An Exploration of Parents' and Professionals' Experiences of School Entry Deferral: An IPA Study

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Abstract

The following doctoral thesis is comprised of three papers, including a literature review, empirical study, and a final reflective account.

Literature Review

The first paper introduces the phenomena of school entry deferral and sets the scene in terms of the current legislative context in England. Theoretical and empirical literature related to children starting school and having their start deferred by one year is reviewed. This enables possible directions for future research to be identified, informing the subsequent empirical paper.

Empirical Paper

Following the literature review, an empirical paper is presented which provides an account of the current study which explored parents' and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral. Within this study, visual research methods and semi-structured interviews were used to give rise to detailed information about participants' lived experiences, which were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Key findings and conclusions are discussed.

Reflective Account

Lastly, a reflective account of the research-practitioner experience is shared. This includes personal reflections related to the research process, from the pre-empirical to the empirical stage. Additionally, the researcher's contribution to knowledge is critically examined alongside the implications for professional practice within educational psychology.

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Acknowledgments

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Literature Review

Introduction

Many researchers have argued that starting school is an important milestone for young children and their families and that positive experiences of this transition may have a lasting impact upon children's future development (Cook & Coley, 2017; Connelly & Gersch, 2016; Takriti, Elhoweris, & Atkinson, 2020). In England, it is common practice for children to start school in the September following their fourth birthday and to be educated according to their school age group.

However, the School Admissions Code (Department for Education, DfE, 2021a) sets out that parents may request for their child to be educated "outside of their normal age group", for instance, where a child is "gifted and talented" or has "experienced problems such as ill health" (p. 25). Additionally, parents of summer born children (e.g., children born from April 1st to August 31st) may decide that they would like their child to start school in the September following their fifth birthday and request for their child to be admitted to reception rather than year 1, thus out of age group (DfE, 2021a). This practice is discussed using different terminology across academic literature, national guidance, and Local Authority (LA) policies, including commonly being referred to as 'deferred' and 'delayed' school entry (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2019; DfE, 2020; Gorton, 2012; Towers, 2018; Suffolk County Council, 2022). Despite this, decisions around when children will start school may have a pivotal impact upon their later educational experiences.

For parents to be able to make informed decisions about when they would like their summer born child to start school, it is important that they know the options available to them as well as the possible implications of their decisions (DfE, 2020). Educational Psychologists (EPs) are well situated to facilitate parents and professionals considering whether to defer a child's start to school by one year, due to their knowledge of educational systems, child development and relevant research. In some LAs, EPs may also have a role within decision-making panels, which are sometimes used to examine and discuss the requests made by parents to enable admissions authorities to reach a balance and informed decision (DfE, 2021b).

The present review aims to provide a summary of empirical evidence and literature related to starting school, postponing entry to school by one year, and the potential impact of these decisions on children's outcomes and experiences. It also

seeks to explore psychological theories that may underpin reasons for delayed school entry and outline the possible implications of existing findings for EPs. These topics appeared most pertinent to the literature and were also of relevance to the author's position as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). The topic of children repeating a year later throughout their school life was outside the focus of this review (see Education Endowment Framework, EEF, 2021 or Hattie, 2009, 2012), as the focus of the present paper was more specifically on exploring young children's journey to starting school.

This literature review is structured into four main sections. Firstly, the topic of children starting school is explored due to the increasing research around this area (Cook & Coley, 2017; Connelly & Gersch, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2013; Takriti et al., 2020). Subsequently, this review will focus upon children having their start to school deferred or delayed by one year, setting the scene by exploring the legislative context, guidance, and emerging trends in the context of England (BBC, 2018b; DfE, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). This paper then goes on to outline literature that may explain the phenomenon of deferred or delayed school entry, including discussing prominent constructs of school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998; UNICEF, 2012). Following this, the next section will examine the evidence base around this practice to identify possible directions for further research (DfE, 2018, 2021c; Gorton, 2012). To conclude, key findings will be summarised with consideration of the implications for EP practice and avenues for future research.

For this review, literature and empirical studies were sourced via several search strategies including an initial broad library search, followed by attaining articles from various databases (e.g., ERIC, PsycArticles, PsychInfo and ScienceDirect), search engines (e.g., Google Scholar) and journals relevant to the practice of EPs (e.g., Child & Educational Psychology and Educational Psychology in Practice). This included using a variety of search terms, including "start school", "school starting age", "transition", "school readiness", "school entry deferral", "school entry delay", "school deferral", "school delay", "deferred school entry" and "delayed school entry".

Although this review primarily seeks to attend to literature relevant to the educational context within England, it also utilises international studies where appropriate to the topic discussed to highlight key factors and the importance of considering children's development in context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Sykes, Bell, & Rodeiro, 2009). Initially, only peer reviewed articles published within the past

ten years were included and the abstracts of papers were reviewed to check for relevance. Following this, references were followed up from the initial papers and the search was widened to include earlier studies, published theses, and media articles that were particularly relevant. This was important to gain a more in-depth insight into delayed school entry, given the paucity of peer-reviewed published literature regarding this phenomenon in England.

Starting School

It is perhaps unsurprising that the topic of starting school has attracted attention internationally and that this trend has been sustained over time, given the importance of children's early experiences on their later development and life outcomes (Cook & Coley, 2017; Connelly & Gersch, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2013; Takriti et al., 2020). Within the statutory guidance for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in England (Department for Education/Department of Health, DfE/DoH, 2015), chapter five for example outlines the actions for early years providers and explicitly states that *all* children are entitled to an education that: facilitates them to "become confident young children with a growing ability to communicate their own views and ready to make the transition into compulsory education"; and, "achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes" (p. 79).

The statutory guidance (DfE/DoH, 2015) and legislation (Children & Families Act, 2014) also emphasise principles for working with children and their families, including having regard for their views, wishes and feelings and enabling them to participate fully in decision making that will influence their lives. This may include preparing for transition before children move to their school settings, reviewing any additional support provided and agreeing information to be shared as part of the planning arrangements with parents/carers (DfE/DoH, 2015).

Supporting children in the early years has long been recognised as an effective use of EPs time and this may involve working with children and their families as they plan for starting school (Byrnes, 2012). Hence, the following section will provide an overview of some of the research findings around children starting school, including literature concerned with compulsory school age, the importance of pre-school contexts, the area of school readiness, and themes around transitions. These areas are focused upon to attend to the socio-ecological context around children starting

school and due to the importance of these themes upon children's future outcomes (Dockett & Perry, 2013).

Compulsory School Age

International literature suggests that the age at which children start school varies from country to country and ranges from three to seven years of age in general (BBC, 2018a; DfE, 2021a; Gorton, 2012; Sharp, 2002; Vogler, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2008). Despite this variation, most countries appear to have set entry and cut-off dates for starting school, whereby birthday cut-off dates usually determine a child's exact school entry age (Gorton, 2012; Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014). Within the United Kingdom (UK), children tend to start school when they are between four and five years of age, which is relatively young compared to other countries (see DfE, 2014 and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO, Institute for Statistics, 2021). However, the exact school starting age varies between the four countries in the UK, with Northern Ireland recently passing a School Age Bill to allow greater flexibility for parents regarding the age at which their child starts school (Department of Education, DoE, 2022).

In England, children are entitled to start school in the September after their fourth birthday and can attend school full-time (e.g., for the whole school day), as set out by the School Admissions Code (DfE, 2021a). This coordinates with the school calendar and year group organisation (Crawford, Dearden, & Greaves, 2014), where the cut-off dates run from the start of September to the end of August (September 1st to August 31st). Although many parents opt for their child to start school at the age of four and take up their entitled full-time school place in September, children are not actually of compulsory school age until on or after their fifth birthday (DfE, 2020). Hence, children born in the summer months (April 1st to August 31st) do not actually have to start school until a full year after they could have first started (DfE, 2020).

There has been considerable ongoing debate around the age at which children start school, with researchers questioning whether there is any compelling educational rationale for children starting school at a particular age (Gorton, 2012; Riggall & Sharp, 2008; Sharp, 2002). This debate appears to occur across countries, despite the differences in compulsory school age, year cut-off dates and pedagogies (Gorton, 2012). At present, a review of the research tends to depict that there may not be one 'optimal age' for starting school (Gorton, 2012), but that children who are older in their

year group initially achieve better examination results on average than their younger counterparts (Crawford, Dearden, & Meghir, 2007, 2010; Crawford, Dearden, & Greaves, 2013, 2014; DfE, 2020; Gorton, 2012; Long, 2020; Riggall & Sharp, 2008; Sharp, 2002; Sykes et al., 2009). This is discussed further in the following section with a specific focus upon the context in England, although this finding appears to be consistent across countries whether the school starting age is four or six (Gorton, 2012), and the differences appear to decrease in general as children get older (Crawford et al., 2007; Crawford et al., 2014).

Evidence Around Summer Born Children

When considering and reviewing studies specific to the education context within England (Crawford et al., 2007, 2010; Crawford et al., 2013, 2014), research suggests that children who are the youngest within their year group (i.e., children born in August) perform significantly worse in academic tests (Crawford et al., 2007; Crawford et al., 2013, 2014) and may be more likely to be identified as having additional needs than their older counterparts (Crawford et al., 2007). In a study using geographical variation in school admission policies, Crawford et al. (2007) found that almost all of the difference in test performance was accounted for by the fact that younger children sat exams up to one year earlier than their peers, rather than due to their age of starting school, the length of their schooling or their relative age. Crawford et al. (2014) similarly found that the age at which children's cognitive skills were tested accounted for much of the significant difference in outcomes, although they used a more robust regression discontinuity design and two complementary identification strategies when understanding what may drive these differences. Based upon these findings, researchers have suggested that an appropriate response would be for policymakers to adjust nationally set tests by age and to provide age-appropriate feedback based on adjusted scores (Crawford et al., 2013, 2014).

Although these age differences appear to be more pronounced when a child first enters school and decline as children get older, studies indicate that these differences are linear and still significant when young people are aged 16 to 18 and making important decisions about their future (Crawford et al., 2007, 2010; Crawford et al., 2013). Crawford et al. (2013) summarise findings using data from a variety of studies, where they used linear regression models for the majority of their analysis to identify mean differences in outcomes for children born at different times of the year.

When discussing their findings, Crawford et al. (2013) reported that children born in August were: 5.4% more likely to be labelled as having mild special educational needs at age 11; 6.4% less likely to achieve five GCSEs or equivalent at 16; 2% less likely to go to university at 18 or 19; and 1% less likely to graduate with a degree than the older students in their cohort. Additionally, students who were the youngest were also likely to have significantly poorer socio-emotional development, have lower confidence in their ability and be less likely to believe that their own actions mattered. These findings led the authors to suggest that children born later in the academic year may have a lower sense of wellbeing "simply because they were unfortunate enough to be born later in the academic year" (Crawford et al., 2013, p. 66).

Although the research in England has suggested that these effects may not persist into adulthood (Crawford et al., 2013), there are contrasting findings within international literature which suggest there may be long-run effects into both adolescence and adulthood (Arnold & Depew, 2018; Oosterbeek, ter Meulen, & van der Klaauw, 2021). However, Crawford et al. (2013) reported that children born at the end of the academic year were not significantly less likely to be in work, earn more/less per hour, or report being healthier or happier during adulthood than those born at the start of the year when summarising the findings from their research. Despite the effects appearing to level-out, the researchers argue that policy intervention is still important to overcome the possible disadvantages faced by children for both equity and efficiency reasons (Crawford et al., 2013).

Context and Themes Around Children Starting School

There are also other important contextual factors and themes to consider when thinking about children's start to school. Regardless of school starting age, many children attend some type of early years provider or pre-school education (DfE/DoH, 2015), which is in fact compulsory in some European countries (DfE, 2014b). Research depicts that attending a pre-school setting and having positive parenting experiences can have a long-term impact upon children's educational attainment, including their GCSE results and the likelihood they will enter academic examinations post-16 (DfE, 2015). Additionally, starting school is often described as a key or critical period for both children and their families, which may have an impact upon their future outcomes (Cook & Coley, 2017; Connelly & Gersch, 2016; Entwisle & Alexander, 1989, 1993; Takriti et al., 2020). Other important themes within the literature related

to starting school include the concepts of 'school readiness' and 'transition' (Dockett & Perry, 2013), which will now be briefly discussed.

Starting School and School Readiness

Researchers have highlighted that the international evidence base around children starting school has focused heavily upon the concept of school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Connolly & Gersch, 2016). Despite this shared interest in school readiness, there are a range of studies with different aims from developing instruments or measures of school readiness to investigating the beliefs of teachers and parents (see Dockett & Perry, 2013 or Hughes, 2015). Researchers have also considered the role of child-related factors and family influences on school readiness, for instance, exploring children's socio-cognitive skills and parenting practices such as reading together or having fun at home (Hughes, Daly, Foley, White, & Devine, 2015). Additionally, other studies have explored individual differences in school readiness status for particular groups of children, such as those with additional needs or living in poverty (see Dockett & Perry, 2013 or Hughes, 2015).

Theories and conceptual frameworks exploring different constructions of school readiness also emerge as important (Brown, 2017; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998; United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, 2012). When reviewing constructions or models of school readiness, some researchers have highlighted a move towards 'interactionist' stances (Connolly & Gersch, 2016). These models emphasise the importance of considering both the individual child's developmental readiness and the readiness of their environmental context when thinking about children's start to school (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998). Similar conceptual frameworks have highlighted the significance of "ready children, ready schools and ready families" to ensure the cost-effective development of all individuals, societies, and countries, and improve equity among young children (UNICEF, 2012, p. 28).

However, wider literature and research indicates that there is a lack of consensus regarding what constitutes school readiness both globally (Brown, 2017) and for early years providers in practice (Ofsted, 2014). This term can have different meanings for different people (Hughes, 2015), despite featuring in many reviews of education, statutory guidance, and health initiatives (Allen, 2011; Field, 2010; Public

Health England, 2015). Brown (2017) suggests that to better understand the bi-directional nature of school readiness as well as this construct in itself, it is necessary to consider “the complicated educational and familial experiences of children locally as well as globally” (p. 297). This is because children may have very different experiences prior to starting school based upon a range of factors, such as where the live and whom they live with (Brown, 2017; UNICEF, 2012, 2016). Based upon the literature reviewed, it appears that further research around children’s experiences before starting school is needed and important for understanding school readiness from a community perspective (Brown, 2017).

Transition to School

The topic of ‘transition’ is another theme within the literature around children starting school, where transition is depicted as an important process for both children and their families (Cook & Coley, 2017; Kennedy, Cameron, & Greene, 2012). Entwisle and Alexander (1989, 1993) argued that beginning school was key for children’s long-term wellbeing and could be identified as a critical period for their academic development. Researchers have continued to highlight that transition around school entry is a vital area of study, due to this being both a “momentous event in the life of the individual child and as a foundation for future educational engagement and success” (Becker & Tuppat, 2018, p. 19). Starting school may also be construed as a ‘rite of passage’ in some communities, which stems from the work of Van Gennep (1908, cited in Vogler et al., 2008).

Despite this, literature indicates that the process of children’s transition to school is complex and not necessarily well defined or widely researched in the UK (Kennedy et al., 2012; Vogler et al., 2008). There is also a considerable amount of overlap between the topics of school readiness and transition in the literature, with researchers highlighting that terms are often both referred to or used interchangeably in articles (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Kennedy et al., 2012). Although the term ‘transition’ may have a variety of meanings and be used in different ways, general definitions tend to consider experiences or processes over particular periods of life (Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Vogler et al., 2008). In this review, transition is discussed with a specific focus upon the time around children starting school, as well as the changes that may occur as part of this journey (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Vogler et al., 2008).

Theorists draw upon a range of perspectives when considering children's transition to school, including developmental, socio-cultural, and ecological models (Kennedy et al., 2012; Vogler et al., 2008). Developmental perspectives typically utilise stage theories, such as the work of Piaget (1932, 1952, 1963, 1978), to discuss optimal timing for transitions. Following the positioning of children in such theories and further understanding around children's active role in their own development, reviews have highlighted children's developmental rights as a reference point during transitions (Vogler et al., 2008) with consideration of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

In contrast to developmental theories, socio-cultural perspectives focus upon the importance of social interaction and how the immediate parent/carer, family or peer context may shape childhood transitions (Vogler et al., 2008). This links to social constructivist perspectives and the theories of Vygotsky (1978), where transitions may be understood as opportunities for children's socio-cultural learning through their active engagement and interaction with the world around them (Vogler et al., 2008). Socio-cultural theories have also informed frameworks including the 'developmental niche' (Super & Harkness, 1986) and 'guided participation' (Rogoff, 1990), which can be helpful for considering the different expectations and values that children may encounter in starting school, as well as understanding transition as an opportunity for learning cultural routines and tools (Vogler et al., 2008).

Ecological models compliment socio-cultural perspectives whilst additionally highlighting the role of wider social structures and contexts around children's transition to school (Vogler et al., 2008). Examples of ecological models include Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory, Elder's (1994) Life Course Theory, as well as Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition. Bronfenbrenner (1979) was interested in occurrences of "ecological transition" and defined these as "whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both" (p. 27). From an ecological perspective, theorists highlight that children's transition to school may involve changes in their surroundings, as well as their social role as they become school pupils (Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2012; Kennedy et al., 2012; Rogoff, 2003). Bronfenbrenner (1979) also argued that children's start to school changed their "exo- into mesosystem" (p. 27), as children become active participants in school settings and their transition may be influenced by the interrelations between their home, school,

and peers (e.g., information sharing between home and school, transitioning to school with or without peers, etc.).

Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition similarly centred around how relationships in their home, school, peer, and neighbourhood environments may change over time, as well as how they may directly and indirectly influence their transition to school. International research also highlights the importance of children's relationships during transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2007), as well as the social narratives about starting school, which may form an educational marker on an individual's life course (Turunen, Dockett, & Perry, 2015). Kennedy et al. (2012) highlight how Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) model can be helpful for understanding how a parent's own childhood experiences may impact upon their involvement in their child's schooling. They also suggested that this model highlights many factors which may influence the quality of the transition experience, as well as providing helpful guidance for intervention (Kennedy et al., 2012).

Literature suggests that the transition to school can be both an exciting and difficult experience for children and their families (Fontil, Gittens, Beaudoin, & Shaldeczek, 2019; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). As children change social environment from preschool or home to school, they may encounter that settings have different expectations, rules, and routines, as well as experience new academic and social challenges (Fontil et al., 2019). Researchers highlight that school settings have a greater focus on formal instruction and academic progress and may be ecologically different to pre-school settings, where schools may have increased class sizes and reduced child-to-teacher ratios (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Fontil et al., 2019). The nature of interactions between parents and early year's professionals may also change, with contact becoming more formal and less frequent in some situations (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Additionally, the daily routines of both parents and children can alter with families getting ready for school each morning, travelling to school, and experiencing different social situations (e.g., attending a breakfast club, being dropped off by relatives, interacting with families before the school day begins, etc.).

Some of the research related to transition has explored the experiences of different groups of individuals (Byrnes, 2012; Connolly & Gersch, 2016), the expectations of teachers (Takriti, Atkinson, & Elhoweris, 2019; Takriti et al., 2020), as well as the practices adopted to support transitions by teachers and other

professionals such as EPs (Cook & Coley, 2017; Dockett & Perry, 2013; Fontil et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2012; Perry & Dockett, 2011). Literature suggests that the start to school can be more complex for children with SEND and a time of considerable challenge for their families (Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2011). When exploring the experiences of parents whose children with autism were starting school in Ireland, Connolly and Gersch (2016) found three common themes including parents discussing: their struggles with the educational system; their experience of their child's diagnosis and concerns about stigma; as well as, preparing for school and trying to find the right school placement. Research also highlights the potential role of EPs supporting parents, schools and children navigating this transition (Brynes, 2012; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Kennedy et al., 2012). For instance, EPs may be able to support with the school transition by acting as a transition facilitator and assisting with planning (Connolly & Gersch, 2016), working with pre-school parent support groups (Brynes, 2012), or by developing "a deeper understanding of the emotional journey embarked on during transition" (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 27).

Summary of Starting School Literature

Within this section, a range of literature has been outlined which indicates that starting school is considered an important topic of study by many researchers (Becker & Tuppat, 2018; Byrnes, 2012). Studies depict that there are a range of ages at which children start school internationally and that there may not be one particular optimal age for beginning school (Gorton, 2012), although children are entitled to a full-time school place from four years of age in England (DfE, 2014a). Many important themes arise within the literature, including debates around age effects (Crawford et al., 2007, 2010; Crawford et al., 2013, 2014), as well as other themes such as school readiness and transition (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Hughes, 2015; Vogler et al., 2008). The literature reviewed indicates that exploring children's experiences is one important avenue for future research and this is needed in order to build further understanding around school readiness as a construct (Brown, 2017). There is also scope for further research around children's transition to school in the UK context (Kennedy et al., 2012), as well as opportunities for EPs to support children, parents, and their educational settings around this topic (Brynes, 2012; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Kennedy et al., 2012).

Deferring or Delaying School Entry

One practice that is widely debated in relation to starting school is situations where children have had their start to school delayed or deferred by one year (Towers, 2018). A variety of terminology is used to refer to this phenomenon in the literature, including 'deferring of school entry', 'delayed school entry', 'delaying kindergarten entry' and 'academic redshirting' (Becker & Tuppat, 2018; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Gorton, 2012; Sucena, Marques, Silva, Garrido, & Pimenta, 2020; Towers, 2018). This appears to indicate that this phenomenon occurs cross-culturally, within different educational contexts (Barnard-Brak, Stevens, & Albright, 2017; Crothers et al., 2010; Fortner & Jenkins, 2017, 2018; Gorton, 2012) and involves decision making by parents, school staff, and other professionals (Becker & Tuppat, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014). Within the next section of this literature review, further information will be provided to set the scene about the context of this practice in England. This will draw heavily upon the relevant statutory guidance (DfE, 2021a), non-statutory advice (DfE, 2020, 2021b), as well as the small selection of studies that are currently available (BBC, 2018b; DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c).

The Legislative Context in England

Although parents can choose for their child to start school full-time in the September following their fourth birthday in England, the School Admissions Code (DfE, 2021a) sets out alternative options for parents who do not wish for their child to start school at this point. Firstly, parents can defer their child's admission date to later in the school year up until they reach compulsory school age, but not beyond the beginning of the final term (DfE, 2021a). Alternatively, children may attend part-time until later in the school year if parents wish, although again this is up until the point where they reach compulsory school age (DfE, 2021a). Additionally, parents of children born in the summer months (April 1st to August 31st) may request for their child to start school in the September following their fifth birthday and request that they are admitted "out of their normal age group" so that they can start their school journey in reception as opposed to year 1 (DfE, 2021a, p. 25). This practice is referred to within the most recent non-statutory guidance for parent/carers as "delayed entry", which is used to describe "a summer born child who starts school at compulsory school age (5), whether this is in Year 1 or reception" (DfE, 2020, p.15).

