and skills, tending to be reduced to the level of compliant technicians with no part to play in the policy-making process. From my observations, the outcome in schools exemplifies Morley's (2004) concept of '*defensive delivery*' whereby teachers attempt to identify risk and match provision to externally imposed judgements and quality indicators, over which they have no control. The resulting climate of prescription and central control, linked to fear of sanctions, suppresses creativity and innovation among teachers and school managers and, I believe, ultimately has the potential to harm significant numbers of children who may be disadvantaged by the age-grouping paradigm because of their relative position within a cohort.

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