However, there still appears to be considerable variation in terminology used between LAs, including the use of both “deferring the start of school” and “delay starting school” (Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, 2021, p. 15); “delay them starting school” (Suffolk County Council, 2022, p. 9); “defer until the next academic year” (Norfolk County Council, 2022, p. 7); and, “Deferred admission to school” and “delay their child’s entry” (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2019, p. 1). To reflect the wide-ranging terminology used across LA contexts in England, both ‘delay’ and ‘defer’ will be used within this literature review to denote the practice of summer born children having their start to school postponed by one year so that they start school following their fifth birthday.

Making Decisions and Requests

When making decisions about whether to delay their summer born child’s admission to school by one year, the DfE (2020a) advises parents to speak to the schools that they are considering, arrange visits to see how children learn in the reception year and talk to professionals about whether their child might be ready for school to help them make an informed decision. This could involve speaking to a variety of different professionals, including their child’s current early years provider, prospective headteachers or special educational needs and disability coordinators, as well as other “specialist services” supporting their child (DfE, 2020a, p. 6). EPs are one of many professionals who may be considered “specialists” (DfE/DoH, 2015, p. 88), due to their knowledge of child development and role supporting children, families, and educational professionals. Thus, EPs may be asked by parents and early years settings for a psychological perspective before parents decide whether to request delayed school entry.

Parents who decide that they would like to delay or defer their child’s start to school by one year must make their requests to school admissions authorities. As school admissions authorities differ depending on the type of school in England, this may mean making a request to a LA, school governing body or academy trust (DfE, 2020; Long, 2020). Under the School Admissions Code, school admissions authorities are required to “make clear in their admission arrangements the process for requesting admission out of the normal age group” (DfE, 2021a, p. 25). In practice, information regarding the process for requesting deferred or delayed school entry can often be

found online via websites (DfE, 2020), for example, within LA or academy trust policies.

When making a request for delayed school entry, parents are advised by the DfE (2020a) to include information about their child, why they think they should be educated out of their "normal age group", as well as any supporting evidence (p. 12). The School Admissions Code (2021a) indicates that supporting evidence may include information about the child's development, medical history, the views of medical professionals, whether they have previously been educated out of age group, as well as, whether they were born prematurely and would have fallen into a lower age group if born in line with their due date. It also highlights that it is important to include the views of the prospective head teacher, as their views must be taken account of when making decisions about educating children outside of their age group (DfE, 2021a). Whilst requesting a delayed start to school, parents are also expected to apply for a school place in case their request is rejected (DfE, 2020a).

The School Admissions Code outlines that school admissions authorities must "make decisions on the basis of the circumstances of each case and in the best interests of the child concerned" (DfE, 2021a, p. 25). In some LAs, decision-making panels are responsible for reviewing and discussing requests to reach a decision, although this is not a statutory requirement (DfE, 2021b). EPs are one of many professionals who may have a role on these decision-making panels (DfE, 2021b). Following making decisions regarding whether to agree a request to delay or defer a child's start to school by one year, school admission authorities are required to clearly set out their reasons when informing parents (DfE, 2021a).

Implications to Consider

Guidance indicates that there are also short and long-term implications for parents/carers to consider when deferring or delaying school entry by one year, due to the legislative context in England (see DfE, 2020, 2021b for full details).

Following children's school entry being delayed, parents/carers are still required to apply for a school place the following admissions year (DfE, 2020), which admission authorities are required to process as part of the main admissions round (DfE, 2021a, 2021b). Hence, despite parents/carers having sought the views of prospective schools when requesting for deferred or delayed school entry, a place at their preferred school is not guaranteed although parents can appeal the refusal of a school place (DfE,

2021a). However, the School Admissions Code currently states that this right “does not apply if they are offered a place at the school, but it is not in their preferred age group” (DfE, 2021, p. 26). When applying for a school place following deferred school entry, parents can choose whether to request that their child starts school in reception (thus out of age group) or in year 1 (DfE, 2021b). However, admission authorities are currently responsible for making the decision as to whether the individual child’s abilities can best be met in reception or year 1 (DfE, 2021b).

There are also long-term implications to be aware of when thinking around delayed school entry, including the possibility that headteachers may consider moving a child back to their typical age group if they believe this is in the best interest of their education (DfE, 2020). Additionally, parents need to re-apply for a place for their child out of year group when they reach transition points (i.e., moving up to junior, middle, or secondary school) or when moving to a school in a different LA at present (DfE, 2020, 2021b). Parents are currently required to do this when their child’s “correct cohort” are making applications for a school place (DfE, 2021b).

Additionally, young people who have been educated out of year group will not be legally obliged to attend school in Year 11 when most students take their GCSEs, as young people are no longer of compulsory school age on the last Friday of June in the school year in which they turn 16 years of age (DfE, 2021b). However, young people are still required to continue in education or training until the end of the academic year where they turn 17 years of age. As outlined by the DfE (2021b), this may involve full time education, an apprenticeship or full-time employment with part time education, depending on the choice made by the young person (DfE, 2021b).

Although the DfE (2021b) have stated that they are committed to amending the School Admissions Code (2021a) to ensure that parents of summer born children can automatically admit their child to a reception class at the age of five and remain with their new cohort throughout their education if this is the wishes of parents, these changes have not yet been made. Literature highlights that this was also not considered as part of the most recent updates to the School Admissions Code (2021a), as this requires a change in legislation (DfE, 2021b; Long, 2020).

Trends in Requests

Research from the DfE (2018, 2019, 2021c) has explored trends in the number of requests for delayed entry into reception for summer born children (DfE, 2018, 2019,

2021c). In the most recent of three online surveys, it was found that requests for delayed school entry had increased annually from 2016 to 2020, based upon the data provided by 52 LAs who participated in all three surveys (DfE, 2021c). However, the findings also suggested that where the numbers of requests were rising, the rate of increase in requests had slowed each year from 89% between 2016 and 2017, to 37% to 2018, 17% to 2019, and 14% to 2020 (DfE, 2021c). Despite this, findings from the wider 105 LAs that provided data in the surveys in 2019 and 2020 indicated a similar level of increase in requests, where there were 3078 requests to delay entry in 2020 in comparison to 2656 for the previous year (DfE, 2021c).

Additionally, the findings suggested that the number of requests received each year varied between LAs, although almost all the LAs received below 40 requests in the most recent survey, with a mean of 33.7 requests in 2020 (DfE, 2021c). The proportion of requests agreed each year was found to have remained relatively steady with between 86% and 89% of requests agreed (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c), which was reported to be a small proportion of the eligible cohort. Collectively, these findings appear to suggest that requests for delayed school entry may have increased over time, despite slowing between 2016 and 2020, varying between LAs, and representing a small proportion of those eligible (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c). The DfE (2021c) also highlighted that the survey findings are in line with school census data, where 1.2% of summer born pupils had delayed entry in January 2020 which increased from 1.0% in January 2019.

Although the findings reported provide helpful indicative information regarding possible trends with regards to delayed school entry in England (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c), there were limitations around the data collected by the surveys as recognised by the authors. Firstly, all three surveys acknowledged that some LAs used estimates as opposed to actual data or exact figures, due to differing levels of detail held by LAs and variable ways of collecting data (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c). Additionally, the trend data was established on the responses provided by approximately a third of LAs which consistently took part in all three surveys; hence these may not be fully representative of all LAs (DfE, 2021c). Moreover, it was acknowledged that there may be some over-reporting and under-reporting in numbers from LAs, and the numbers may not have captured all requests where arrangements are made at school level or by an admissions authority that is not the LA (DfE, 2019, 2021c). Hence, the trends reported are indicative rather than absolute or fully representative, despite indicating an

increase in requests for delayed school entry consistent with school census data (DfE, 2021c). It is also not yet clear whether the number of requests for delayed school entry may have altered over the last two years, considering the possible ongoing impact of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on these trends.

Local Authority Approaches

Interestingly, LAs have been found to be varied in their approach to granting requests for delayed entry to reception, where some LAs grant all requests, others ask for evidence to be provided to make a case, and others previously only agreed requests with very strong cases being made (BBC, 2018b; DfE, 2019, 2021c). This inequity has been described as a "postcode lottery" in the media (BBC, 2018b), as parents' experiences of requesting a delayed start to school may differ depending on where they live in England. The most recent DfE (2021c) survey also explored the views of 804 parents/carers who had applied to delay their summer born child's entry to school to September 2020 or September 2021. Within the findings, it was reported that some parents/carers noted the different approaches across LAs and sometimes across schools within a LA resulting in "no level playing field for parents/carers" (DfE, 2021c, p. 21).

However, the DfE (2021c) research also reported a shift towards more LAs agreeing requests for delayed entry, where nine per cent of LAs agreed all requests in 2018 in comparison to 22% agreeing all requests in 2020. Additionally, the majority of LAs agreed some of the requests for delayed entry (78%) and there were not any LAs that reported only agreeing very strong cases on this occasion (DfE, 2021c). In line with this finding, some LAs reported having updated their approaches over the past year (6%) and others in the past one to three years (21%), with a move towards more requests being automatically accepted (46%). In general, these findings appear to indicate that whilst LAs continue to differ in their approaches to delayed school entry in England, policies in some LAs are changing and requests appear to be more likely to be agreed than in previous years. Despite this, there is a distinct lack of research with regards to parents' and professionals' lived experiences of school entry deferral in England. This may be a fruitful avenue for future research, particularly given the research indicating a trend in requests increasing alongside ongoing concerns raised around equity (BBC, 2018b; DfE, 2021c).

Summary of Legislative Context and Emerging Trends

Drawing upon the relevant statutory guidance (DfE, 2021a), non-statutory advice (DfE, 2020, 2021b) and available research (BBC 2018b; DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c), there is growing interest in the topic of summer born children having their start to school delayed or deferred by one year. A range of vocabulary is used to describe this practice both cross-culturally (Becker & Tuppat, 2018; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Gorton, 2012; Sucena et al., 2020; Towers, 2018) and across LAs in England (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2019; Norfolk County Council, 2022; Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, 2021; Suffolk County Council, 2022). Decision making regarding delayed or deferred school entry appears to be a complex systemic process. This currently involves parents/carers making requests to school admission authorities, who are required to make decisions on a case-by-case basis depending on what is thought to be in the best interests of the child (DfE, 2021a).

Emerging research surveys indicate that requests for delayed or deferred entry for summer born children increased between 2016 and 2020, despite representing a small proportion of those eligible (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c). Additionally, early research appears to indicate that LAs continue to differ in their approaches to delayed school entry in England, however, policies are changing in some areas and requests are more likely to be agreed than previously (DfE, 2021c). Although the existing evidence base provides helpful indicative information about possible trends with regards to school entry delay in England (2018, 2019, 2021c), further studies exploring the lived experiences of those involved may be helpful for promoting contextual understanding of this phenomenon further.

Constructs and Frameworks to Explain Delayed School Entry

Literature indicates that the rationale for delaying children's start to school may be understood in relation to views regarding school readiness (Gorton, 2012), although there are a variety of reasons and factors contributing to delayed school entry (DfE, 2018, 2021c). The following section will outline constructs of school readiness which are most prominent in the literature for explaining reasons for delayed school entry (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998), before examining a conceptual framework of school readiness (UNICEF, 2012).

Constructs of School Readiness

In addition to their relevance to the literature reviewed regarding children's start to school (Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2013), different perspectives around school readiness may be helpful for understanding reasons for delayed school entry (Brown, 2017; Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998; Towers, 2018; UNICEF, 2012). Meisels (1998) outlined four seminal framings of school readiness, including idealist/nativist, empiricist/environmentalist, social constructivist, and interactionist perspectives (Brown, 2017; Gorton, 2012). Each of these four perspectives will now be examined in turn.

Idealist/Nativist. One framing of school readiness is known as the idealist/nativist perspective (Meisels, 1998). Idealist/nativist perspectives tend to focus on internal factors and the maturity of the individual child for determining when they are ready for school, privileging this over any exogenous factors in their environment (Meisels, 1998). Hence, some researchers have also referred to this as the 'maturational/nativist' view (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gorton, 2012). Literature indicates that the idealist/nativist perspective has been linked to historical definitions of readiness which emphasise a child reaching a certain level of development and being able to succeed within a 'typical' school (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gorton, 2012), sometimes set against the works of Piaget (1932, 1952, 1963). As the role of the family, teacher and school system are consigned to the background (Meisels, 1998), this perspective is argued to largely frame school readiness as a 'within-child' construct (Brown, 2017).

From the idealist/nativist standpoint, reasons for school entry delay may include the child needing additional time to mature or reach a certain stage of development to be school ready. This rationale assumes that the practice of delayed school entry will provide children with the "gift of time" (Graue & DiPerna, 2000, p. 529), either to promote readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2009), to allow children to develop and mature outside of the school setting (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017), or to assume the presumed advantage of age (Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Edwards, Taylor, & Fiorini, 2011). This rationale is clearly depicted in literature suggesting that flexibilities around school entry exist to accommodate the "longstanding concerns that children born towards the end of the school year – in England, summer-born children - suffer adverse educational impacts by virtue of starting school at a younger age than their peers" (Long, 2020, p.

3). However, critics of the idealist/nativist perspective question whether giving children the additional time before starting school can outweigh the benefits of providing them with opportunities to learn in a school setting (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017; Graue & DiPerna, 2000).

Empiricist/Environmental. In contrast to the idealist/nativist perspective, the empiricist/environmental viewpoint focuses on looking outwards for external evidence of a child's school readiness, including "what the child can do and how the child behaves" (Meisels, 1998, p. 13). Gorton (2012) outlines that this perspective is based upon the assumption that school readiness can be measured by external signs such as a child's knowledge, skills, and observable behaviour. This perspective appears somewhat evident within Public Health England's (2015) description of what "school-ready children look like", including criteria such as being "able to take turns, sit, listen and play" and "independent in getting dressed and going to the toilet" (p. 6). Some of these criteria are based upon Sheridan's (2014) depiction of common early developmental milestones for children up to the age of five, although this is just one example and there are many different school readiness assessments which focus upon a child's skills (Dockett & Perry, 2009).

In addition to focusing on the child's knowledge, skills and behaviour, the empiricist/environmental perspective is underpinned by the belief that the child's environment and external factors control their school readiness (Meisels, 1998). Hence, children who cannot demonstrate certain skills are thought to not be ready for school and to require further guidance, teaching, or specialist support to assist them (Meisels, 1998). Brown (2017) suggests that this perspective underpins many global educational reforms which aim to ensure children are ready for school.

From the empiricist/environmental viewpoint, reasons for school entry delay may include children not yet being able to demonstrate desired evidence of readiness and needing further environmental input to enable them to acquire the necessary skills to be school ready. This may be theoretically likened to the practice of grade retention (Gorton, 2012), where pupils who do not reach a given standard and are required to join a younger class of students the following year to repeat a year of learning (EEF, 2021). However, school entry delay may differ to the practice of grade retention, where this occurs before the child is of compulsory school age and enters the school system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Subsequently, children who have their start to school delayed may have a range of experiences before starting school and may not

necessarily repeat a year in a pre-school setting. Despite these differences, some researchers have questioned whether delaying a child's start to school may prevent them from accessing support or specialist provision in a timely fashion, which might equate to a "theft of opportunity" as opposed to providing them with the "gift of time" (Graue & DiPerna, 2000, p. 529).

Social Constructivist. Another approach is that of the social constructivist (Meisels, 1998). The social constructivist approach views school readiness in social, community and cultural terms, where a child being ready for school is seen to be dependent on their context (Brown, 2017; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998). This approach focuses on the setting to define school readiness (Brown, 2017) and conceptualises school readiness "in the eye of the beholder" (Meisels, 1998, p. 15). Hence, ideas about school readiness may emerge from social and cultural values, narratives, expectations, or norms regarding attributes such as a child's age, sex, and preschool experiences (Graue, 1992; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998).

The social constructivist approach implies that being ready for school in one context may look different to another (Brown, 2017). Thus, children may be seen as ready for school in one environment (e.g., family, nursery, community, culture, etc.) but not ready for school in another. Gorton (2012) argues that the social constructivist perspective is one-directional in nature and can elicit a diverse range of readiness perspectives, which can make coming to an agreement on what constitutes readiness problematic. From the social constructivist perspective, reasons for school entry delay may include children being viewed as not yet ready for school, as defined by their social and cultural context. This perspective also holds that in a different social and/or cultural context, the same child may be considered school ready.

Interactionist. One further framing of school readiness is the interactionist stance (Meisels, 1998) which views school readiness as a bi-directional concept as it focuses on both the child's knowledge, skills and experiences, and the school's contribution to developing these further (Gorton, 2012; Brown, 2017). From this perspective, school readiness is seen in relative rather than absolute terms, and as a product of the interaction between the child and their experiences in their wider environment (Meisels, 1998). Literature portrays this concept as a more comprehensive, intuitive, complex, and multidimensional view of school readiness (Gorton, 2012; Brown, 2017; Meisels, 1998), with a focus on the "reciprocal relationship between school and child" (Meisels, 1998, p. 15). This approach has

previously been likened by researchers (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gorton, 2012) to theories of child development that are socio-cultural (Vygotsky, 1986) and transactional (Ford & Lerner, 1992), as well as evidence regarding brain plasticity (Curran, 2008).

The interactionist stance may explain reasons for school entry delay in terms of views about school readiness centred around both the child and their environment (Meisels, 1998). Towers (2018) depicts that some interactionists reason that delayed school entry may be counterproductive, based upon the assumption that children's developmental needs can be better addressed through early intervention and formal schooling than delayed school entry (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Jaekel, Strauss, Johnson, Gilmore, & Wolke, 2015). However, Towers (2018) also highlights that some researchers believe that children's developmental needs can be mediated through a high-quality pre-school curriculum (Reschly & Christenson, 2013; Johnson & Marlow, 2017). Despite these two standpoints clearly differing, both appear to be useful for considering interactionist views on school readiness which may aid understanding around reasons for and against delayed school entry.

Conceptual Framework of School Readiness

UNICEF (2012) outlined an alternative model of school readiness in their paper titled "School Readiness: A Conceptual Framework", which was based upon evidence and aimed to be relevant to the lives of young children around the world. Within this section, UNICEF's (2012) conceptual framework is explored further as this may also be useful for understanding possible reasons for delayed school entry. This model of school readiness was chosen for consideration as it comprehensively considers the interaction between children, their families, and schools, whilst also being sensitive towards diversity, culture, and context (UNICEF, 2012).

UNICEF's (2012) framework appears to build on some of the earlier constructs described by Meisels (1998), as well as wider literature and definitions of school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2009; National Education Goals Panel, 1997). Within UNICEF's (2012) conceptual framework, school readiness is defined by the two characteristic features of 'transition' and 'gaining competencies' on the following three dimensions:

(1) Children's readiness for school, which looks at children's learning and development.

(2) Schools' readiness for children, which looks at the school environment and practices that foster a smooth transition and promote learning of all children.
(3) Families' readiness for school, which looks at parent/caregiver attitudes and involvement in children's early development and transition to school.

As depicted above, the conceptual framework outlined by UNICEF (2012) explicitly considers the role of both school and family systems when considering children's readiness for school. This is similar the work of Dockett and Perry (2009) who conceptualised school readiness "as a complex set of interactions between individuals and their families, schools and communities" (p. 25). In addition, UNICEF's (2012) framework explicitly takes account of the role of wider ecological systems when drawing upon the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) and acknowledges the influence that culture and public policy can have on paradigms of school readiness. Hence, school readiness is defined within this framework as the product of the interaction between the child, school, and family system, influenced by culture and public policies (UNICEF, 2012).

When considering delayed school entry, UNICEF's (2012) conceptual framework implies that reasons for school entry delay related to school readiness may be understood across different system levels or dimensions. To explore this further, each of the three dimensions within this conceptual framework will be briefly discussed.

Children's Readiness for School. Starting with the dimension of the child's readiness for school, UNICEF's (2012) model implies that reasons for school entry delay may include concerns from parents and professionals regarding children's developmental skills and ability to thrive in school. This dimension appears to hold similarities with aspects of the empiricist/environmental and idealist/nativist perspectives previously outlined (Meisels, 1998). Notably, the "ready children" dimension focuses on individuals possessing "the basic minimum skills and knowledge in a variety of domains that will enable the child to be successful in school" (UNICEF, 2012, p. 9). Additionally, this dimension acknowledges that what constitutes school readiness may vary between individuals (e.g., parents and primary school teachers) and globally (e.g., characteristics that cultures and countries deem important for children), thus reflecting aspects of the social constructivist perspective (Meisels, 1998). In summary, UNICEF's (2012) conceptual framework firstly indicates that

reasons for school entry delay may be understood by considering children's developmental skills and abilities, as defined by the important adults in their lives.

Schools' Readiness for Children. The second dimension within UNICEF's (2012) conception of school readiness focuses on "ready schools" that support children and families to experience a smooth transition into primary school (p. 11). From this perspective, a range of further reasons may underpin school entry delay. Examples include concerns regarding any of the following factors, which are outlined by UNICEF (2012) to be important for transition: the gap between early childhood care and primary school environments (e.g., differences in educational philosophy, teaching style and structure of curricula); the quality of the school environment (e.g., time devoted to learning, materials and pedagogic practices); cultural differences between home and school (e.g., where the child's first language may differ from their language of instruction); or the extent to which schools are considered child-friendly and inclusive (see UNICEF, 2009, for further information regarding child-friendly schools).

The "ready schools" dimension (UNICEF, 2012, p. 11) also appears to have similarities to aspects of the empiricist/environmental, social constructivist, and interactionist perspectives of school readiness (Meisels, 1998), attending to the role of external factors, the child's environment, culture, and how this may influence the child's transition to school. However, it could be argued that this dimension adds further value by explicitly considering the interaction between the school environment and other ecological systems around the child such as early years and home contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989). This dimension also includes wider themes such as educational philosophy, difference, and inclusion across settings, as opposed to focusing mainly on support within the child's immediate environment. Hence, UNICEF's (2012) model may be helpful for understanding other possible reasons for delayed school entry, including schools' readiness for children and the interaction between schools' and other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989).

Families' Readiness for School. Finally, the third dimension of UNICEF's (2012) conceptual framework focuses on families' readiness for school, which may also be helpful for understanding possible reasons for delayed school entry. UNICEF (2012) suggests that the family is the most important context for development prior to starting school, defining family in this context as any members who co-reside with the child (e.g., parents, carers, siblings, and extended family members).

When considering possible issues of families' readiness for school, UNICEF (2012) summarised a range of factors that have been linked including: poverty; parenting beliefs, attitudes, and practices; the learning environment in the home; supportive and responsive relationships; and the importance of fathers. It is suggested that these family factors may also assist understanding around reasons for delayed school entry, including parenting beliefs around the value of this practice. Additionally, there may be socio-economic and/or cultural factors interacting with a families' readiness for their child to start school. Thus, UNICEF's (2012) framework encompasses wider family factors that may explain reasons for school entry delay.

Summary of Constructs and Conceptual Framework

As depicted within this review, the practice of delayed school entry is currently explained within the literature in relation to constructs of school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998). Meisels (1998) seminal framings of school readiness may aid understanding of reasons for school entry deferral, including views around children needing time to mature, needing environmental input to acquire skills or concerns around school readiness as defined by the child's social and cultural contexts. Researchers have also raised questions around whether this practice can outweigh the benefits of opportunities provided in school settings and highlighted concerns around whether this may act as a barrier to timely early intervention (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gorton, 2012; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Jaekel et al., 2015; Towers, 2018).

To extend the literature around school readiness, this review has outlined how UNICEF's (2012) conceptual framework may further aid understanding of the practice of school entry delay, as it explicitly attends more closely to the interaction between school and family systems when drawing upon a range of evidence and knowledge. Although constructs and conceptual frameworks of school readiness are helpful for understanding some possible reasons for school entry deferral, on critical reflection the literature appears somewhat dominated by these theories (as reflected within the present review). In the future, it is suggested that research adopting a more open-ended stance may provide new possibilities in terms of making sense of school entry deferral.

Research Exploring Deferred or Delayed School Entry

Following on from exploring theoretical literature which may be helpful for explaining delayed school entry (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998), the next section of this literature review will focus upon empirical studies and research centred around this practice. Firstly, research exploring factors and reasons for delayed school entry will be outlined with reference to the context of this practice within England (DfE, 2018, 2021c), whilst also acknowledging wider research (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Gorton, 2012; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014; Winsler et al., 2012). Secondly, evidence seeking to investigate the possible impact of delayed school entry upon outcomes for children will be explored (Sucena et al., 2020), including drawing upon international findings more heavily due to the lack of studies currently available within England. Lastly, research exploring views about delayed school entry (DfE, 2021c) and experiences of this phenomenon will be considered (Gorton, 2012). It is hoped that reviewing the current evidence available regarding children having a delayed or deferred start to school will be of particular use to TEPs and EPs interested in researching this topic further.

Factors and Reasons for Delayed School Entry

Over the past ten years there has been increased interest in carrying out research exploring factors related to delayed school entry and reasons that may underpin this phenomenon (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; DfE, 2018, 2021c; Gorton, 2012; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014; Huang, 2014; Winsler et al., 2012), which are sometimes set against the constructs of school readiness previously outlined (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1998). Recent research in the context of England (DfE, 2018; DfE, 2021c) appears to be largely in line with international findings (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Dougan & Pijanowski, 2011; Edwards et al., 2011; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Huang, 2014; Winsler et al., 2012). Namely, findings from two online surveys suggest that delayed school entry appears to be more requested for boys, for children whose ethnicity was identified as ‘White’ and for children whose date of birth falls closer to the cut-off dates for school entry in August (DfE, 2018, 2021c). Additionally, parent/carers who have delayed their children’s start to school have been found to be significantly more likely to have higher incomes (DfE, 2018, 2021c), which was measured by self-reported total household income. These findings are interesting from a social justice perspective, given that

delayed school entry appears to be more requested for children who on surface-level may be argued to typically hold positions of privilege (e.g., white males from higher socioeconomic backgrounds). Some researchers have suggested that differences in rates of delaying school entry may not necessarily be surprising, where there may be concerns around the financial implications of holding children out of school for families with lower incomes (Frey, 2005; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Winsler et al., 2012).

When considering factors and reasons relevant to children's delayed school entry, research surveys appear to indicate that parent/carer views around children's readiness for school may be most influential (DfE, 2018, 2021c). For instance, 77% of the 804 parents/carers who responded to the most recent online survey selected 'I decided my child was not ready for school' as a consideration and 41% selected this as their main reason for delaying, within the 42 LAs that agreed to distribute the survey in England (DfE, 2021c). This was similar to a previous online survey, where 47% of the 196 parents/carers that responded cited 'whether they felt their child would be ready for school' as their main reason for delaying (DfE, 2018). These findings appear in line with the work of Gorton (2012) who used a qualitative case study approach to explore decision making and experiences of delayed school entry and found that participants held different models of school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1998), which influenced their decision to retain in their Scottish context.

Other factors that have been found to be among the most influential reasons for delayed school entry include parents/carers being aware of evidence regarding summer-born children and their child's medical condition or developmental delay (DfE, 2018, 2021c). In particular, the most recent survey found that 55% of parents/carers cited 'evidence on the school experience of summer-born children' and 34% of parents gave 'medical condition/developmental delay' as their main reasons for delaying their child's entry to reception (DfE, 2021c). These findings appear somewhat consistent with wider research by Horstschräer and Muehler (2014), who used data on compulsory medical school entrance screening in a German federal state to analyse how children's probability to be recommended to start school was influenced by early gaps in age and development. Although the context of this study clearly differed to the DfE (2018, 2021c) research, Horstschräer and Muehler (2014) found that age and developmental status were important predictors of school recommendation in Germany. In particular, it was reported that younger children and children with "impairments" in cognitive, socio-emotional, motor development and health areas

were less likely to be recommended to start school (Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014, p. 270).

Research also indicates that there may be a range of wider factors influencing parents/carers views about delayed school entry and reasons for delaying their child's start to school (DfE, 2018, 2021c). For example, the DfE (2021c) research survey found that other considerations were also relevant in parents' decisions to delay entry, including: advice from pre-school/nursery (26%); advice from friends/other parents (20%); advice from a medical professional (12%); Coronavirus (12%); advice from the school (10%); allowing the child time to learn English as their additional language (7%); social media such as Mumsnet/Facebook (9%); advice from the LA (3%); availability of places in preferred school (3%); availability of childcare (2%); and cost of childcare (1%). This research indicates that a range of contextual factors may influence parents' reasons for delaying their child's start to school, including changing factors such as Coronavirus that may have been relevant over the past two years but would not have been pertinent five years ago.

In addition to these findings, qualitative comments from open feedback revealed further interesting reasons for parents/carers delaying school entry (DfE, 2021c). Some of these comments expanded upon parents/carers earlier reasons as to why they did not feel their child was school ready (e.g., not interested in sitting down at a table, too young, not yet emotionally socially or physically mature enough, and their own negative experiences as a child or their other summer-born children had experienced). Additionally, some parent/carers outlined other family circumstances such as moving to a new city, and a few adoptive parents reported wanting their child to have time to build attachments or catch-up on delays related to early life upheaval/trauma (DfE, 2021c). These findings appear to indicate that parent/carers may take a wide range of factors into consideration with regards to delayed school entry, rather than focusing solely on school readiness (DfE, 2018, 2021c).

From reviewing research related to reasons for delayed school entry, it appears that there is growing interest in understanding the reasons and factors that may underpin this phenomenon internationally (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; DfE, 2018, 2021c; Gorton, 2012; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014; Winsler et al., 2012). From the scant evidence base in England, findings appear to suggest that the views of parents/carers around children's readiness for school may be the most influential reason for school entry delay (DfE, 2018, 2021c). These

reasons may be underpinned by idealist/nativist or empiricist/environmentalist perspectives (Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998), although it is difficult to ascertain whether this is the case as 'I decided my child was not ready for school' may mean different things to different parents/carers according to the social constructivist approach (Meisels, 1998). Additionally, the research appears to indicate that there are a wide range of other factors that may come into play, including advice from various stakeholders in systems around the child, family circumstances and contextual factors, not forgetting the possible impact of Coronavirus on parents/carers reasons for school entry delay (DfE, 2021c). Future research using a qualitative and systemic approach may be beneficial to gain a fuller understanding of these reasons and factors.

Evidence Around the Impact of Delaying School Entry

As argued by Dougan and Pijanowski (2011), research around the impact of delayed school entry upon children's future outcomes is important for enabling parents to make well-informed decisions for their child. Although there is robust evidence that that some children who are youngest in their year group at school perform lower than their older classmates (Crawford et al., 2007, 2010; Crawford et al., 2013, 2014), the DfE (2020) have suggested that this does not necessarily mean that every child who is summer born will achieve lower results than their older peers.

Much of the research that attempts to explore the impact of delaying school entry has been conducted internationally, is quantitative in nature and tends to focus upon the academic outcomes attained by children. Hence, it is important to recognise that although there may be some interesting findings to consider, these may not all be directly generalisable to the UK context. Few studies have explored the impact of deferred or delayed school entry in England (DfE, 2018) and there is a general lack of qualitative research to exemplify any rich details about the impact of this upon the lives of children and families in practice. The following section aims to summarise some of the recent findings regarding delayed school entry, before considering evidence related to children born prematurely and children with additional needs.

Sucena et al. (2020) summarise the findings concisely within their research paper when suggesting that there is no consensus within the literature regarding the practice of academic redshirting, which is a term used for voluntary delayed entry to school in the United States (US). On the one hand, a few studies have suggested that there could be initial benefits for children in relation to their maths and reading scores

(Datar, 2006; Dougan & Pijanowski, 2011) and in terms of developing better friendships (Dougan, 2015, cited in Sucena et al., 2020), possibly due to children being older in their year group. However, researchers have highlighted that any perceived advantages of delayed school entry may not be sustained in the long-run (Larsen, Little & Coventry, 2020; Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017; Sucena et al., 2020) and may be explained in relation to other variables, for example, individual differences in children's characteristics or family economic background (Larsen et al., 2020; Sucena et al., 2020).

Research has also suggested that there may not be additional advantages for reading acquisition (Sucena et al., 2020) and some researchers have found that children who were academically redshirted achieved comparable outcomes to their peers (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Mendez, Kim, Ferron, & Woods, 2015). On the other hand, some studies refer to possible disadvantages of academic redshirting in terms of children's academic performance, social and emotional development, self-esteem, motivation, and behaviour (BBC, 2015; Jaekel et al., 2015; Martin, 2009; Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017; Sucena et al., 2020). Other researchers have expressed concerns that delaying school entry may lead to difficulties due to the increase in academic demands in kindergarten (Huang, 2015).

There is a distinct lack of research exploring the impact of delaying or deferring entry to school upon children's outcomes in the context of England, and only one such study exists to the author's knowledge (DfE, 2018). The DfE (2018) carried out in-house analysis of the first national data to investigate the impact of delayed entry for summer-born pupils on their phonics test performance. It was reported that there was an increase in phonics scores for summer-born children who were delayed entry between 2014/15 and 2015/16, although this improvement was not statistically significant (DfE, 2018). The DfE (2018) suggested that these findings imply there may not be a significant impact of delaying admission on children's early phonics screening scores, although it was acknowledged that "it will be important to make further assessments as more data becomes available" (p. 23).

Interestingly, it was reported that both delayed and normal admission summer-born pupils were out-performed by pupils who were not summer-born in both 2014/15 and 2015/16 (DfE, 2018). Despite this, summer-born pupils who were delayed admission were found to score on average 0.7 marks higher than normal summer-born pupils. However, it is important to note that this preliminary analysis was

acknowledged to have “several significant limitations” and was limited to pupils that did not have “a SEN flag” in reception and year 1 (DfE, 2018, p. 23), thus is not inclusive and representative of all children who were delayed school entry. More importantly, the available research base does not yet provide any information about the impact of delaying school entry on areas of interest other than phonics screening. It appears that there are several opportunities available for future research into the topic of deferred or delayed school entry in England.

Children Born Prematurely. As acknowledged by the DfE (2020a), parents of children who were born prematurely (i.e., before 37 weeks gestation) may consider delaying or deferring their child’s start to school by one year. There has been ongoing debate over whether school entry delay may be a helpful intervention for children who were born extremely pre-term (i.e., before 28 weeks gestation) within the literature (Johnson & Marlow, 2017; Towers, 2018). Although not all children born prematurely will have additional needs or disabilities, some may have learning or health needs and require additional support with areas of their development in school (DfE, 2020; Jaekel et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2009; Johnson & Marlow, 2017; Towers, 2018). Children who were born prematurely may also fall into a different age group than they would have if they were born full term, due to having been born before their due date.

Some research has suggested that delaying school entry for children who were born prematurely may not provide any advantage for achievement in school or promote children’s academic performance (BBC, 2015; Jaekel et al., 2015). Jaekel et al. (2015) expressed concerns around the practice of delayed school entry for preterm children, arguing that there may be disadvantages arising from children missing learning opportunities or not receiving additional support during their critical early years. Conversely, other researchers have proposed that delaying school entry for extremely preterm children and providing a pre-school environment that emphasises language, social development, play and exploration may be more developmentally appropriate (Johnson et al., 2009), which may enable children born prematurely to progress with greater independence in the classroom (Johnson et al., 2009; Towers, 2018). Although there is a lack of studies exploring the impact of this practice upon preterm children, the ongoing research surveys by the DfE (2019, 2021c) indicate that requests for children born prematurely may be more likely to be accepted by LAs in general. However, it is important to remember that the LA may not be the admissions

authority for some schools, hence these findings are indicative rather than fully representative as stated by the DfE (2019).

Interestingly, the DfE (2020a) outlined two case studies as examples within their advice to parents of summer born children starting school, one of which related to children born prematurely. Within this case study, the parent reported considering deferring their son's start to school as he was born 8 weeks prematurely and his development was delayed, particularly in relation to his speech "as he still barely spoke at all" (DfE, 2020, p.8). This parent reflected that they had decided not to defer their son's school start following the head teacher encouraging them to visit the school where he was offered a place and to speak to the class teacher to find out more about how he would be supported, including joint support with his speech therapist. Within this case study example, the parent reported that they knew they had "made the right decision" as their son "settled in well", "rapidly caught up with his peers" and "was exceeding age related expectations" by the end of primary school (DfE, 2020, p.8).

Although this case study may be helpful as it provides a brief insight into the perspective of one parent, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this is transferable or relevant to other parents of children born prematurely. Hence, further research is needed to both understand the experiences of parents and the impact of school entry deferral for children who were born prematurely (Johnson et al., 2009; Towers, 2018).

Children With Additional Needs. Some parents of children with additional needs may also consider deferring their child's entry to school. At present, there appear to be mixed international findings around the practice of delayed school entry for learners with additional needs. For instance, Horstschräer and Muehler (2014) found that delaying school entry allowed children with "impairments" to improve with regards to their developmental status across four dimensions (e.g., cognitive, socio-emotional, motor and health) when exploring data on compulsory school entrance screening in Germany (p. 270). However, it was reported that children who were delayed remained below average and showed more developmental impairments than the average of the recommended children (Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014).

Other studies found that postponing children's entry to school may have limited academic benefit in terms of maths or reading achievement for learners with ADHD (Barnard-Brak et al., 2017) and could be disadvantageous for the achievement of children "with an identified disability" (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017, p. 44). Some research

has suggested that learners who were delayed entry starting school may be more likely to be placed in specialist education in comparison to their peers (Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Mendez et al., 2015), which appears to imply that postponing school admission may not necessarily support children's later inclusion in mainstream settings. Research also indicates that delayed school entry may have adverse outcomes for children's later social and emotional adjustment (Crothers et al., 2010), where learners identified as "old-for-grade" were found to be more likely to be involved in or experience bullying (Crothers et al., 2010, p. 327).

These findings may be explained by psychological theories which emphasise the importance of the social context for learning (Bruner, 1978, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978), where it could be suggested that children who are delayed school entry may have less opportunities for scaffolded learning with peers who are more able. Some researchers have also hypothesised that learners with additional needs may have better access to professional support and intervention when attending public schools as opposed to kindergarten in the US (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017), which may be due to more well-established links between services and structures. This has led to researchers expressing concerns about whether delayed school entry may inadvertently delay early identification and additional support during a critical period of development for young children (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017; Jaekel et al., 2015).

As previously discussed, the weight of research has explored the practice of delayed school entry internationally, and therefore needs to be interpreted with caution in terms of its generalisability to the educational system within England. Critics also highlight that there have been methodological issues with exploring the impact of school entry deferral, including problems finding an adequate control or comparison group (Towers, 2018; Winsler et al., 2012), difficulties in controlling for selection variables (Winsler et al., 2012) and the use of differing outcome measures over time (Fastenau, 2015). It appears that investigating the impact of school entry deferral is not a straightforward process, as it is difficult to reliably compare progress between groups or ascertain how children would have progressed if they were not deferred. Despite this, the research findings highlight the importance of considering the potential impact of school entry delay on children with additional needs within wider ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). At present, it is suggested that there is no conclusive evidence regards the impact of delaying or deferring admission to school for summer born pupils in England.

Views and Experiences of Delayed School Entry

Only a few research studies have considered the views and experiences of those involved in delayed school entry (DfE, 2021c; Gorton, 2012), where there appears to be a lack of published peer-reviewed research in this area in general. It is argued that this is a particularly important given the emphasis placed upon participation and collaboration within current legislation and guidance (Children & Families Act, 2014; DfE/DOH, 2015).

When exploring the views of parents/carers who had their child's admission delayed in their research survey, the DfE (2021c) found that parents/carers were very positive about having the opportunity and felt it was the right decision for their child to mature or catch-up emotionally, socially, physically, or developmentally. With regards to the process, it was found that parent/carers views varied from some finding it "very easy" and "straightforward" to others reporting it as "complicated" and "very stressful" (DfE, 2021c, p. 9). Additionally, the findings suggested that parents thought the process was too much of a lottery over whether the request would be agreed depending upon the support of the LA and school (DfE, 2021c). The findings of the open feedback also noted that there was felt to be varying practice across LAs and schools, with some parents reporting that the process was made more difficult than necessary by a lack of awareness and understanding (DfE, 2021c).

Collectively, these findings appear to echo the concerns around equity highlighted by the media (BBC, 2018b). There are also some parallels between the DfE (2021c) findings and challenges identified within the recent SEND Review (Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, DfE & DHSC, 2022). Namely, the SEND Review found that parents/carers were frustrated in navigating complex SEND systems and there was inconsistency in how children's needs were being met, which was often based upon where they live or are educated (DfE & DHSC, 2022). Importantly, the SEND Review also suggested that despite being well intentioned, the present system is failing to deliver for children and their families, with poor outcomes for children and young people, increasing tensions in accessing support, and financial challenges for LAs (DfE & DHSC, 2022).

Although no studies have yet investigated the lived experiences of those involved with delayed or deferred school entry in England, Gorton (2012) explored decision making and experiences of delayed school entry in a LA in Scotland using a qualitative case study approach. With regards to experiences of delayed school entry,

it was found that participants reported a range of negative and positive outcomes for children, as well as factors that may have supported children's transitions to school. Gorton (2012) found that all five of the case study children were reported to have made progress during their additional year in nursery (e.g., emotional, social, language and communication skills), and some of the education staff and EPs reported that the additional time supported parents to come to terms with their children's needs. Interestingly, Gorton (2012) also took a longitudinal approach and found that all the children continued to need additional support as they joined primary school. When considering possible 'cons' of delaying school entry, Gorton (2012) identified that there were concerns around children standing out due to their size or age following being delayed starting school, as well as concerns around the feasibility of pursuing possible patterns of non-attendance in nursery.

Gorton's (2012) research had several strengths, including attempting to explore children's experiences of delayed school entry and capturing the views of parents, some educational professionals, and EPs using a longitudinal approach. As Gorton (2012) was the first to study delayed school entry within the UK context, several opportunities for future researchers were also identified ranging from studies exploring experiences of delayed school entry around the time of children's first term to school to a longer-term follow up of children's outcomes. Although there is evidence indicating that many children who have their start to school delayed attend a nursery or preschool setting in England (DfE, 2021c), there is no evidence exemplifying the multiple experiences of those involved throughout this time. This is perhaps surprising giving the increase in requests for delayed school entry discussed earlier within this literature review (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c), and another potential avenue for future research.

Summary of Research Exploring Delayed School Entry

There appears to be an increasing evidence base with regards to the topic of delayed school entry internationally (Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014; Winsler et al., 2012), with a few studies considering this practice in England (DfE, 2018, 2021c; Towers, 2018) and Scotland (Gorton, 2012). Based upon the research reviewed around reasons for delayed school entry in England, it is suggested that parents/carers views around children's school readiness may be most influential although there are a range of wider factors that also come into consideration (DfE, 2018, 2021c). Very little research is available to assist understanding of the

possible impact of delayed school entry in the context of England (DfE, 2021c). Despite encouraging much debate, international research exploring the impact of delayed school entry appears to be largely inconclusive (Sucena et al., 2020) and many methodological issues have been identified within the predominantly quantitative literature base (Fastenau, 2015; Towers, 2018; Winsler et al., 2012). Given these methodological issues, it appears that there is scope for qualitative studies which may be able to provide a richer picture of the experiences of those involved in delayed school entry.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed indicates that starting school is an important topic and providing support to young children at this early point in their school journey is often identified as being an effective use of EPs time (Byrnes, 2012). Although the age at which children start school varies across countries and there appears to be no clear optimal age (Gorton, 2012), children are entitled to begin school when they are four years of age in England (DfE, 2021a). Within the research on starting school, important topics include the debate around age effects (Crawford et al., 2007, 2010; Crawford et al., 2013, 2014), as well as other considerations such as transition and school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2013). The topic of starting school presents EPs with opportunities to work systemically with teachers and collaboratively with parents to enable greater confidence at points of transition (Byrnes, 2012; Gorton, 2012).

Deferred or delayed school entry (postponing a child's start to school by one year) is referred to using a range of language in the literature, where this phenomenon occurs cross-culturally and attracts much debate (Becker & Tuppat, 2018; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Gorton, 2012; Sucena et al., 2020; Towers, 2018). EPs may be involved with parents who are considering school entry deferral, and they may also take part in decision-making within some LAs (DfE, 2021b). However, research has found that LAs may have varied approaches when it comes to school entry deferral (BBC, 2018b; DfE, 2019), which has been described in the media as leading to a "postcode lottery" (BBC, 2018b).

When attempting to explain the practice of deferred or delayed school entry, it is evident that this is currently understood with regards to constructs of school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Gorton, 2012; Meisels, 1998). This literature review also outlined how UNICEF's (2012) conceptual framework may further assist

understanding of the practice of delayed or deferred entry in attending to the wider family and educational systems around the child more closely. It also critically acknowledged that the literature appears somewhat dominated around theories related to school readiness and suggested that research adopting a more open-ended standpoint may provide possibilities for making sense of this phenomenon further.

Interestingly, reviewing the empirical research highlighted that there is no clear consensus regarding the impact of school entry deferral (Sucena et al., 2020) and considerable debate regarding this practice among specific groups of children, including those who were born preterm or have additional needs (Towers, 2018). When working with parents who are considering delaying their child's start to school by one year, EPs may be able to offer a person-centred approach to ensure that parents views, wishes and feelings are heard, whilst sensitively sharing relevant information and advice to enable parents to make their own decisions (DfE, 2020, 2021a). It will also be important to consider the individual child, and whether they may have been born prematurely or have additional needs. In situations where school entry deferral is being considered, EPs may also be able to offer advice regarding ways to support the child to be fully included by identifying "effective strategies, equipment, programmes or other interventions to enable the child to make progress", which is important regardless of their educational setting (DfE/DoH, 2015, p. 88).

Based upon the lack of research in England (Gorton, 2012), the incongruent research findings from international studies (Sucena et al., 2020), and the potential long-term implications of delaying school entry (DfE, 2020), it is advocated that EPs could play a key role in researching this topic further to give rise to more information to help parents and professionals with decision making. In practice, there are many opportunities for future research to provide a more holistic and detailed understanding of deferred school entry in England. Moving forwards, further research is needed to fully understand the experiences of those involved in deferred or delayed school entry and the possible implications of this on children's journey to school. Qualitative approaches to exploring school entry delay may also complement existing studies and provide greater depth to the predominantly quantitative evidence base. This may enable EPs working with parents and admission authorities to facilitate further dialogue around this phenomenon, share findings regarding what this might look and feel like in practice, and ensure that the decisions made are truly in the best interests of individual children.

Empirical Paper

Abstract

There has been an annual increase in requests for deferred or delayed entry to school for summer born children in England (DfE, 2021c), despite the debate around this topic and the lack of evidence within the UK (Gorton, 2012; Johnson & Marlow, 2017; Towers, 2018). Building on available research (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c; Gorton, 2012), this study used an interpretative phenomenological methodology and multi-perspectival design to explore parents' and professionals' lived experiences of school entry deferral. Visual research methods and individual semi-structured interviews were used to elicit an in-depth understanding of four parents' and two professionals' lived experiences (Bartoli, 2020; Boden, Larkin, & Iyer, 2019). Transcripts were analysed using principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and an adapted six-stage process (Bartoli, 2020; Larkin, Shaw, & Flowers, 2019; Rostill-Brookes, Larkin, Toms, & Churchman, 2011). This accommodated the use of the multi-perspectival design and visual research methods. Patterns were explored including convergence and divergence to give rise to three super-ordinate themes which focused upon; understanding requests for deferred entry; making sense of the deferred year; and understanding children's transition to school. Findings of this study are considered with regards to relevant theoretical literature and empirical research. Additionally, the strengths, limitations and implications of this research are examined, including the implications for EPs.

Keywords: Starting school; deferred school entry; delayed school entry; interpretative phenomenological analysis; multi-perspectival design; visual research methods; Educational Psychologists.

Introduction

A recent review of empirical evidence and literature highlighted that there is considerable debate around situations involving children having their start to school delayed or deferred by one year (Towers, 2018). This may not necessarily be surprising due to the level of interest in the topic of children starting school in general (Becker & Tuppat, 2018; Byrnes, 2012), and the importance of children's early experiences on their later development and life outcomes (Cook & Coley, 2017; Connelly & Gersch, 2016; Takriti et al., 2020).

Although the practice of children having their start to school postponed occurs internationally across different cultures and educational systems (Becker & Tuppat, 2018; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020; Gorton, 2012; Sucena et al., 2020), the present paper seeks to explore this phenomenon from the multiple perspectives of parents and professionals in the context of England, as relevant to the author's position. This is particularly pertinent given the small body of literature that is currently available from the UK context (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c; Gorton, 2012; Towers, 2018) and the systemic nature of this practice, which involves decision making by a range of stakeholders including parents and school admission authorities (DfE, 2020, 2021a, 2021b).

It is hoped that further research centred around children having their start to school delayed or deferred by one year may support parents and professionals to better understand how this may be experienced by others in practice. This may enable parents and school admissions authorities to make well informed decisions about what might be in the best interests of children (DfE, 2021a). Further understanding of school entry deferral may also be of relevance to EPs with different responsibilities across ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005), from supporting individual children on their journey to school to assisting parents and professionals with decision-making (DfE, 2021b).

The Legislative Context in England

Under the School Admissions Code (DfE, 2021a), the arrangements for children's admission outside of their "normal age group" sets out that parents of summer born children (children born from 1st April to 31st August) may choose not to send their child to school until the September following their fifth birthday (p. 25). Additionally, parents of summer born children may request for their child to be admitted

out of their normal age group so that they begin school in reception rather than year 1 (DfE, 2021a). Some literature suggests that these flexibilities exist to accommodate concerns that summer born children may "suffer adverse educational impacts by virtue of starting school at a younger age than their peers" (Long, 2020, p. 3).

Although this practice is referred to within the most recent non-statutory guidance as "delayed entry" (DfE, 2020, p.15), a wide range of terminology is used by LAs within their admissions information and guidance (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2019; Norfolk County Council, 2022; Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, 2021; Suffolk County Council, 2022). In the present study, both "deferred school entry" and "delayed school entry" will be used with the intention of reflecting the language of participants, LAs, and wider research communities (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). However, these terms will commonly be used to denote the practice of parents requesting that their summer born child starts school at compulsory school age (e.g., following their fifth birthday).

Trends in Requests and Local Authority Approaches

Within recent years, the DfE (2018, 2019, 2021c) has published three research reports following using online surveys to explore trends in parent/carer requests and LA approaches towards delayed school entry for summer born children in England.

Individual Characteristics. When considering the individual characteristics of children, the DfE (2018, 2021c) found that delayed school entry was more commonly requested for boys than girls, for children whose ethnicity was identified as 'White', and for children born in August with birthdays closer to the cut-off date for starting school. For instance, 62% of requests for delayed entry were for boys, 53% of requests were for children born in August (as opposed to just 5% born in April), and 84% of children were described as 'White' in the most recent survey (DfE, 2021c).

Additionally, the DfE (2021c) reported that five percent of requests for delayed school entry were for twins, 17% of requests were for children born prematurely, 17% of requests were for children that "had been diagnosed as having a special educational need or disability" and 12% were for children whose parents suspected that they might have an additional need or disability (p. 24). The research also indicated that parents/carers requesting delayed school entry were significantly more likely to have higher incomes, as measured by self-reported total household income (DfE, 2018, 2021c). Collectively these findings are interesting from a social justice perspective,

where on face-value delayed school entry appears to be more requested for children who may typically be perceived as holding positions of privilege in some contexts (e.g., White males from higher socioeconomic backgrounds). However, as evident within the research findings, children who are deferred may have many unique intersectional identities (e.g., premature birth, disability status, language, among other variables), which could interact with their position of being a summer born child in different ways to structure their experiences.

Number of Requests. With regards to trends in the number of requests for delayed school entry into reception for summer born children, the DfE (2018, 2019, 2021c) research found that the number of requests increased annually from 2016 to 2020 in the 52 LAs who participated in all three of the online surveys. Despite this, the findings indicated that the rate of increase in requests had slowed each year and the number of requests varied between LAs, with 33.7 requests on average being reported in 2020 (DfE, 2021c).

Reasons for Requests. When exploring parents/carers reasons for requesting delayed entry to reception, emerging research has indicated that concerns around children's school readiness may be the most influential reason underpinning this practice (DfE, 2018, 2021c). This finding is consistent with Gorton's (2012) longitudinal qualitative case study research which explored the decision-making process for delayed school entry in Scotland, where it was found that participants held different models of school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1998) and this influenced their decision to retain children in nursery. Interestingly, wider literature also indicates that there is a lack of consensus as to how to define school readiness (Brown, 2017; Ofsted, 2014), with this term having different meanings for different people (Hughes, 2015).

In the DfE's (2021c) research, additional key reasons reported by parents/carers for requesting delayed school entry included children having a medical condition or developmental delay, as well as evidence on the school experience of summer-born children. Wider research has similarly found that age and developmental status were important predictors of school recommendation in Germany (Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014), although this was based upon data regarding compulsory medical school entrance screening that is carried out before children start school at six in German federal states.

However, the DfE (2021c) also found further factors that contributed to parents/carers reasons for requesting delayed school entry, including advice from various stakeholders, Coronavirus, allowing their child to learn English as their additional language, social media, as well as the availability of places in their preferred school and the availability of childcare. Although the DfE (2018, 2019, 2021c) research is helpful for beginning to understand reasons for delayed school entry, it is suggested that open-ended and systemic approaches may allow possibilities for new or more detailed understandings of this phenomenon to emerge.

Local Authority Approaches. When exploring the approaches of LAs to granting requests for delayed entry to reception, the literature appears to indicate that LAs have varied approaches towards this practice (DfE, 2019, 2021c). This has raised questions about equity and has been described as a "postcode lottery" in the media (BBC, 2018b), where parents' experiences may differ depending on where they live in England. However, the most recent research survey also indicated that some LAs may have changed their approaches and there appears to be a move towards more requests being automatically accepted (DfE, 2021c). Despite this, the proportion of requests being agreed each year was reported to have remained relatively steady, with the total number remaining a small proportion of the eligible cohort (DfE, 2021c).

Although the DfE (2018, 2019, 2021c) findings are useful for beginning to identify possible trends around delayed school entry, it was acknowledged that these findings are indicative due to the limitations around the data used. This included the use of estimates, data from approximately a third of LAs that had consistently taken part in all three research surveys, and some possible over-reporting or under-reporting in numbers (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c). In addition, parents may not necessarily make their request to the LA, as school admissions authorities differ depending on the type of school in England and may alternatively be the school governing body or academy trust (DfE, 2020). However, the increase in requests for delayed school entry was reported to be consistent with school census data overall (DfE, 2021c).

Research Exploring School Entry Deferral

Despite wider research exploring children having their start to school delayed in different countries (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Datar, 2006; Dougan & Pijanowski, 2011; Gorton, 2012; Larsen et al., 2020; Martin, 2009; Mendez et al., 2015; Sucena et

al., 2020; Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017), there is very little empirical evidence exploring this practice in the context of England (DfE, 2018, 2021c).

Impact of School Entry Deferral. International research appears to indicate that there is no consensus regarding the practice of children having a delayed start to school (Sucena et al., 2020). Namely, some studies report initial benefits in terms of maths and reading scores (Datar, 2006; Dougan & Pijanowski, 2011), other researchers suggest any initial advantages may not be sustained or could be attributed to other variables (Larsen et al., 2020; Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017; Sucena et al., 2020), and further researchers have found no advantages in terms of reading acquisition or that academic outcomes were comparable to peers (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Mendez et al., 2015; Sucena et al., 2020). Concerningly, some studies have also reported that there may be disadvantages of delayed school entry for children's academic performance, social and emotional development, self-esteem, motivation, and behaviour (BBC, 2015; Jaekel et al., 2015; Martin, 2009; Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017; Sucena et al., 2020).

When looking at findings specific to the context in England, the DfE (2018) completed in-house analysis of phonics screening data for summer born children between 2014/15 and 2015/16 and reported that there may not be a significant impact upon children's early phonics screening scores. However, it was acknowledged that this was preliminary analysis which had "several significant limitations" and did not include pupils that were identified as having "a SEN flag" in reception and year 1 (DfE, 2018, p. 23). There have also been a range of methodological limitations to the previously outlined international literature, including difficulties with finding an adequate comparison group, problems with controlling for selecting variables and some use of differing outcome measures over time in quantitative studies (Fastenau, 2015; Towers, 2018; Winsler et al., 2012). Collectively, these methodological issues appear to imply that attempting to measure the impact of delayed school entry may be difficult in practice due to the complexity of this phenomenon.

Views and Experiences of School Entry Deferral. Only a few studies have explored the views and experiences of those involved in delayed school entry (DfE, 2021c; Gorton, 2012), although there is a lack of peer-reviewed published research around this area (Towers, 2018).

The DfE (2021c) investigated the views of parents/carers who had their child's admission to school delayed and found that parents/carers were very positive about

having this opportunity. It was reported that parents/carers felt that this was the right decision for their child to mature or catch-up emotionally, socially, physically, or developmentally (DfE, 2021c). Additionally, the findings suggested that parents/carers views about the deferral process varied, and some parents/carers reported that the process was too much of a lottery resulting in “no level playing field” with regards to whether requests would be agreed (DfE, 2021c, p. 21). Findings from parents/carers open feedback also indicated that the process was thought to be made more difficult than necessary due to a lack of awareness and understanding (DfE, 2021c).

To the author’s knowledge, no studies have investigated the lived experiences of those involved in delayed or deferred school entry in England. However, Gorton (2012) previously explored the experiences of delayed school entry for five children and their families using a longitudinal qualitative case study approach in Scotland. Gorton (2012) concluded that there were a range of positive and negative outcomes for delayed school entry, including children making progress in their additional year and parents coming to terms with their children’s needs, despite children needing ongoing additional support as they joined primary school, concerns around children standing out due to their size or age, and difficulties with monitoring patterns of non-attendance during their additional time in nursery.

There were several strengths to Gorton’s (2012) research, where it used a longitudinal approach to explore children’s experiences of delayed school entry and captured the views of parents, some educational professionals, and EPs. Research recommendations were also identified, such as a study with the scope to include a wider range of professionals and explore experiences of delayed school entry around the time of children’s first term in school. This informed the subsequent aims of the present study, which hoped to further exemplify the experiences of those involved in delayed school entry within England, where children start school half a year younger than their Scottish counterparts (Scottish Government, 2020).

Research Aims and Rationale

The main aim of this study was to explore the multiple experiences of those involved in situations where children had their start to school deferred by one year in England. Underpinning this was the rationale of providing further insight into the phenomenon of school entry deferral and contributing to the existing research, which has mostly focused upon exploring trends and factors that may be able to explain

requests for this practice (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c). The present research also aimed to consider how individuals involved in school entry deferral made sense of their experiences. This was based upon the argument that exploring multiple lived experiences of deferred school entry may allow EPs to better understand individuals' responses to this practice. Hence, gathering an in-depth understanding of personal sense making processes may be beneficial for EPs working with children, parents and professionals when supporting with decision-making processes.

Research Question

Within this study, the following research question was explored:

- How do parents and professionals make sense of their experiences of school entry deferral?

Methodology

Ontology and Epistemology

This research was situated from an ontological position of relativism and an epistemological position of interpretivism (Mead, 1934; Sultana, 2014). In contrast to ontological realism, which suggests that there is an independent reality which can be discovered through research (Scotland, 2012), relativism suggests that reality is subjective and mediated by our senses, interactions, and experiences (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015; Pop & van Nieuwerburgh, 2019; Scotland, 2012). The relativist ontological position is also based upon the belief that there are multiple versions of 'reality' based upon our personal experiences, which can be built through research "by the participant's words and interpreted by the researcher" (Pop & van Nieuwerburgh, 2019, p. 87). Hence, this research explored the multiple and equally valid realities of individuals who had experienced school entry deferral (Clement, 2019; Pop & van Nieuwerburgh, 2019), whilst acknowledging the author's position facilitating this research and perceiving any given findings (Oxley, 2016).

An interpretivist phenomenological approach was adopted allowing the researcher to explore individually constructed views and personal meaning about experiences of school entry deferral. Interpretivism posits that knowledge about the world is socially constructed and understood (Burr, 2015; Mead, 1934), rather than something that can be gained objectively through empirical study (Sultana, 2014). An interpretive phenomenological approach was considered the most appropriate

position to address the research question, as this enabled focus upon the quality, texture and meaning of experiences within context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Willig, 2013). This contrasts to other epistemological paradigms, which may have alternatively tried to gain objective knowledge, explored underlying mechanisms, produced pure descriptions, or considered the role of language in relation to school entry deferral (Willig, 2013). Additionally, this ontological and epistemological position was considered consistent with qualitive approaches which can be used to explore meaning attached to experience (Pop & van Nieuwerburgh, 2019), therefore making this approach suitable to address the aims of this study.

Methodology

For this research, the methodology of IPA was chosen to understand personal lived experiences of school entry deferral from a psychological and interpretive perspective (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). IPA was selected as it was consistent with the aims, ontological and epistemological position of this study, and was deemed appropriate for examining individuals' subjective accounts and interpretations of their experiences of school entry deferral. Researchers highlight that IPA can be used to explore how individuals construct their own realities and acknowledge that this is accessed through interaction with the researcher and influenced by the researcher's own sense making (Pop & van Nieuwerburgh, 2019). This appeared in line with the epistemological position of interpretivism which was chosen, although IPA allows researchers to practice "epistemological openness" when adopting the stance which they feel to be most appropriate to their research (Oxley, 2016, p. 57).

IPA was initially developed over two decades ago (Smith, 1996) and it was intended as a psychological experiential research methodology, although it stemmed from phenomenological philosophy (Oxley, 2016; Smith & Osborn, 2015; Sultana, 2014). IPA has three main theoretical underpinnings including phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Oxley, 2016; Smith & Osborn, 2015), which root it firmly within a qualitative approach which is experientially focused and interpretative in nature. Each of these underlying theories will be briefly discussed, before attending to the approaches that were used to increase the validity of this qualitative research as appropriate for IPA methodology (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Yardley, 2015)

Phenomenology. Drawing on phenomenology as "a philosophical approach to the study of experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11), IPA researchers firstly attempt to understand their participants' world and are interested in individual's personal accounts of an object or event (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2015). This can be traced back to the work of the philosopher Husserl (1900), who argued that phenomenological inquiry should involve examining experiences in the way they occur to understand their essential qualities (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This approach to inquiry contrasted to the mainstream positivist paradigm of the early 20th century (Oxley, 2016; Smith et al., 2009), as it did not attempt to produce an objective statement using prior scientific hypotheses and instead focused on trying to see things as they presented themselves (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

To identify the core features of human experience through a phenomenological attitude, Husserl developed the "phenomenological method" which involved "bracketing" preconceptions and progressing through a series of steps or "reductions" to get to the essence of subjective experience (Oxley, 2016, p. 56). Although IPA researchers do not attempt to achieve such reductions and recognise their own role and conceptions in engaging in interpretive activity (in line with Heidegger, 1927/1962), IPA is still phenomenological as it involves detailed examination of the lived experiences of particular people (Oxley, 2016; Smith & Obsorn, 2015). With regards to the present research, the phenomenological background of IPA clearly aligned with the researcher's focus on understanding parents' and professionals' lived experiences of school entry deferral.

Hermeneutics. IPA is also connected to hermeneutics, which refers to the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Obsorn, 2015). Hermeneutics is a particularly relevant theory to IPA researchers who attempt to make experiential claims when interpreting the accounts of their participants (Larkin et al., 2006). In doing so, IPA researchers recognise that they cannot directly access their participants experiences and so need to adopt an interpretive stance when trying to make sense of their participants' accounts (Smith et al., 2009). This aspect of IPA links to Heidegger's (1927/1962) development of a hermeneutic phenomenology, where Heidegger questioned whether knowledge could be created without an interpretive outlook (Smith et al., 2009).

As outlined by Smith and Obsorn (2015), IPA research is often described as involving a two-stage interpretation process known as the "double hermeneutic", as

the participant is trying to make sense of their own world, and the researcher is trying to understand the participant who is trying to make sense of their own world (p. 26). Another central concept in hermeneutic theory which is relevant to IPA is the "hermeneutic circle" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 27), which can be helpful for IPA researchers in making sense of the dynamic nature of understanding. When trying to understand their participants' accounts, IPA researchers may draw upon both empathic hermeneutics and questioning hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1970; Smith & Osborn, 2015), for example, when trying to identify, empathize and ask critical questions of participants' accounts to assist their own sense-making. In the present research, the hermeneutic origins of IPA aligned with the researcher's epistemological position and offered the opportunity for the researcher to be reflexively engaged in making sense of school entry deferral (Oxley, 2016).

Idiography. The last important theoretical influence upon IPA to be discussed is idiography, which refers to a focus on "the particular" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). When considering IPA as a methodology, IPA researchers are interested in idiography in terms of understanding how particular individuals make sense of a particular phenomenon within their given contexts (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA also involves a commitment to a particular level of in-depth, thorough, and systematic analysis, which makes it possible for the researcher to make experiential claims regarding the accounts of individuals as opposed to claims only on a group or population level (Smith & Obsorn, 2015). The theory of idiography underpinning IPA as a methodology was consistent with the researcher's particular focus upon school entry deferral and the experiences of certain individuals, namely parents and professionals with direct meaningful experiences.

Validity. Whilst using IPA as a methodology, the present study sought to address Yardley's (2015) four key principles of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance to enhance its validity. Yardley's (2015) framework was selected as this has been identified as pertinent to assessing the quality of IPA research (Smith et al., 2009), although the researcher also held in mind criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Table 1 depicts how each of Yardley's (2015) principles were considered to attend to validity within this qualitative research.

Table 1

Addressing Yardley's (2015) Framework for Validity and Quality

Core Principle	Researcher considerations to enhance validity
Sensitivity to Context	Literature review included relevant theoretical and empirical research to set the scene; consider the wider socio-cultural context; and identify gaps in research with regards to delayed school entry in England. Sensitive consideration of prospective participants' perspectives when designing the study, seeking ethical approval, and piloting the interview schedule to ensure appropriateness of questions. Participant information carefully outlined to include information for sensitivity to context based upon participant interviews, whilst being careful about presentation to protect identity of participants. Careful consideration of data during analysis and presentation of findings, including use of verbatim extracts to illustrate the researcher's interpretations, demonstrate credibility and give voice to participants.
Commitment and Rigour	Design of research included both data and method triangulation (multi-perspectival and multi-method) to provide further insight and enhance credibility further. Rigour in selection of participants using purposive sampling and specific inclusion criteria to ensure each group was reasonably homogenous. Commitment and attentiveness to participants in offering initial virtual meetings to build rapport, as well as follow-up debrief sessions. Engagement in research supervision throughout the research project, including during data analysis for confirmability when sense checking the researcher's experiential claims and ensuring sufficient interpretation for IPA.
Coherence and Transparency	Coherence was considered in depth by the researcher when using the literature to identify a research question and ensure a continuous thread through the selected ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods. Detailed description of the stages of IPA to aid transparency and assist with transferability judgement for the reader. This included information about how participants were recruited, the semi-structured interview schedule used (Appendix D), the adapted six-stage process of analysis, as well as the analysis undertaken (see Appendices E, F and G). Tentative presentation of the research findings based upon the researcher's interpretation of participants' accounts in line with IPA, as opposed to proposing concrete or absolute findings. Reflective account written by the researcher as informed by their research diary and supervision minutes through ongoing reflexivity.
Impact and Importance	Selection of a research area which may be relevant, interesting, and beneficial to the applied practice of EPs, as well as important to parents and professionals working with children across a range of settings. Consideration of the findings with regards to relevant theories and existing research, including acknowledgement of strengths and limitations which may inform future research. Suggested implications for practice identified based upon the findings presented by the researcher from analysing the data for dependability.

Note. This table outlines how the present research addressed Yardley's (2015) framework for assessing validity in qualitative research.

Design

A multi-perspectival design was used to address the complex and systemic nature of school entry deferral (Larkin et al., 2019). Multi-perspectival designs recognise that 'lived' experiences may not be exclusively located within one individual, but also within the accounts of people within their 'lived' world (Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). This is based upon the premise that complex phenomenon may be understood by looking at the accounts of multiple groups of individuals, particularly where phenomenon may have a relational or systemic dimension. Such designs may extend the potential reach and impact of experiential research, as insights can be evidenced from more than one point of view thereby offering a means of triangulation (Larkin et al., 2019).

As highlighted by Larkin et al. (2019), several researchers have adopted multi-perspectival designs whilst building upon existing approaches within IPA to explore experiences from two or more perspectives (e.g., Dancyger, Smith, Jacobs, Wallace, & Michie, 2010; de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Idrees, Hartley, & Hearn, 2020; McInally & Gray-Brunton, 2021; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011; Ummel & Achille, 2016). Multi-perspectival IPA research differs from traditional IPA which tends to explore probable shared perspectives of a phenomenon by sampling one reasonably homogeneous sample of participants (Larkin et al., 2019). This is because multi-perspectival IPA researchers focus upon exploring complex experiences from more than one perspective. Despite this, multi-perspectival designs maintain a commitment to the theoretical underpinnings of IPA including idiography in data collection and analysis although this is extended "depending on the key components within a system or the number of actors within the relationship of interest" (Larkin et al., 2019, p. 185). Hence, multi-perspectival IPA can be helpful for attending to relational or systemic dimensions of a phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2019).

In the context of the present study, a multi-perspectival design appealed due to its ability to give voice to the multiple individuals involved in experiences of school entry deferral. This appeared appropriate given the systemic nature of this phenomenon involving young children, their parents, professionals, and school admissions authorities (DfE, 2021a). Additionally, researchers have highlighted that although complex and bold in nature, multi-perspectival designs may be helpful for providing a multi-faceted understanding of a phenomenon to inform and change practice (Hambly, 2014; Larkin et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009). This can also remedy

concerns around one-dimensional or de-contextualised meanings of events or processes (Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). Hence, a multi-perspectival design was employed due to its capacity to enable a broader and more triangulated understanding of school entry deferral, which might in turn inform practice for EPs working with individuals considering or experiencing delayed school entry.

In addition, a multi-method design was adopted where the researcher selected to use both individual semi-structured interviews and visual research methods. As argued by Smith et al. (2009), IPA as methodology requires methods which can elicit detailed first-person accounts and rich data about participants' thoughts, feelings, and stories with regards to the focus phenomenon. Individual semi-structured interviews were chosen for the present study due to how well-suited these are to IPA, where researchers have suggested that semi-structured interviews can give participants space to think, speak and be heard, whilst being optimal for developing in-depth discussions (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith et al., 2009).

Additionally, some researchers have begun to highlight the benefit of using visual research methods to enrich language-based understanding (Bartoli, 2020; Borrett & Rowley, 2020; Brown, Spencer, McIsaac, & Howard, 2020; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). Visual research methods are also compatible with IPA, which can incorporate imaginative work in data collection and be used flexibly by researchers to address the aims of their studies (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The combination of visual research methods alongside individual semi-structured interviews appealed as other researchers have suggested that this can support participants in sharing their stories by acting as a catalyst in interview contexts and bring about additional insights to gain greater understanding of participants' experiences (Bartoli, 2020; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). From the author's perspective, the use of both visual research methods and semi-structured interviews were selected to also bring to life the participants' experiences and enable the researcher to imagine life in their shoes more vividly.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who had meaningful lived experiences of school entry deferral, as required for theoretical consistency with IPA (Smith et al., 2009). With regards to the multi-perspectival design, a 'directly related' group of participants was sampled including parents and professionals immersed in

school entry deferral (Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). In this study, homogenous groups of participants were recruited including parents and professionals with lived experiences of school entry deferral. This is akin to research conducted by Rostill-Brookes et al. (2011), who explored experiences of foster placement breakdown with groups of young people in foster care, social workers, and foster carers to provide a central systemic narrative.

Parent Participants. In the present study, parent/carer participants were firstly recruited via a LA admissions officer who provided gatekeeper permission and invited eligible parent/carers to take part via email. The identification criteria included: being a parent/carer of a summer born child aged 5:0-6:11; where children had their start to school deferred from 2020 to 2021, as agreed by the LA admissions panel; and, where children had subsequently started school. The aim was to recruit parent/carer participants in the autumn term (e.g., September - December 2021) following children's school entry, after providing time for children to settle into school and for parents/carers to provide a rich picture regarding their full experiences of school entry deferral (Gorton, 2012). This decision enabled role clarity for the author as a postgraduate researcher taking an interpretive standpoint, as opposed to a TEP providing advice or support for the LA.

Professional Participants. Subsequently, relevant professional participants were recruited via parents/carers involved in the study, who also provided gatekeeper permission. This included professionals who had been involved with their child over the past 12 months, either as part of the admissions process or through meeting with themselves or their child on at least one occasion. Parent/carers were given a list of a wide range of professionals that they could invite, including Early Years Managers, Early Years Practitioners, Headteachers, Teachers, Teaching Assistants, Paediatricians, Speech and Language Therapists, EPs, Medical Professionals, or other key professionals who had been involved with their child. This was to allow for professionals to be recruited dependent on context (i.e., who was involved with their child throughout their deferred entry and willing to give consent) and who could provide rich, experiential data (Reid et al., 2005; Hefferon & Gil-rodriquez, 2011).

Sample. Although there is no one 'correct' sample size (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Idrees et al., 2020), IPA usually requires a relatively small number of similar participants who can provide detailed narrative and personal reflections (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). Hence, this study aimed for a sample size of between 6 and 12

participants who could provide insight as 'experts' regarding their experiences of school entry deferral (Reid et al., 2005; Hefferon & Gil-rodriquez, 2011).

In total, 4 parents and 2 professionals participated in the present study. All the parents and professionals met the outlined inclusion criteria. The professionals both worked with pre-school children who had their start to school deferred over the past 12 months. One professional worked with pre-school children, their families and early years settings following referral to their team for early support. Another professional worked with pre-school children and their families as part of a wider team in a nursery environment. The exact professional roles of participants and names of their settings have not been provided to protect the anonymity of participants as well as the children who were referred to in this study. Although this is a small sample size in total, multi-perspectival designs have been used as case studies and with small samples previously (de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Idrees et al., 2020; Larkin, Clifton, & de Visser, 2009; McInally & Gray-Brunton, 2021), as well as with larger groups (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). Information regarding all participants is presented in Table 2, which has been fully anonymised using pseudonyms.

Table 2

Participant Information

Participant Number	Participant Group	Participant Pseudonym	Child Pseudonym	Interview Term
1	Parent	Nina	Alex	Autumn 2021
2	Parent	Georgia	Rosy	Autumn 2021
3	Parent	Freya	Edward	Autumn 2021
4	Parent	Abigail	Ben	Autumn 2021
5	Professional	Janet	Ben	Spring 2022
6	Professional	Mia	Edward	Spring 2022

Note. This table shows anonymised information about participants, including groups of parents and professionals with experiences of school entry deferral.

Research Methods and Data Collection

This study used visual research methods and individual semi-structured interviews to enable participants to think, communicate and be heard (Reid et al., 2005).

Participants were asked to select a visual stimulus prior to their interview to help them think about and communicate their experiences of school entry deferral (Gorton,

2012). The criteria for selecting the visual stimulus were shared within the participation information sheet and specified that participants should select: an object, drawing or photograph that represented their experiences of school entry deferral; that they owned (i.e., had taken, made, or found themselves); and that was safe to share (e.g., that they felt comfortable with sharing and that did not include other children/adults). Other researchers have also used visual methods to aid semi-structured interviews with adults (Bartoli, 2020; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011), young people (Borrett & Rowley, 2020), and focus groups with children (Lipponen, Rajala, Hilppö, & Paananen, 2016). As well as being a mediator for discussion (Lipponen et al., 2016), it has been argued that visual research methods can lead to a deeper understanding of experiences and go beyond methods that are purely language-based (Bartoli, 2020; Borrett & Rowley, 2020; Brown et al., 2020).

Individual semi-structured interviews were used to gather rich data about participants' experiences of school entry deferral, and these were conducted virtually in line with university guidance. In using video conferencing as a method for data collection, the researcher provided as much flexibility as possible for scheduling interviews in line with participants' preferences, reduced possible power imbalances of navigating public/private spaces, and ensured both verbal and visual interaction to gather rich data (Hanna & Mwale, 2017). Prior to data collection, ethical approval was gained (see Appendix A) and following this informed consent was requested and gained from all participants (see Appendices B and C), which included the audio and video recording of interviews, as well as photographs/screenshots of the visuals used.

A draft interview schedule containing open-ended questions and prompts was designed with reference to prior research recommendations regarding exploring delayed school entry (Gorton, 2012), as well as suggestions for constructing interview schedules within IPA research (Smith et al., 2009). Following this, the draft interview schedule was piloted with an LA admissions officer to ensure that questions posed were appropriate, including questions exploring participants' visual stimuli, experiences of school entry deferral and transition to school. Following this, the interview schedule was finalised (see Appendix D), which was used as a guide for discussion rather than an exact script to enable flexibility for participants to share their experiences and expand on any points of interest.

All data was collected and stored in line with the provision of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act (2018).

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using IPA (Smith et al., 2009) principles and an adapted six-stage process. Like traditional IPA, data analysis started with exploring each participant's personal account of their experiences and analysing this idiographically before moving "outwards" to focus on thematic development (Larkin et al., 2019, p. 190). However, the six-stage process was adapted to incorporate the use of visual research methods and to reflect the multi-perspectival design (see Bartoli, 2020; Gaffney, 2020; Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Further details about the procedure adopted for data analysis are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

Adapted Six-Stage IPA

IPA Stage	Analysis Focus
Stage 1	Following transcription, analysis began by focusing on one participant's personal interview. This involved close examination of the original data by reading and re-reading the transcript (alongside the visual data), as well as, checking it against the virtual interview recording.
Stage 2	The content of the transcript was examined (alongside the visual data) and initial comments were noted exploring descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual points of interest. Text associated with the visual data was noted.
Stage 3	Emergent themes were developed by focusing on chunks of text.
Stage 4	Connections across emergent themes were explored and collated within a participant table.
Stage 5	The process above was repeated for each participant interview in turn, analysing the transcript using the same method.
Stage 6	The last stage involved identifying themes within each participant group (e.g., parent group and professional group) and then identifying themes across all participants. Figures and tables were created as a visual way to exemplify themes.

Note. This table demonstrates the adapted six-stage IPA procedure (adapted from Bartoli, 2020; Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

As portrayed in Table 3, the initial stage of data analysis commenced following transcription and involved the researcher immersing themself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcript alongside the visual data, whilst also checking this for accuracy. Bartoli (2020) suggests that this is important to ensure that both participants' words and visual representations are central to the analysis process.

The next stage involved exploring the content of the transcript (see Appendix E) and noting initial comments focused around descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual

aspects (Smith et al., 2009), as well as content which related to the visual data (Bartoli, 2020). The researcher also made their own reflective notes throughout this stage to somewhat 'contain' thoughts related to the existing literature which may be helpful for the discussion and ensure that participant's voice was integral to telling their stories (Bartoli, 2020; Smith et al., 2009).

Following this, emergent themes were identified by focusing on chunks of text and creating a concise statement of important points, reflecting both participants' words and the researcher's interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). The next stage involved applying a range of techniques including abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualisation, numeration, and function to search for connections across themes (Smith et al., 2009). These were collated and organised within a table for each participant (see Appendix F). Once the initial stages one to four had been completed for the first participant, this process was repeated in turn for each participant using the same analytic procedure.

Larkin et al. (2019) advocate that the direction of analysis moving "outwards" in a multi-perspectival design may depend upon the design and the nature of data gathered (p. 190). As the present study design included directly related groups and two participant groups with differing perspectives (e.g., parents and professionals), the final stage involved identifying themes within each participant group starting with the group that shared the first participants perspective (i.e., the parent group) and then identifying themes across all participants. As proposed by Larkin et al. (2019), analytic strategies for developing themes or exploring patterns included:

- Convergence (i.e., consensus or conceptual overlap)
- Conflict (i.e., disagreement or differing perspectives)
- Reciprocity (i.e., ideas that complement each other)
- Paths of meaning (i.e., shared experiences with different meaning)
- Lines of argument (i.e., important dimensions or aspects of the system)

Such analytic strategies allowed the researcher to attend to the uniqueness of participants' experiences and patterns of divergence, as opposed to only shared themes (Bartoli, 2020).

During this stage, the researcher moved towards a more interpretive standpoint whilst trying to make sense of participants' individual stories and how accounts related to one another. This involved creating tables whilst analysing data within groups and across all participants (see Appendix G), as a visual way to demonstrate themes (Larkin et al., 2020). At this point, the researcher considered how data might be

subsequently presented to prevent individuals from being recognised, such as providing sensitive extracts without attribution (e.g., without a pseudonym) or presenting group extracts (Loaring, Larkin, Shaw, & Flowers, 2015; Haskayne, Larkin, & Hirschfeld, 2014).

Although the stages above have been described in a step-by-step fashion, data analysis was iterative and dynamic in nature reflecting the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2009), which involved moving between the part and the whole at different levels (e.g., exploring words to sentences, single extracts to whole interview transcripts, and individual participant interviews to group level analysis). This supported the researcher's prolonged engagement and sense-making during the data analysis process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the UEA Ethics Committee. Ethics was fully considered in ongoing research supervision and this study was completed in line with the Code of Human Research Ethics (British Psychological Society, BPS, 2021) and the guidelines written by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Participants were provided with transparent information about the study and possible ethical issues were addressed within participant information sheets and consent forms. This included possible ethical issues related to the recruitment of directly related groups, visual research methods, virtual interviews, and possible threats to anonymity due to the nature of the study (Larkin et al., 2019). Participants were given opportunities to ask questions via email and within an initial virtual meeting, which was offered to all participants to build rapport and ensure they had understood the information provided. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw up until the point of data analysis and given the opportunity to check their transcripts for accuracy and completeness before commencing data analysis. To support participants with any responses to the research process, follow-up debrief sessions were offered.

This study had also initially hoped to explore the experiences of children aged 5:0-6:11 years who had their start to school deferred, although the researcher was unsure to what extent children would know of their school entry deferral and hence have the capacity to provide their informed consent to participate. Following ethical concerns around children's understanding of their deferred entry, ability to give informed consent and answer questions about this for the purpose of the research, the

researcher made the decision to focus on parents' and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral. This is further considered within the discussion of this paper.

Findings

Three main super-ordinate themes were identified from the phenomenological and interpretative analysis of participants' accounts of school entry deferral. The main themes that emerged were:

- Understanding Requests for Deferred Entry
- Making Sense of the Deferred Year
- Understanding Children's Transition to School

The following section aims to explore the shared understanding in accounts of parents (P) and professionals (Prof), whilst also highlighting areas of difference. This is particularly pertinent to the present study, where participants were involved in similar or shared experiences of school entry deferral with different relational roles to children, who they themselves had different journeys to school. In outlining each main super-ordinate theme, subordinate themes will be presented and illustrated with supporting extracts from participants' interview transcripts.

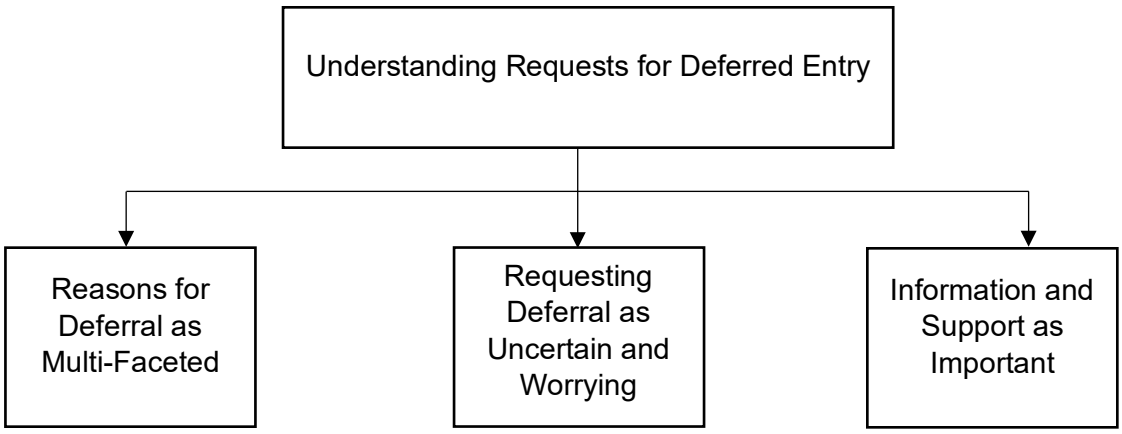
Understanding Requests for Deferred Entry

The first super-ordinate theme focused on the way that participants understood their experiences of requesting or being involved in requests for school entry deferral.

Three subordinate themes were identified. The first subordinate theme reflected some conceptual consensus about reasons for school entry deferral being multi-faceted in nature. The next subordinate theme identified some similarities with parents and professionals reflecting on feelings of uncertainty and worry during the school entry deferral request process. Lastly, the third subordinate theme that emerged highlighted the importance of information and support for those involved in requests for school entry deferral, despite each participant having varied experiences of the application process. Figure 1 provides an overview of the first super-ordinate theme and the corresponding subordinate themes.

Figure 1

Overview of 'Understanding Requests for Deferred Entry'



Reasons for Deferral as Multi-Faceted. Although parents and professionals were not directly asked to explain their reasons for school entry deferral or their understanding of reasons for deferral requests, all participants talked about this when reflecting upon their experiences. Parents' and professionals' accounts were identified as being conceptually similar where they indicated that reasons for deferral were multi-faceted. Within the following section, the experiences of participants are explored from the standpoint of parents and then professionals to support with explaining some of the similarities noticed.

Parents' Reasons for Deferral. Parents in this study spoke about a range of different thoughts underpinning their reasons for requesting deferred school entry. This often included the child's age or month of birth, although this was clearly not the only reason as illustrated by Freya who explained that she "never" wanted to defer her son "only because of that date."

All parents talked about their child's nature, skills, and/or development in relation to their reasons for requesting a deferred start to school. For example, Nina initially talked about how she had created a drawing of a whirlwind for her visual to represent her experiences of school entry deferral, as she described associating her son with "the whirlwind" and how he was "really, really energetic" in nature and "into everything". With regards to Nina's reasons for requesting delayed school entry, Nina talked about how she felt at the time and reflected that it would have been "a shame to have to contain" her son and "make him calm down".

Additionally, Nina talked about how her visual had “various letters and numbers flying inside it”, which appeared to represent her son’s enjoyment and readiness for learning early literacy and numeracy skills before starting school. Going further, Nina portrayed her son as enjoying “learning letters” but not being “particularly interested or showing any readiness in reading, writing, or counting”. For Nina, this appeared to influence her expectations of her son’s enjoyment of formal learning at school, where Nina described that they had “expected that that would be a bit of an uphill battle, battle with him if he went to go to school.” Nina’s account appears to indicate that her feelings about her son’s energetic nature and his readiness for learning contributed to her expectations of school possibly being a struggle for him at this point, which may have fed into her reasons for requesting deferred school entry.

Similarly, Georgia talked about her daughter’s nature as one aspect of her reasoning for requesting school entry deferral, “Erm Rosy was also very…she’s an introvert anyway like me, but erm. She would play with her peers, but not like other children would.” Although one of Georgia’s reasons was more focused around her daughter’s social traits and play with peers, Georgia went further in explaining how this influenced her social development as “it took her a long time to trust anyone”. Georgia also talked about how her daughter was “slightly behind on that social bonding aspect” when looking at her “scores” from her previous nursery setting, which may have influenced Georgia’s reasoning for requesting deferred school entry.

Both Freya and Abigail also discussed their child’s nature, skills or development when describing their reasoning for delayed school entry. Freya reflected on questioning her son’s school readiness in the context of a meeting with nursery staff:

> Freya: And then we just said, ‘Is he really ready?’ Because you could see, he was still a bit clingy. He still had a issue with toilet, that was just ongoing story, but I don’t know if this is something of his age or the way he is. (P)

Freya’s account indicates that one of her reasons related to concerns about her son’s school readiness, which may have been informed by her views about her son appearing “clingy” as well as his early toileting skills.

Abigail talked about her son’s social nature and attention skills being one aspect of her reasoning, where she described that he “wasn’t being the same as other children in groups” and “couldn’t follow things as well as others at nursery”. Taking this further,

Abigail discussed how they had requested early help when her son was at his “old nursery”, but this had been rejected. The extract below from Abigail’s account demonstrates the cumulation of her reasoning:

> Abigail: But that was the state we are in at the point of making the deferral, ‘What can we do to help this boy? We've had our early help assessment rejected. He has no attention skills. He can't sit in the carpet with the other children. He can't engage in an adult led activity. What, how is he going to cope? He won't be able to sit on the chair in the classroom, he'll just disrupt everyone. He'll try and run out the door. He, he won't cope with this.’ So, we did everything we could to…create something that would work if this didn't happen. (P)

Abigail’s account also depicts that her reasoning for requesting deferred entry may have been multi-faceted in not only reflecting her thoughts about her son’s nature, but also multiple aspects of context in terms not receiving early support and expectations of school environments (e.g., engaging in adult led activities in classroom settings).

Within their interviews, Georgia and Nina shared further reasons that had guided their school deferral requests for their children. Nina similarly talked about how her request was in part due to the formal nature of education within school environments and her own experiences of starting school:

> Nina: So, if I were, say to know, he will go to a utterly play based environment for next two, three years, I probably would not have bothered to request deferral. It’s, it was about this formal education. Erm. And also coming from [country] where education, formal education starts much later. So, I started school when I was nearly [age] [laughs]. (P)

Nina’s own experiences and beliefs appeared to have guided her decision making, as well as her understanding of her son and learning within school environments. From exploring Nina’s account, her reasoning appears to be multi-faceted in terms of reflecting thoughts about her child (e.g., his energetic nature, interest, and readiness for learning), formal education (e.g., expectations of school

and formal learning), as well as her own experiences of starting school (e.g., starting school at a later age). This multi-faceted nature of Nina's reasoning is depicted below:

> Nina: So, I have that experience, which just tells me, why would you send a prem child who just turned four [laughs] into an environment where he will have to learn to read and write and he's not ready for it? So, erm, that, I think very much that was guiding me as well. (P)

Georgia also talked about her reasoning from a personal perspective, although this was drawing upon her husband's background and their shared beliefs about delayed school entry making a difference to children:

> Georgia: But also, I think, my husband is [from country/region] and [from country/region] children don't go to school until they are six, seven. And so he was, he was very supportive of that… [omitted family details]. And he very much, I mean they have the same outcomes as the UK. He very much believes in that delayed start anyway. So, we were both on the same page with that. So even if Rosy hadn't had the challenges she had, I still think that being not the youngest in the year, not struggling [laughs], erm, makes a difference to children. (P)

Georgia and Nina's accounts appear to indicate that their reasons for requesting deferred school entry were also influenced by their individual, family, and socio-cultural contexts, which again appears to demonstrate that their reasoning was not one-dimensional but involved complex thinking and a range of facets.

Despite parents all having slightly different reasons for requesting school entry deferral for their children, they all reflected reasoning as a multi-faceted concept. This encompassed thinking about a range of different features such as the child's age, nature, skills, perceived school readiness, expectations of the school environment, formal learning, as well as their own personal and family experiences.

Professionals' Reasons for Deferral. When considering the experiences of professionals working with pre-school children, their accounts also reflected a range of reasons for children having a deferred start to school and the multi-faceted nature of reasoning. Firstly, Janet talked about her experience working with parents and how

from her perspective, requests for school entry deferral were sometimes about "parents'…anxiety and concerns about school". Janet explained this in more-depth later in her interview when saying:

> Janet: In other experiences I've had, it's because parents aren't ready. It's because parents are worried about what autism looks like in a mainstream school. They haven't always had a great experience with school themselves, so they are concerned about what that…erm…what that looks like for their child. So, then they want the safety of an early year's environment. And then that can be quite a different reason for staying. (Prof)

In the extract above, Janet describes how reasons for requests for deferral can include parents' readiness for their children to start school, worries about how their child may experience mainstream school settings, as well as possible concerns due to their own school experiences. When further discussing her experiences, Janet talked about how Covid may be influencing parents' current reasons and feelings about children starting school or having their entry deferred:

> Janet: Some of the children I'm working with at the moment didn't do as much time as they would have done in an early year's setting, so parents are sort of extra anxious. Some children who would have done a pre- preschool year didn't because of Covid. So, then they only started their preschool year in September and then parents are having to make a decision about school quicker than they would have done. And Covid is still around, so children are having chunks of time off. So, what is their preschool year hasn't been a fluid year and so there's a lot of anxiety in parents about, 'What does it look like for a child who is already developmentally delayed and hasn't had the experience over this year that they would have done and then has to go into a mainstream school?' (Prof)

For Janet, the extract above indicates that some of the reasons for requests for school entry deferral may be explained by Covid, where children may have missed out on opportunities to spend time in pre-school settings and parents may have experienced ongoing disruptions. This lack of a "fluid" pre-school experience appears

important to Janet in understanding the wider context of parents' concerns about children starting school.

Janet also discussed additional reasons for school entry deferral requests, recognising that these were sometimes about the child's "age and their developmental stage" or their position as a "summer born". When talking about children's development further, Janet described how "toileting, speech, and friendships" may "trigger" parents to request school entry deferral. Janet reflected that in her experience, some parents "feel that big school should come with an element of toilet training" and that parents "put a lot on speech" or "the ability to ask for something". Although Janet reflected upon her role "explaining that we can teach a child to communicate in different ways", her account also indicated that these aspects of children's development could be "a big deal for parents" in terms of their reasons for requesting deferred entry.

Mia similarly reflected upon feelings of worry and concerns about a child starting school, although this appeared to be from a shared position aligned with parents' feelings:

> Mia: We'd have been…we were very worried about the prospect of him not getting the deferral and, and then going on without the necessary skills. Erm, socially, emotionally, never mind all the kind of the other learning that…that goes on. Those were the two things we were really, really concerned about. (Prof)

In addition to the quote above which depicts Mia's concerns about the child transitioning to school without a certain level of social and emotional skills, Mia also talked about her rationale for wanting to be able to offer this to more families:

> Mia: I would like it for so many more children. I would like to keep them here for that extra year. I think they learn so much through the style of learning that we have here, and I think although some are ready to move on, there's lots of children who just are not, particularly now. And I…I think it, it's a shame we can't offer it for more children. (Prof)

Mia's account implies that one of the reasons for school entry deferral may be the offer of learning through a particular style in a nursery setting. For Mia, one of the reasons for delayed school entry may be concerns about children being "ready to move on" and the timing of this also appears relevant, where Mia described this as being particularly relevant "now". From the researcher's perspective, this emphasis on timing may be understood in relation to the wider ongoing context of Covid.

Both professionals' accounts are helpful for making sense of some of the affective reasons for deferred school entry, including parents' and professionals' worries or anxieties about children starting school. They also hint at how the ongoing context of Covid may impact upon children's perceived school readiness. Some of the reasons discussed by professionals hold similarities to those described by parents, including aspects of children's skills and development, as well as considering the learning environment and parents' own experiences of school. Although parents and professionals discussed different reasons across their personal accounts, collectively they all appeared to speak to the multi-faceted nature of reasons for deferred entry.

Requesting Deferral as Uncertain and Worrying. When talking about how they felt about making decisions and requesting deferral, there was an implicit sense of some degree of initial uncertainty and worry within the accounts of parents and professionals. This section begins by exploring the similar uncertainty expressed by professionals and parents when initially considering school entry deferral as an option and whether this might be the right decision, before then exploring other communicated feelings of worry related to the process.

Making the Right Decision. Firstly, both professionals talked about discussions that they had with parents who were considering school entry deferral and wondering about whether this was right thing to do for individual children. For example, Mia described having a conversation with the parents "about what we should or shouldn't do" and the question of: "'Is it the right decision?'" Janet also talked about her discussions with parents around decision making when explaining her visual of the crystal ball emoji. Janet explained that she chose this visual stimulus because from her perspective, the "biggest thing" that she came across was parents asking, "'Do you think it's the right thing?'"

In addition to both professionals discussing their experiences of being asked about whether school entry deferral was the right thing, Janet also reflected on her position as follows: "And, you can have thoughts and conversations, but ultimately, I

don't know. I don't know if making that decision to defer will make all the difference." There appears to be an implicit sense of uncertainty in Janet's account and her questioning over whether the decision to defer might make the difference hoped for or not. From the researcher's perspective, this questioning around the potential impact or difference that school entry deferral might make appeared to be a significant part of Janet's experience.

Two of the parents talked more directly about their initial feelings of doubt, worry and uncertainty when making decisions and applying for deferral. For example, Georgia talked about how she felt worried about whether school entry deferral was the right decision to start with: "So, I think it was…it worried me to start with, were we doing the right thing? Holding her back a year? How would that impact her?" Georgia reflected upon how she didn't know what was going to happen at the time of making the decision, again indicating a degree of uncertainty to begin with:

> Georgia: When you make that decision, you don't know what's going to happen. You don't know what the outcome's going to be. But looking back you can go, yeah that worked out for the best. It was absolutely the right decision. (P)

With hindsight, Georgia was able to evaluate the decision to defer her child's school entry as the "right" thing to do and described this as working out "for the best". Nina similarly described having "niggles of doubt" and wondering: "'Ooh, is this the right thing to do?'" In expanding upon her worries further, Nina explained that some of her worries were about whether her child would be "the only one, child who was deferred" and whether "other parents will be surprised", although she reflected that this did not happen in her experience. Nina also described feeling worried about being questioned or not having support from professionals:

> Nina: But I, I was worried that someone will question me more…er…and I was worried I will have less support from, from some professionals or teachers rather er. But it was just really natural process. So, I…I…I think it was a, you know, naturally good decision, and I think it was yeah. It was good. (P)

On evaluating her experience with hindsight, Nina felt it was a "good" decision and a "natural process" for her child.

Across these accounts, it appears that some initial questioning, uncertainty, and worry may have been part of professionals' and some of the parents' initial experiences of making decisions around school entry deferral.

Acceptance and Rejection. Freya, Abigail, and Mia also talked about having some feelings of worry or nerves, although this appeared to be more related to whether the request for deferred entry would be accepted and whether the child might have to transition to school.

Freya reflected upon how she felt that a transition to school at this point would be "difficult" and tried to talk to school staff about this as part of completing visits as a prospective parent. From exploring Freya's account, it appears she did not feel that her feelings of worry were accepted and that they were even denied by school staff in one setting:

> Freya: You know, if I will have to send this child, I believe that for me that will be very difficult and for my child will be difficult transition. Where I have all no answer to that question or just being denied even the right to worry about it, because 'Oh everybody just gets on well. After couple weeks, they all want to stay at school, and nobody wants to go home.' (P)

Freya's experience of worry around her child's possible transition to school was interesting from the researcher's perspective, as it highlighted that families may be navigating worry about their child starting school alongside decision making about school entry deferral.

Following on from this, Abigail talked about her feelings about what might happen if her request was not accepted: "And like I say, my biggest worry probably was it might get rejected, 'What on earth do we do?'" As a professional, Mia also talked about feeling nervous about whether the application would go through in time and be accepted:

> Mia: I guess with it because it was a much later application than normal, we were slightly nervous about whether he would actually get it. We felt it's entirely appropriate and he had erm, I mean, we'd given the evidence etc. and we thought, we thought he deserved it, but because it was quite a late application,

> we were a bit nervous as to whether it would go through in time and he would actually be…erm…be given it. (Prof)

When making sense of parents' and professionals' accounts of making decisions around requesting school entry deferral, it appears that initial feelings of uncertainty and worry may have been a natural part of the process. For some parents and professionals, feelings of uncertainty seemed to implicitly underpin initial thinking and questioning about school entry deferral. Others commented on feelings of worry about their child having to start school and nerves about whether the request for delayed school entry would be accepted. Although parents and professionals appeared to have some degree of similar feelings of uncertainty and worry, these may be underpinned by different thoughts or experiences reflecting individual nuanced meanings.

Information and Support as Important. Within their interviews, parents and professionals talked about their individual experiences or involvement with the application process for requesting school entry deferral. Both the accounts of parents and professionals appeared to reflect the importance of information and support, despite participants having varied experiences of the application process. This section integrates the accounts of parents and professionals.

When asked about one of the worst parts of school deferral, Abigail reflected upon her experience of writing a letter to support her application for her child's school entry deferral and feeling unsure about what level of information to include:

> Abigail: It was making the letter, it was. It was actually knowing how to phrase something. It wasn't made easily. You know if, if there was some little tick box exercise that you know you fill in a standardized form. I need to defer my child because of this, this, this, this, this. This is what we think the normal reasons are and this is what it is for my child. It's, it's not knowing that I write a very simple letter saying, 'I really think he needs this, please can I have it?' Or is it I need to quote reams and reams of law to support why I'm requesting this and why it's my lawful right? And depending on who you talk to, they come up with different perspectives, and you, as a parent, going through this for the first time, not having a clue. Yeah. They don't make it easy for you. (P)

Abigail also described how not being able to complete an online application was “stressful” and “difficult” for her as a parent: “Because you have a small child, things are difficult to stay on top of. You have a thought that you need to do something, and you can't do it because your child needs you.” Despite this, Abigail appeared to make sense of the deferral process itself as “pretty straightforward” once it was agreed.

Similarly, Freya commented on aspects of the application process being “difficult”, although this was more in relation to gathering the required information from prospective schools in the context of Covid:

> Freya: I think we were just unlucky to do it in the time we decided. I don’t think the process itself may be so complicated, but we have found these things, you know, speaking to people in the area of lockdown or the school was just not possible. Specially people who don’t know you, because like the nursery we still have a contact because of course we send the child or they send couple things, but that was very difficult. (P)

Within Freya’s account, she described attempting to gather the views of prospective head teachers “for their approval” and finding that schools were “very busy”, which made this part of Freya’s experience “quite stressful” although she “could understand that”. However, Freya also reflected upon receiving support from her child’s nursery setting and described their reassurance as “important” to her:

> Freya: So, we met them again and again. Me and my husband. Then we went through: What the process is like? What is involved? Again, why do we think we would like to do it? What do we think we will gain from it? Do we know if there’s any pros and cons? And, very important thing, I think for both of us, was that we were reassured, that he, as a child, he won’t add outgrow the nursery. They said that they believe, he will still find lots of, kind of, stimuli, you know, in the nursery. (P)

Going further, Freya talked about how the nursery setting supported her with the paperwork needed to apply for school entry deferral, and although they knew what they had to do, this made the process even more “reassuring” and “easy” from her standpoint.

When talking about her experiences of the application process, Georgia described the LA as having “a permissive kind of approach” and the prospective head teacher at the school concerned being “supportive of it as well”, which to her “made a difference”. Georgia explained:

> Georgia: “If you have a head teacher who’s not supportive of it, a county that aren’t supportive of it, I think that would put pressure on you as a parent to go, ‘Oh yeah she needs to go to school.’ But just having people who supported it, made it feel okay, I think. (P)

Although there were differences across the accounts of parents, the level of information and support similarly appeared to contribute to how “easy”, “reassuring” or “stressful” the application was for them.

From Mia’s perspective as an early year’s professional, she reflected upon how “pleased” she was to be able to support a family throughout the process of applying for deferral:

> Mia: I mean just very pleased that we were able to do it really. Erm…really pleased that we were able to, to get that sorted for the family. But they made it easy as well. I mean, we were able to give them information about it and they went off and happy to write their own letters and confident in their own ability to do all of that. There were an easy family to deal with. Erm, which obviously…they, they were in agreement with us, and they were pushing for it too. So, I mean very much just a, a positive memory of it all. (Prof)

Although Mia described providing information to support the family apply for school entry deferral, she also talked about the family being “an easy family to deal with”, “confident in their own ability” and “pushing for it too”.

In Janet’s account, she talked about parents having differing levels of awareness and knowledge about the application and decision-making process for school entry deferral:

> Janet: You know, parents often hear that word at meetings, or they've heard it from friends and that kind of thing. And I was feeling sort of a bit of a mystery

> around how you get one. Are you allowed to ask for one? Are you given one? Is it a parent's decision? Is it a Local Authority decision? And there always seems to be a bit of a mystery around how this thing happens, you know this deferment happens. And some parents don't know about it, so some parents don't think to ask. And some parents absolutely know about it, so it's in their mind early on. (Prof)

Some of the parents also reflected upon things that they found supportive, or thought would be supportive for other parents interested in requesting school entry deferral in the future. For example, Georgia talked about how she found it helpful to talk to different people and how "invaluable" a social media support group was for her:

> Georgia: Erm, and, and something that really helped me was being on the Facebook group erm for other parents that are thinking of doing it and being able to ask that question in a group of people. Like, 'What was your experience?' And all the questions you worry about like, 'How does it feel for a child going into a school when they are the oldest in the class? And what's your experience of that?' And being able to ask other parents who've been through it before. Erm, you know, could they share their experience of it. And obviously everyone is different. But you get an idea, from asking other people. So that support group was…invaluable. (P)

Abigail discussed how she thought greater awareness and normalising school entry deferral was "important", and how she found it helpful to see people post things about cross-cultural differences in school starting age:

> Abigail: But I think a greater awareness that this does happen and it's normal and it's for real reasons and actually, compulsory school age is age five, so this is fine. Erm, is, is quite important. I think there's a lot to educate with that. Erm, I find a lot of solace in things people post about other countries, 'Well in our country, we don't stop at school until age six.' And you think, 'Okay! Yay! You definitely did the right thing! He started a whole year earlier!' And that helps a lot. (P)

Nina also talked about how her son's pre-school teachers were "supportive" and how it felt nice that school entry deferral was not seen as "weird". Nina explained this further in saying that: "it was nice to feel that it becomes more of a norm, because I, from my point of view, it was nice to give parents a bit of choice." For some of the parents, it appeared that having the opportunity to talk to others about their experiences enabled them to ask questions or normalise school entry deferral.

In summary, this subordinate theme recognised that information and support were important aspects of the experience of parents and professionals with regards to requesting deferred school entry. Despite this, the extracts provided indicated that there was some variety in how different aspects of the application process were experienced by those involved.

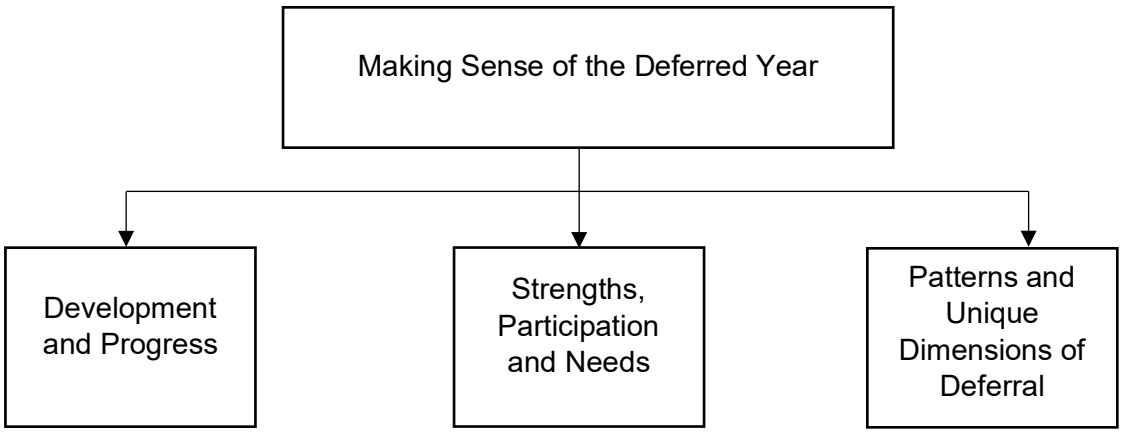
Making Sense of the Deferred Year

The next super-ordinate theme was focused on how participants made sense of their experiences related to children's deferred year or additional time before starting school.

This super-ordinate theme was made up of three subordinate themes. The first subordinate theme was concerned with how parents and professionals understood children's development and progress as part of their additional time before starting school. Another subordinate theme was centred around how celebrating strengths, participation, and understanding needs were important for some participants. The last subordinate theme identified both patterns and unique dimensions across participants experiences of the deferred year. An overview of this super-ordinate theme is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Overview of 'Making Sense of the Deferred Year'



Development and Progress. All the parents and professionals talked about their individual experiences of children's development during their deferred year. Within this section, parents' and professionals' experiences are explored to attend to their differing positions and roles in relation to children.

Progress as Lovely and a Relief. The accounts of parents demonstrated their perspectives on the progress made by their children during the deferred year, with examples including children forming their first friendships, building confidence, developing their attention skills, and becoming calmer. In general, parents talked favourably about the progress made by their children during their additional time before school, and this also appeared to be an emotionally significant part of their own experience. For instance, Georgia explained that she had chosen her visual (a photo of her daughter having her face painted at her nursery leaver's event) because this summarised how much her daughter had "grown" and she named that it made her "feel happy" when she looked at it. Experientially, Georgia described how "lovely" it felt seeing her child start to make friends and the following extract clearly depicts how much this meant to her as a parent:

> Georgia: I think seeing her make friends, erm because she just hadn't before that year. And just seeing her erm…holding hands with other children, actually talking about other children. Erm, and and this picture, like the, her confidence had grown no end. So, I think it was, I think was that, making friends bit, was

> just, ‘Oh wow! She’s making fri…’ It just felt so lovely. You know, when it’s your child and they are finally making friends, it was really really lovely. (P)

Georgia was not alone in celebrating the changes and development that she had noticed for her child during the deferred time before starting school.

Freya similarly talked about how her son had started “making friends” and she described how different this was to his previous year in nursery:

> Freya: So, it was something that, you know, was very different er…to the previous year when he was in the nursery. Where I know that he has been playing along the other children, but he could never really say a name of a child. He could say, oh, I play with this occasionally or with that, but never to such a link that he would like to bring them a present or share something with them. (P)

Freya’s visual (a wrapped-up figurine and drawing as presents) depicted the change that she noticed where her son started to develop friendships and make presents for his peers. Freya also described how this was “such a lovely thing” for her as a parent, where it showed her that he “finally” had someone who he felt “close to” and that he wanted to go to nursery because “he was missing his friends”. When reflecting on her best experiences during the deferral year, Freya talked about how having an “easy transition to another year in the preschool” and seeing her child “happy, making friends, really moving forwards” was “reassuring” that they had “done a very good thing”.

Abigail talked about how nursery staff tried to support her son and move him forwards with “his attention and his listening and his behaviour and everything altogether”, which was “fantastic” to her as a parent. She went further in explaining how her child “rose in the erm early years assessment” which “was good”. The extract below indicates that this gave her “joy” and may also have been reassuring from her perspective:

> Abigail: And I think the joy of seeing him progress along their early year’s framework. I know it's, it's a marker and it's not everything, but it's very shocking to have your four-year-old rated a 16 months year old in some areas and to see

> him move along is fantastic. It just makes you feel, 'Okay. He's gonna be alright.' And that helps. A lot. Yeah. (P)

This extract demonstrates that Abigail found seeing her son make progress emotionally significant, where this was helpful and reassured her that he would be okay in the future.

Nina also reflected on how she had noticed that her son, who she had previously described as "a bit of a whirlwind", started becoming calmer during his deferred year: "So, er, there was a stage, I think in May or June, where suddenly he became much calmer at home…and that was really lovely, you know, as a parent it was a huge relief." Additionally, Nina talked about how "lovely" it was to see her child form close friendships with other children, and how she connected with other parents during the deferred time:

> Nina: And er…. Alex developed, so in last year, Alex developed really close friendship with one particular girl and quite good close friends with couple more kids, and that was lovely [coughs]. And connecting with their parents and arranging little play dates was lovely. (P)

The extracts outlined clearly portray how pleased parents were to see their children develop and make progress during their deferred year. A range of different developments were outlined including children making friends, developing confidence, improving attention skills, and becoming calmer. Despite individual differences between the exact nature of the progress made by children, the accounts of parents appear to be favourable with regards to progress in general.

Progress as Memorable and Affirming. Professionals also talked about some of the skills developed by children in the year before they started school, although they reflected upon this from their own individual standpoints. Firstly, Mia talked about how the child she had worked with developed a range of skills as part of their deferred year and how this affirmed to her that they had made the "right" decision:

> Mia: Erm, and we really felt he started to flourish with his English and was able to express himself so much better. He…I mean that, but that was just one of the achievements. He, erm, all his self-help skills had been pretty good during

> his first year with us, but we realized how much he improved in that second year, and especially with toileting. He…that was something he just couldn't get to grips with in the first year, but the second year he really did. He…he was much more open to navigating his way around the, kind of, the variety of activities we have here. In the first year he was quite…I guess he would choose one or two things that he was comfortable with. The second year he really opened up to all sorts of opportunities. Erm…and with other children as well, so the activities but also his engagement with others. So, it really started to…we were very happy we'd made a right, the right decision for him, he just flourished. And we felt he was then ready to go on to school. (Prof)

Mia also described one particularly memorable moment for her as a professional, where the child brought a book into nursery and was "able to retell the [first language] story in English to us". Reflecting upon this, Mia talked about how "lovely" it was to "be able to see that his language had come on so far, but also his confidence. It wasn't just the language, it was both." Mia talked about how these two skills "marrying together allowed him to feel really good about himself" and how "he could do something that we couldn't!" This achievement appeared both important and memorable to Mia, as illustrated below:

> Mia: It was a real moment of achievement for, for him, and obviously that, as early years practitioners, that's what we love...to see the children really feel that kind of achievement and boost their self-esteem. So yeah, that that book was definitely a moment that we won't forget. (Prof)

When Janet reflected upon her professional experience of being involved with children throughout their deferred year, she said "in my experience it's worked for some children, and it hasn't supported other children in the same way". Janet further explained this when discussing children's progress in relation to their early year's environment:

> Janet: But I think…so for some children they do another year in an early year's environment, and it's a good early year's environment, and they are aware of the targets and how to move a child forward. For other children, the early year's

> environment that they stay in doesn't necessarily do anything with them. So, then it's not that great experience that sometimes parents think it will be. (Prof)

Janet also gave an example of one of the best experiences she could remember about working with a child who had their start to school deferred:

> Janet: He stayed on at a preschool. They were brilliant preschool. They did a really good job. And he just spent that year developing, growing, blossoming and he went into school with no EHCP and no other need. You know, he never popped back up again. We never heard from him again. And I think some of it was developing his English, Mum feeling secure in the area, making friends. (Prof)

Despite Mia and Janet's having different experiences of being involved with children throughout their deferred time, their accounts both indicate that seeing children make progress is memorable to professionals. Additionally, professionals appeared to evaluate the deferred time as "right" or having "worked" when children were supported to make progress within their nursery settings.

Strengths, Participation and Needs. Across the accounts of professionals and parents, some of the participants made sense of their deferred time by talking about how it was spent celebrating children's strengths and participation, as well as, understanding their individual needs. Whilst more nuanced as a subordinate theme, this was portrayed as "important", "everything" and "invaluable" by those telling their individual stories. Accounts within this section are organised around complimentary ideas.

When talking about her visual and how this represented school entry deferral, Mia talked about a page she had chosen from a child's learning journey and why this was "important" to her as an early year's practitioner:

> Mia: I think because, erm, at [nursery], we are all about celebrating the child, and their individuality, their own strengths. And we…we recognized very early on he had challenges with other things. Erm, and therefore it was really important to us that we focused with him on the things that he really enjoyed and that we could celebrate. (Prof)

A further extract from Mia's interview emphasises how "important" this was for her as a professional: "And…it…the…we could really, kind of, erm…enter into that together and he could, he would lose himself in that. Erm so that…that was why it was something that felt…always felt really important to celebrate with him." Mia's use of language within this extract indicates that celebrating strengths and participating together may have been significant to her experiences as a professional.

From a parent's perspective, Freya also talked about how "personal" her son's change in participation and enjoyment was for her:

> Freya: The feeling I had, but is quite, is very personal, that the year before he was there, but he was just not able to take in what there was on offer. Wherever, the deferral year, yes there were activities which possibly were very similar to the previous year but has enjoyed them. And he was able to take part and remember what they were doing and basically enjoy his time. (P)

Abigail similarly talked about her son's participation, as well as reflecting upon her understanding of her son's autism during her interview. When explaining her visual (her son's ear defenders), Abigail talked about how gaining her son's diagnosis was an "important" aspect that represented her experiences of school entry deferral:

> Abigail: They represent Ben's autism, and we knew since Ben was aged [omitted], that something wasn't quite right with Ben. He wasn't being the same as other children in groups, he was erm more disruptive and couldn't follow things as well as others at nursery. So, we knew things weren't…quite normal and we had no idea what. Erm, so they represent his sensory needs that he has from his autism. So, he uses them to block out sounds when he's finding noise overwhelming and they help him. So that's, that's what they represent to me. And they were important for the school deferral because we got his diagnosis in [month during deferred year]. (P)

Additionally, Abigail described one of her best experiences, which involved her son being able to take part in some activities:

> Abigail: That he was, I mean, I went to help, erm, but they adjusted enough that I could go to help, and he took part normally. You know, we all sat down at the end and had sort of picnic together and had lunch and we played on the play equipment they put out for a bit. And, it just was, more normal. (P)

As depicted in the quote above, this also represented an aspect of shared participation where Abigail and her son were engaging "together" in the picnic. Abigail also expanded upon how important understanding her son's needs was for her as a parent in supporting his journey to starting school:

> Abigail: So, you know he still was behind, but he was far closer to where he should be starting Reception then he would have been had he started just turned age four with no diagnosis, no one-to-one provision, no EHCP, no nothing. So, this time has brought us everything really. Everything to understand him and know what he needs, and I have a journey that can be more successful for him. (P)

From Abigail's perspective, this opportunity to understand her child better appeared pertinent, and perhaps a life marker for a more "successful" school journey.

Georgia similarly talked about her experience of discovering and getting to grips with her daughter's sensory needs as part of her school deferral experience:

> Georgia: So…erm…so Rosy has, we discovered during that time, sensory processing disorder, erm so she struggles with the feeling of clothes. Erm and we kind of realised something was going on when she moved to [omitted] nursery. And…it…so that time it gave us time to get to grips with that from a…what is it, how do we deal with it, to see an occupational therapist to help with that. (P)

Furthermore, Georgia went on to describe how this extra time was "invaluable" to her as a parent in terms of supporting her child's transition to school:

> Georgia: Erm, and it just gave us that extra time for us to work on the sensory processing disorder, now she's been able to, to go to school in her school

> uniform, which she wouldn't have been able to before. Erm, to form friends that she has gone into school with, which has made the transition so much easier for her. Erm. And, and so it's been invaluable, I'd say. Absolutely invaluable having just having that extra time. (P)

Although not represented by the accounts of all participants, this subordinate theme highlighted how some of the participants made sense of aspects of their school deferral experiences. For some participants, their school deferral experience involved celebrating children's strengths, participation, as well as understanding their individual needs. Despite the participants having differing experiences, these were conceptually similar in being perceived as valued aspects of their school entry deferral experiences.

Patterns and Unique Dimensions of Deferral. The last subordinate theme attended to some of the patterns and other unique dimensions of participants' experiences during the deferred year. Within this section, one pattern around parents' experiences of explaining school entry deferral will firstly be explored, followed by some other unique aspects of individual participants' experiences.

Parents Explaining School Entry Deferral. On a conceptual level, all the parents acknowledged that they sometimes had to explain that their child was deferred in their interactions with others. This pattern is clearly depicted in the two extracts below:

> Nina: Yeah. And…expla…explaining to…to, I mean I didn't have to explain much but I often…erm…yeah, just mentioning to other people that er, you know Alex was deferred always, you have to do a little, just a little, little. You have to explain yourself. Which. And no-one was particular…no one told me like… most people were saying, 'Great decision, yeah, from way we can see it.' But still having to explain is always…you know, you know what it's like. (P)

> Georgia: You feel this…there is not many people who do it still. Not many people at all. So, you feel this real. Erm, people kind of say, 'Oh! Why are you doing that?' Erm, and you find yourself needing to explain each time. (P)

Abigail similarly talked about explaining her decision in her interactions with others when speaking with family members and having to "cope" with the dominant narrative of children having a "right" school year:

> Abigail: And you've got phrasing like that to, to cope with, 'Shouldn't he be in his year?' 'Well, no, because his year is his new year, the year that he is in right now. This is the right school year for him to be in.' And having to justify that is pretty hard, and that feeling, that expectation that because the cut-off is 1st of September, 31st of August, and that is that, and that is fixed, and, 'Gosh, why on earth have you done something different? (P)

Although Freya also discussed being asked about her son's school entry deferral, she reflected upon this not being a negative thing from her perspective but instead reflecting the curiosity of others:

> Freya: So, we have lots of this one but not in a negative thing. It's rather curiosity, or just you know, something that has been done differently and people just like, 'Oh actually, I didn't know you can do it or when my children were young, you could not have done.' This is a little chat, though we have. That's what happens when you introduce him and tell him how old he is. That's what the conversation seems to lead like, 'Oh, why? [laughs] Why, why, why?' (P)

Whilst these two extracts depict differing perspectives, both parents similarly reflected upon having to navigate conversations around why their child was deferred or they had chosen to do something different. This was identified as an interesting systemic dimension of all parents' experiences, where parents seemed to be in a loop of explaining their reasons over time (e.g., from making a LA case to speaking with others in their family and educational systems).

Unique Dimensions and Changes Over Time. With regards to some more unique dimensions and aspects of participants' experiences, one parent talked about how their child's enjoyment of nursery changed over the course of the year:

> Er…and he loved being in the nursery, but I did get a sense that he started to get quite bored by the end of that year. Having said that, I think for many kids,

> say kids who are quite er old for their year group, so say autumn born kids, they often become really ready to go to school… (P)

This was an interesting and unique dimension to this parent's experience, which appeared to be made sense of systemically in relation to patterns and discourses around older children being more school ready. Although this parent generally reflected that their experience of school entry deferral had been "more positive" than expected and a "good decision", they did mention that this did make them wonder if they should have "pushed" their child on earlier at the time.

Another parent talked about how they felt that there had been a "real missed opportunity" for early support and described how their child had been "excluded" from one nursery setting. From her position as a parent, she summarised the range of feelings that she had about this: "What I feel about the exclusion is that it meant that everything fell into place, so despite it being absolutely horrendous, it meant that we finally got all the doors opened and got what we needed…" Despite this experience being a unique part of this individual parent's story and experience of the deferred year, this was again made sense of systemically and reframed helpfully by the parent as opening "doors" to support. This parent talked about school entry deferral as being "the best and only thing" that she was able to do to support her child at the time.

Although these two accounts are very different, they both reflect that there may be unique aspects to parents' experiences as part of their deferred year. Both unique aspects speak to changes happening for children over their deferred time within their nursery contexts.

When exploring some of the unique experiences of professionals regarding the deferred year, again these appeared to reflect participants' understanding of changes over time. From Mia's position working within the context of a nursery setting, she reflected upon trying to support a child with toilet training as being "hard" and made sense of this as being "very common" for children around this age:

> Mia: Erm…I think we found as practitioners, we found the…the endless toileting issues hard because it, it felt for a long time we weren't making any progress at all. Erm, and although we know that is…something that's very common with children at this age, erm, there were moments when…and I, I say we quite a lot 'cause we…we're, we're very much a team…we felt like where this was going

> on and on and on. Erm but it was worth it in the end. Erm so, I mean that stands out as something that was hard work. (Prof)

Although Mia evaluated this part of her experience as “hard work”, she also described this was “worth it in the end” from her point of view, which may indicate that seeing this progress and change over the deferred time was important to her as a professional.

From Janet’s position as a professional, she understood patterns of change or progress over the deferred year in relation to how children were supported to work towards their targets within their early year’s environments. Janet described how in some situations she had seen delayed school entry “really achieve nothing”, for instance where “they just go back to preschool and there's no real thought put into progressing those targets and working with those children.”

Janet also talked about changes over time for parents of children who were deferred in terms of their peer groups and how this changing social context can be “hard” for parents:

> Janet: So, for me, it's often around the parents. That their, their peer groups, their friendship groups, can be a little bit skewed then because they might have been friendly with the year group that they started preschool with. But then their children have gone into school, whereas their child stayed at preschool another year and then they don't necessarily make friends with the new families coming in. So, parents can often need quite a lot of support. Because they erm, yeah, like I say, they’re missing the group that they perhaps did baby groups with and started preschool with, and that kind of thing. So, it can be hard for parents. (Prof)

On a wider level, Janet talked about how her interactions within her own professional environment made her think differently about school entry deferral. Namely, Janet described how: “an Educational Psychologist said to me once, and I've always thought about this, that if you defer a child at four, you know, five-ish, that sees them through till they're nineteen.” This was something that Janet described as having “always really stayed with me”, due to her context of working with pre-school children and staying “in the moment”. When making sense of this further, Janet revisited her

visual of the crystal ball emoji and reflected upon the possible long-term impact of decision making around school entry deferral:

> Janet: So, to think that we made a decision for a four-year-old that will then impact them when they're nineteen, does make me think, you know that adds to that whole crystal ball thing, ‘What's that going to look like?’ (Prof)

Collectively, the extracts from Janet’s interview indicate that she was thinking about the children’s context when trying to make sense of the deferred year, as well as the context for parents and herself as a professional. Despite the differing nature of these two professional accounts, they both highlight unique aspects of their professional experiences and how understanding of deferred entry is developed in context.

In summary, this subordinate identified patterns around parents having to explain and justify their decisions as part of their experiences of the deferred year. The parents’ accounts depict differing responses from other people as well as how this was experienced differently by the individual parents. Additionally, unique dimensions emerged across the accounts of some of the participants, which appeared to reflect changes in individuals’ experiences over time and their specific contexts.

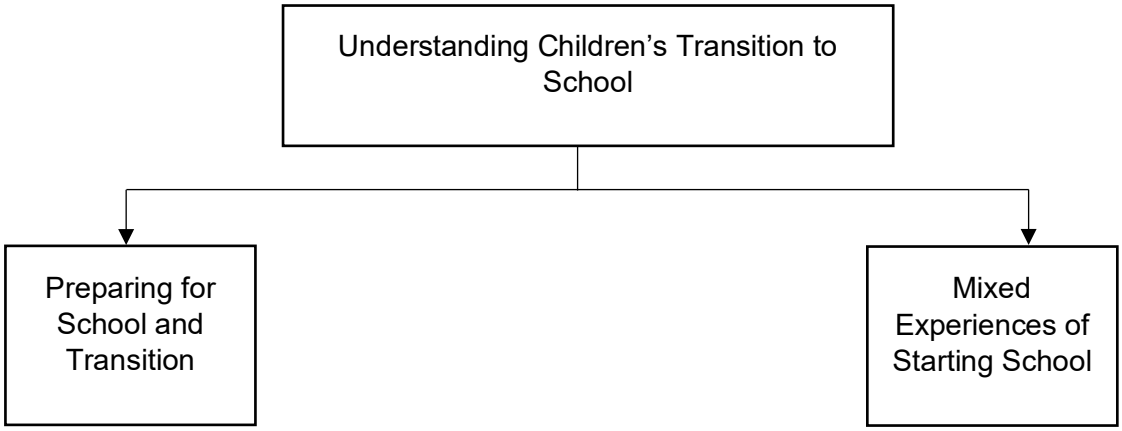
Understanding Children’s Transition to School

The last super-ordinate theme was focused on how participants understood children’s transition to school and included two subordinate themes.

The first subordinate theme was concerned with how participants felt about their children starting school and the transition practices that were in place, where the second subordinate theme focused on how the transition to school was evaluated by parents and professionals. An overview of this super-ordinate theme is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Overview of 'Understanding Children's Transition to School'



Preparing for School and Transition. Many of the participants talked about their experiences of children's transition to school in terms of the extent to which they felt that they had the opportunity to prepare or engage in transition practices. The accounts within this section are considered collectively, firstly attending to how the pandemic may have influenced participants' experiences and then exploring transition practices that were discussed.

Firstly, some of the parents and professionals talked how the pandemic had influenced their experiences of transition. For instance, Nina talked about how transition was "utterly uneventful" due to the reduced visits to schools set against the context of Coronavirus: "…you know, it was all happening in pandemic, so they hardly had any visits or anything like that and…Alex….Alex didn't question it, at all." Extending this further, Georgia explained how she did not experience sessions to support her child settle into school and how things were different to the norm: "We, erm, so normally at school you'd, you'd go in and settle them, if that makes sense, you'd have settling in sessions. And none of that could happen because of Covid."

Mia similarly explained how transition practices had changed in relation to the pandemic, although she focused on reduced communication from her perspective as a professional: "But because, obviously, everything changed with the pandemic, we didn't have as much communication as we might normally have done…about all of that."

Despite some parents and professionals indicating that the pandemic may have reduced transition practices to support children starting school, both professionals talked about sharing information as part of their transition practices:

> Mia: But erm, so from what I…the bits that I was involved in…erm, the teacher from the school he went to came over to us and we had a erm meeting sitting outside, chatting about it and then, erm, she obviously took all that information back to er…to her colleagues. What I'm not sure about is how much, at that stage, they were able to go into school etc. and whether they had the stay and play sessions. (Prof)

> Janet: So, I would highlight that to a colleague, but my transition would be exactly the same. It would be sharing what the preschool have found successful. It would be handing over the EHCP targets and making sure the school could meet those needs. (Prof)

As portrayed above, Janet described her transition practices as “the same” with regards to supporting children’s journey to school, regardless of whether they had been deferred or not.

Abigail also discussed sharing information as part of one of the ways she helped to prepare for her child’s start to school from her perspective as a parent:

> Abigail: Uhm, we prepared very well for school. We sent the entire EHCP application to the school so they had all the information they needed. School said they sought out a constant one-to-one for Ben. So that was wonderful. No matter what he'd have 100% one-to-one. And the EHC application went through, we got the draft finalized two weeks before school started. (P)

Collectively, the accounts of parents and professionals indicate that visits to school, communication and sharing information were transition practices relevant to supporting children following deferred school entry. Some participants made sense of transition practices in relation to social norms and the context of the pandemic, which may have understandably reduced school visits and communication for some individuals in this study. Other participants reflected upon the transition practices that

they had adopted, with information sharing across nursery and school settings appearing most prominent.

Mixed Experiences of Starting School. All participants reflected upon their experiences of children starting school following their deferred entry. Within the accounts of participants, individuals discussed children having “smooth” transitions, coping “well” and having “good” experiences, as well as experiencing “struggles” and “difficult” times.

Aspects of Starting School as Going Well. When exploring parents’ accounts, two parents talked about their children’s first few days at school and how things appeared to go “well” for them during this time:

> Georgia: Erm, so, her first day, she went in, no crying. She’s…she’s very, very tired. Erm, all the children are tired by the end of the week, and I think that’s natural, because they’re going in five days a week and Rosy’s not used to that, you know, she was [omitted] days a week at nursery. Erm, but, all in all, she’s coped very well. (P)

> Abigail: So, everything was in place, and we had three absolutely wonderful days with no incidents and the TA was saying to me, ‘I'm going to take a bit of step back. Things are going so well I don't need to be on hand so much. I'll try not to interfere so he can interact with his, his friends.’ (P)

Nina similarly talked about her son having a “smooth” transition:

> Nina: Er, yeah, he was happy he would go with his friend, one of his friends, because two of his friends went to different schools. And his transition was really quite smooth. (P)

This extract appears to indicate that the transition for Nina’s child went well because he was able to transition with one of his peers.

Freya described how starting school had been a “good” experience for her child and discussed his feelings about making new friendships: “He, you can really say, it’s a good experience for him. He is excited to go. He’s excited about er making new friends.” Expanding on her son’s experience of starting school further, Freya talked

about how her son was excited to learn new things and described him as having an "easy" start:

> Freya: He's, he is really happy. And he get excited about things they do, so like even learning a silly sounds or something. It just seems very, very, very boring to an adult. He comes very excited. All I have learned these, and I want to do this one. So, no, a very easy start. No tears whatsoever. (P)

Nina also reflected upon how her son was enjoying his experience of being at school: "But he loves it. You know, all this novelty, all this stimulation, he loves." For Nina, this positive transition experience appeared to be linked to new and stimulating experiences. Similarly, Georgia commented on how her daughter was coming home from school having "learnt something new" and "telling me that she's made new friends". Georgia summarised that "all in all" she thought her daughter had "coped very well" with the transition.

From Mia's professional perspective, she talked about how she perceived the child as having a "positive" experience through communication with their parents and hearing that "they've been pleased with the way he's settled in erm…and there haven't been any problems."

On the whole, the extracts presented indicate that many of the participants experienced aspects of children starting school as going well following deferred entry, although this ranged from some participants focusing upon the early days to others talking more widely about their children having "smooth" transitions. Interestingly, all of the parents mentioned their children's experience in relation to "friends" during their transitions and some discussed children learning "new things".

Some Struggles in Starting School. The accounts of some of the participants also indicated that parents were experiencing children having "struggles" and "difficult" times as part of their transition to school.

Nina talked about her son's experience of learning two languages across home and school contexts as "a little additional challenge" from her perspective, describing that it can take children "a little bit longer, to, you know, to process both languages and both er…alphabets and reading systems". However, Nina also talked about her son as "happily" experiencing phonics, which may indicate that he was still enjoying learning phonics despite the extra challenge.

Abigail talked about “incidents” in school and how things were “not going very well” from her perspective:

> Abigail: So, sadly, despite everything that's been done and happened in the run up to this, it’s not going very well. So, I think that would have been the case anyway, but I think rather than a disaster with a lack of understanding at least for myself and my husband, we actually have a diagnosis. We know better what's going on with Ben. (P)

Georgia also shared some of the struggles her daughter experienced getting ready for school in the mornings:

> Georgia: Erm, and then, every morning is a struggle, getting Rosy ready for school, because clothes don’t feel right on her, she struggles to put her shoes, her socks on, erm with her sensory processing disorder. (P)

Expanding on this further, Georgia told me how scenarios involving getting dressed for school could be a “little bit stressful” for her as a parent, although her transition experience was “better” than she “thought it would be.”

From a professional perspective, Janet talked about a child she was working with who was “struggling” following starting school: “He didn't have a settled preschool time, so he deferred, and he's now gone into reception, so he's done a term in his reception class now and he's really struggling.” From Janet’s perspective, she explained how she was not sure if this was “because he deferred” or due to how he was experiencing his classroom context: "He has a lot of sensory needs, and the classroom is loud and overwhelming. But I, if I had a crystal ball, it might have been loud and overwhelming if he'd gone in with his peer group.”

Janet also shared how her role sometimes involved supporting school staff in understanding that deferred school entry may not necessarily change a child’s needs:

> Janet: Some schools think that if a child does another year in preschool, it'll all be okay by the time they get to school, and sometimes it's supporting staff to know that that need hasn't gone away. They may have developed some of their

skills and they may have got better in, in some areas at managing and, and, that kind of thing, but it doesn't necessarily mean the needs gone away. (Prof)

Collectively, this subordinate theme reflects the mixture of parent and professional experiences that emerged about children starting school. This ranged from reflections on children having "good" experiences and coping "well" to experiencing "struggles" and "difficult" times. This may somewhat reflect the nature of each participants' individual experiences, as well as the interaction between children's individual differences and changing school contexts following deferred school entry.

Summary of Findings

As outlined within this section, three super-ordinate themes and eight subordinate themes were identified following data analysis. The main super-ordinate themes included understanding requests for deferred school entry, making sense of the deferred year, and understanding children's transition to school. The eight subordinate themes went further in exploring the meaning of these aspects of participants' experiences, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of Findings

Super-Ordinate and Subordinate Themes	Example Quote
Understanding Requests for Deferred Entry	
Reasons for Deferral as Multi-Faceted	"So, I have that experience, which just tells me, why would you send a prem child who just turned four [laughs] into an environment where he will have to learn to read and write and he's not ready for it?" (Nina, P)
Requesting Deferral as Uncertain and Worrying	"So, I think it was…it worried me to start with, were we doing the right thing? Holding her back a year? How would that impact her?" (Georgia, P)
Information and Support as Important	"But I think a greater awareness that this does happen and it's normal and it's for real reasons and actually, compulsory school age is age five, so this is fine. Erm, is, is quite important." (Abigail, P)
Making Sense of the Deferred Year	
Development and Progress	"And for me there was such a lovely thing. 'Cause, as I'm saying, it was just showing me that he finally, socially, he have someone he feel close to, and I know that he was going there because he was missing his friends." (Freya, P)

Strengths, Participation and Needs	"And we…we recognized very early on he had challenges with other things. Erm, and therefore it was really important to us that we focused with him on the things that he really enjoyed and that we could celebrate." (Mia, Prof)
Patterns and Unique Dimensions of Deferral	"I've also seen it really achieve nothing because they just go back to preschool and there's no real thought put into progressing those targets and working with those children." (Janet, Prof)
Understanding Children's Transition to School	
Preparing for School and Transition	"We, erm, so normally at school you'd, you'd go in and settle them, if that makes sense, you'd have settling in sessions. And none of that could happen because of Covid." (Georgia, P)
Mixed Experiences Starting School	"Some schools think that if a child does another year in preschool, it'll all be okay by the time they get to school, and sometimes it's supporting staff to know that that need hasn't gone away." (Janet, Prof)

Note. This table demonstrates the key findings of this study integrating quotes from parents and professionals to exemplify some of their individual and multiple perspectives.

Discussion

This research explored parents' and professionals' experiences of children having a deferred or delayed entry to school in the context of England (e.g., summer born children starting school at compulsory school age following their fifth birthday). It aimed to address the research question: How do parents and professionals make sense of their experiences of school entry deferral? Adopting an interpretive, phenomenological, and systemic approach enabled three super-ordinate themes to be identified.

Understanding Requests for Deferred Entry

One of the first key findings identified that parents' and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral included their involvement in requesting deferred school entry, which emerged from the reflections of all parents and professionals based upon their own individual experiences.

Although participants were not directly asked to explain their understanding of reasons for requests for school entry deferral or why their child was deferred, this was a topic that all participants naturally discussed as part of their experiences. This study found conceptual consensus amongst participants where reasons for school entry deferral were identified as being multi-faceted. Some of the reasons shared by parents

included reflections on their individual children (e.g., their age, nature, skills, and perceived school readiness), the context of educational settings (e.g., lack of early support, expectations of the school experience and formal learning), and their own experiences and position (e.g., beliefs and experiences of starting school). There are a range of psychological theories that may be relevant to understanding these experiences, including models of school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1998; UNICEF, 2012), theories drawing upon ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005), as well as social narratives about starting school (Turunen et al., 2015).

Some of the reasons for requests in the present study appear consistent with those reported in the wider literature (DfE, 2021c; Gorton, 2012; Horstschräer & Muehler, 2014). For instance, previous research by the DfE (2021c) which explored parents/carers reasons for requesting delayed school entry also found that two of the main factors given included children's school readiness and their child's medical condition/developmental delay. Similarly, Gorton (2012) reported that participants' decision to retain children in nursery within their Scottish context was influenced by different models of school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1998), although children were delayed starting school for a variety of reasons and reported to have different levels of need. Horstschräer and Muehler (2014) also found that age and developmental status were predictors of school recommendation, when looking at data around compulsory medical school entrance screening in German federal states.

As mentioned, the accounts of parents in the present study additionally highlighted the role of wider factors which were relevant to their individual requests for delayed school entry. This echoes the DfE (2021c) research to some extent which also acknowledged some contextual factors that may have been considerations for parents/carers. However, accounts from professionals within the present study additionally highlighted how *feelings* of anxiety and worry about starting school may also play a role when making sense of requests for school entry deferral. Collectively, participants shared multiple and complex reasoning for school entry deferral requests as opposed to these being driven by one line of thinking or feeling alone.

In the present study, parents and professionals appeared to experience feelings of uncertainty and worry whilst working through the process of requesting deferred school entry. Although these feelings may appear similar on the surface, it is acknowledged that this was expressed in different ways by participants in relation to

various thoughts or aspects of their experiences (e.g., decision making, school visits alongside requests, support from other professionals, and acceptance versus rejection of request). This unique finding has not been previously identified by other studies, although previous research has recognised differences in parents/carers experiences with some reporting a smooth and easy process and others finding it to be more difficult and stressful (DfE, 2021c). The present research may be helpful for understanding how requesting school entry deferral may have felt for participants in this research within their individual contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). When considering the possible implications of this finding, it appears pertinent to be mindful of the feelings of both parents and professionals involved in the process of requesting delayed school entry; further implications are discussed later in this section.

Another subordinate theme identified from both the accounts of parents and professionals reflected that information and support were perceived as important for those requesting deferral, although participants' accounts indicated that they had varied experiences of the application process. This finding appears in line with previous research indicating that parent/carers may have different experiences of the deferral process (DfE, 2021c), with varying approaches from schools regarding how favourably they treat requests and some reporting a lack of awareness and understanding. Within the present study, some parents also talked about how they found support from various sources helpful (e.g., nursery settings, headteachers, LAs, support groups, etc.), as well as opportunities to normalise school entry deferral in their interactions with others.

Making Sense of the Deferred Year

The next key finding was centred around parents' and professionals' experiences during children's deferred year before starting school and how they made sense of these within their individual contexts.

In the present study, narratives emerged across the accounts of parents and professionals of children developing a range of different skills whilst in nursery contexts during their deferred year. Examples included children making friendships, developing their confidence, improving their attention skills, developing skills in expressive language and English, as well as aspects of self-help such as toileting. These findings are consistent with previous research which found that parents/carers were positive about the opportunity to defer and felt this was the right decision to help

their child mature or catch-up developmentally (DfE, 2021c). In addition, the findings of the present study are in line with research exploring delayed school entry in Scotland (Gorton, 2012), where positive outcomes included children making progress in aspects of their social, emotional, language and communication skills.

However, the findings of the present study went further in exploring how this progress or development was experienced by parents and professionals. Despite the exact nature of the individual progress varying, the accounts of parents indicated that seeing children's development was experienced as lovely and a relief for them personally. The narratives of parents highlighted how much it meant to them as individuals to see their children reach milestones and move along with their early year's progress. From the perspective of professionals, their accounts indicated that progress was memorable and used to evaluate whether the deferred time was "right" or "worked". One of the professionals also talked about how this varied in their experience depending on the way in which the early year's setting supported the child to work towards their targets. This may somewhat be explained by theories emphasising the importance of context on children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005), as well as frameworks for understanding how individuals might attribute information to explain causes for certain events (Heider, 1958).

When understanding participants' experiences of the deferred year, some professionals and parents commented on how this included celebrating children's individual strengths, participation, and understanding their needs. Although this subordinate theme was not present for all participants and there was considerable variety across accounts, these aspects of their individual journeys were described as "important", "personal", "invaluable" and "everything". Gorton (2012) similarly found that one positive outcome of delayed school entry included parents coming to terms with their child's needs, although this was from the perspective of education staff and EPs.

Another unique finding from the present study highlighted further patterns and unique dimensions of school entry deferral, which were understood as somewhat systemic in nature (Fox, 2009). These included patterns of parents having to navigate conversations around why their child was deferred or why they had chosen to do something different, as well as unique dimensions of parents and professionals experiences. When considering participants' sense making, these unique dimensions

were sometimes understood in relation to social norms, as well as their individual contexts and changes occurring over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005).

Understanding Children's Transition to School

The last key finding identified children's transitions to school following school entry deferral as part of their experiences. This was based upon the accounts of both professionals and parents in discussing transition practices and children's first term at school following school entry deferral.

One subordinate theme that emerged from the accounts of some of the parents and professionals focused upon transition and preparing for school after children's deferred year. Two of the parents and one of the professionals talked about their experiences in terms of having hardly any visits to school, settling in sessions and reduced communication, making sense of this in relation to the ongoing pandemic. This also appeared to be understood by participants with reference to social norms about what would typically happen around times of transition to school. Ecological models of transition may be relevant to understanding this finding (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1994; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), where these emphasise the role of wider social contexts around children's transition to school (Vogler et al., 2008). Additionally, some participants talked about the transition practices that they had used to try to prepare for children joining school settings, such as information sharing across nursery and school systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Socio-cultural perspectives around transition may also be helpful in considering this finding, as these tend to focus on social interaction and transitions being collectively produced within specific contexts (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Dockett et al., 2012; Vogler et al., 2008).

Additionally, the present study found that participants had mixed experiences of starting school, where parents and professionals described children having some "good" experiences and coping "well" to experiencing "struggles" and "difficult" times. When exploring the accounts of parents and professionals further, it was identified that this reflected the interaction between children's individual differences and changing educational context from nursery to school following their deferred entry (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Dockett et al., 2012; Griebel & Niesel, 2009). One of the professionals also spoke about supporting children, parents, and school staff over transitions, as children's needs may be ongoing despite them making progress and developing skills in some areas. Again, this is consistent with Gorton (2012) who found

that children needed ongoing additional support as they joined primary school when exploring delayed school entry in Scotland. This finding is also in line with wider literature which suggests that the transition to school can be an exciting yet difficult experience for children and their families (Fontil et al., 2019; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research Ideas

The present study has both strengths and limitations. Although there is growing interest amongst researchers in using the methodological approach of IPA in innovative ways (Larkin et al., 2019), there is still a relatively small proportion of research adopting multi-perspectival designs (de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Idrees et al., 2020; Larkin et al., 2009; McInally & Gray-Brunton, 2021; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011) and it is also quite rare to combine IPA with the use of visual research methods (Bartoli, 2020).

In this research, adopting IPA and a multi-perspectival design enabled the researcher to explore ways that different stakeholders such as parents and early year's professionals made sense of their experiences of school entry deferral. Not only did this allow for understanding delayed school entry from the perspective of those with expertise, but it also enabled a more contextualised and systemic narrative by attempting to reflect the realities of different adults in children's close circles or systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). Where there are benefits to adopting a multi-perspectival design in terms of attempting to triangulate viewpoints (Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011), data analysis is often complex and researchers need to be sensitive to potential risks of losing detail at the level of the individual (Larkin et al., 2019). Although every effort was made to retain aspects of individual variation, the researcher found balancing perspectives and unpicking themes of divergence difficult. However, it is suggested that this complexity may still arise within traditional IPA designs, where participants may have very differing experiences due to intersecting identities or differing contexts structuring their lived realities.

Another possible limitation of this research was the use of a purposive sample which has been highlighted as being subjective and prone to researcher bias in situations where researchers cannot justify their sampling methods (Wagner & Bunn, 2020). The present research adopted a purposive sampling method to recruit participants with meaningful lived experiences of school entry deferral in line with IPA

for methodological consistency (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, a ‘directly related’ group of participants was sampled to provide a more systemic understanding of children having a delayed start to school and a sampling criterion was used to ensure that groups could provide rich, contextual, and experiential data (Reid et al., 2005; Hefferon & Gil-rodriquez, 2011).

Although this study had hoped to explore the experiences of children and a wider range of professionals (e.g., Teachers, Paediatricians, Speech and Language Therapists, EPs, Medical Professionals, etc.), this was not possible in practice to due ethical reasons around gaining informed consent whilst maintaining commitment to the intended design. As a result, the experiences of children, other stakeholders and key professionals were not captured within this research. Other multi-perspectival designs have also acknowledged limits around including all possible influential groups and how compromises are sometimes necessary when conducting research within the context of complex systems (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). Future research could seek to explore the school experiences of children following delayed school entry in collaboration and with the informed consent of parents/carers. Additionally, further studies could investigate the views and experiences of a wider range professionals to understand their involvement and viewpoints on delayed school entry.

It is also recognised that the present research has a small sample size, although it did not aim to adopt an empirical or generalisable approach and was more interested in exploring the meaning of school entry deferral from different perspectives. Like other research using IPA (Wagner & Bunn, 2020), this study does not claim to represent the experiences of all parents and professionals who have insight into school entry deferral. Additionally, IPA is interpretive in nature hence the findings represent the researchers sense making as well as participants (Condliffe, 2021) – the double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2015). With that said, it is suggested that this research provides insight into multiple experiences of school entry deferral from the process of making requests to children’s transition to school and contributes to the small body of existing research surveys exploring delayed school entry in England (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c). Uniquely, the findings of this study highlight how some parents and early years professionals may have made sense of their experiences and felt about different aspects, such as feelings of uncertainty and worry around requesting deferral.

One further strength of this research is the combination of IPA and visual research methods, which was a creative way of exploring participants' lived experiences of school entry deferral. As noted in other studies, one of the merits of the use of visual research methods was that this offered participants with the time and opportunity to reflect on what this meant to them ahead of their interviews (Bartoli, 2020). Where participants differed in their choice of visual (e.g., object, drawing or photo), this enabled parents and professionals to select something meaningful that reflected their realities. All visuals added a further layer of insight into each participant's perspective and exploring these at the start of the semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to quickly learn about something important to the participant from a person-centred perspective (Rogers, 1980).

From the researcher's view, the visuals in this study represented significant aspects of parent's thinking and memories, as well as professional's involvement in school entry deferral. This appeared to add to the depth and richness of the data gathered (Bartoli, 2020). Where it was recognised that multiple meanings may be drawn from visuals and this could be a further possible limitation, data analysis remained grounded within the words and language used by participants (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). Participants' references to their visuals from their interviews were integrated throughout the findings where possible and these remained central to the findings (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011), even in their absence as with other studies (Bartoli, 2020). The use of visual research methods may also be helpful for future researchers exploring how children make sense of starting school, perhaps including both summer-born children who were deferred and those who were not deferred to understand their perspectives.

Implications

The findings of this study may be of interest to a range of different individuals, including parents/carers considering school entry deferral and professionals within wider systems around them, including EPs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005).

When considering implications for EPs around decision making and requests for delayed school entry, the findings indicate that it is important to listen to parents' and professionals' perspectives, explore their rationale for considering this approach and understand that their reasons may be multi-faceted in nature. Where reflections around individual children are raised by parents/carers, it will be important to build a

holistic picture of the child (e.g., their individual characteristics, strengths, developmental history including whether they were born prematurely, any additional needs, etc.), as well as wider factors that may be relevant to shaping their experiences (e.g., their family relationships, home environment, activities enjoyed at home, early learning/pre-school context, any additional support or professional involvement, etc.). Given that the findings of the present study affirm prior research indicating that concerns around school readiness may feature as part of this reasoning (DfE, 2021c; Gorton, 2012), it will be important for EPs to clarify what this means to those involved and gently consider the school readiness of children, families, and schools together (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1998; UNICEF, 2012).

Whatever the decision made by parents/carers, EPs have a duty of care to young children and their families and are in the position to advocate for their best interests. Although there will be differences between each child and their family circumstances, it is argued that a focus on children's basic and ordinary needs is likely to be relevant regardless (Maslow, 1943; Mount & O'Brien, 2002). This might include considering with the family whether any support is needed to meet their basic needs, as well as, facilitating the child to share their views (DfE/DoH, 2015). Where it is acknowledged that it may be difficult for EPs to ensure the meaningful involvement of children in the decision-making process, it is suggested that exploring children's understanding and views about starting school to encourage self-advocacy is important from a rights-based perspective.

Validating the feelings of parents and professionals around children starting school and decision making related to school entry deferral also appears significant, as this was experienced as uncertain and worrying for some participants in the present study. Not only is this in line with person-centred approaches that emphasise having unconditional positive regard for others (Rogers, 1980), but it may be pertinent for parents concerned about the responses and support that they will receive from professionals. EPs may also be able to explore what the child, parents/carers, and educational professionals might hope to learn or experience during the child's time before starting school. With regards to children with SEND, EPs may be able to work with parents/carers and key professionals to consider whether any additional planning, support, resources, or intervention may be needed to facilitate these opportunities and their future progress.

To support parents/carers, early years settings, schools, and health professionals with awareness and knowledge of delayed school entry, EPs are well placed to signpost to relevant information, advice, and support groups. Examples may include the DfE (2020a, 2021b) guidance, school admission authority websites, accessible overviews of the psychological literature and evidence base around delayed school entry, as well as signposting towards social media groups. EPs could additionally work together with school admissions authorities to facilitate shared understanding of research and practice related to delayed school entry, as well as reflect upon the experiences of parents and professionals. This might provide opportunities to reflect on admission arrangements for requesting delayed school entry, the information available for parents/carers about the process, systems for decision making, as well as any follow-up procedures for informing and supporting parents/carers.

Another implication of this research is that it emphasises the importance of children making meaningful progress during their deferred time before starting school. Such progress was evidently valued by both parents and professionals in the present study, despite the nature of the progress varying in the accounts of participants. A potential role for EPs may include supporting children to make meaningful steps of progress during their deferred time where needed, which could involve consulting with parents and early years practitioners, offering training around evidence-based interventions, and/or supervision to assist with problem-solving. This may be particularly pertinent given the possible impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on children's early development, as well as the experiences of families and educational settings. The findings of the present study also indicate that EPs may be able to work with early years practitioners in focusing on children's strengths, participation, and targets during their deferred year. Additionally, EPs are well placed to work with parents, early years practitioners and other relevant professionals to co-construct a holistic understanding of children's needs.

Lastly, the present research indicates that it may be helpful to facilitate dialogue between parents, early years settings and schools to share good practice around transitions. This could include discussing approaches to assist with information sharing in line with the SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 Years (DfE/DoH, 2015), perhaps using strength-based and person-centred approaches. It may also include reflecting upon other common transition practices such as school visits and settling in sessions

to ascertain whether additional and/or different opportunities may be helpful for children who had their school entry deferred.

As the accounts of participants in the present study indicated that children may have had mixed experiences of their transition to school, it may be appropriate for EPs to support children and families experiencing difficulties during this time. A potential role for EPs could include working with parents, early years professionals and school staff to facilitate shared understanding around children with SEND in relation to their strengths, needs and progress thus far.

Conclusion

Whilst complimenting and extending the available research (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c; Gorton, 2012), this study has been the first to provide an in-depth exploration of parents' and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral in England. The findings identified three main super-ordinate themes in understanding participants' experiences of requesting school entry deferral, making sense of the deferred year and children's start to school.

With regards to participants' experiences of requesting deferral, the findings understood parents' and professionals' reasons for school entry deferral as being multi-faceted. Accounts of parents and professionals indicated that they may have experienced some feelings of uncertainty and worry when requesting deferral, although information and support were seen as important. When reflecting upon their experiences of children having additional time before starting school, all participants talked about the development and progress made by children which was clearly valued by both groups of participants. Some participants also shared memories of celebrating strengths, participation, and getting to grips with their children's needs as significant aspects of their individual experiences. Patterns of explaining school entry deferral emerged for parents, as well as some unique dimensions across the experiences of participants. When reflecting upon children's start to school, both transition practices and mixed experiences of children starting school were identified following deferred school entry.

This research adds value to the existing body of IPA studies within the field of educational psychology (Oxley, 2016), by uniquely drawing upon both a multi-perspectival design and visual research methods (Bartoli, 2020; Borrett & Rowley, 2020; Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). Where this was a complex study

and is not intended to be generalisable due to its qualitative nature, it is hoped that this research will create further thinking and dialogue around the practice of children having a deferred or delayed start to school. This appears particularly pertinent given the indicative research suggesting that the number of requests has been increasing annually (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c).

Reflective Account

Introduction

This reflective account will focus upon my own personal research experience. Drawing upon the work of Schön (1983), this will involve 'reflection-on-action' and returning to my experiences at different points throughout my research journey. It will also include reflecting upon my role as a research-practitioner and thinking critically about how this informed the creation of both the literature review and empirical paper.

Firstly, my reflections will be presented from the pre-empirical to the empirical stage of my doctoral research. This will include thinking about my position in selecting a research topic, reviewing the literature, identifying research opportunities, and designing the subsequent study. Attention will then be given to the empirical stage of research, including my thoughts about piloting the interview questions, recruiting participants, and collecting data about participants' experiences whilst acknowledging and attempting to bracket my own pre-conceptions (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Following this, I will consider my experiences of data analysis and my own sense making process whilst engaging in IPA. This involved a double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2015), whereby I was trying to make sense of the information provided by participants, who were in turn making sense of their own experiences of school entry deferral (Smith et al., 2009).

After considering my research journey, this account will shift to my thoughts regarding the implications of the research (the 'so what?'). It is argued that this research has many possible contributions. Consideration will firstly be given to the personal contribution of this research to my development as an individual completing their first large scale research project, whilst recognising my dual role as a Postgraduate Researcher and TEP. Reflections will also be shared regarding the ways in which this research may contribute to the existing evidence base related to school entry deferral both internationally and in the UK. Importantly, implications for practice will be considered for EPs working with parents who may be considering school deferral or have already deferred their children's start to school. This aspect of reflection is important so that the learning potential of my experience is not lost (Gibbs, 1988), but can be used to enable children and parents to be effectively supported moving forwards.

Lastly, attention will be given to my pre-flections for the future (the 'now what?'). This will include outlining my ideas about how this research may be disseminated, my unanswered questions and thoughts for future enquiry that could further expand on the knowledge base regarding school entry deferral.

Reflections On My Research Journey

Selecting a Research Area

My interest in school entry deferral developed over the past five years and was nourished by my ongoing professional experiences. I first learnt that parents of summer born children could delay their start to school by one year when I was working as an Assistant Psychologist (AP), which surprised me as I was not aware of this when working as a Teacher in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Initially, I was keen to learn more about this research area due to my interest in supporting children the EYFS and to resolve my own personal lack of knowledge! As I knew very little about school entry deferral, my initial wonderings focused on some of the practical elements, such as learning more about the decision-making process, who might be involved, and the possible rationale for this practice.

Subsequently, I noticed that the area of school entry deferral continued to 'crop up' in my experiences as an AP and TEP, both within my direct work with children and their families across different LAs, but also in conversations in peer supervision with TEPs and EPs. I began to consider the impact that school entry deferral might have on young children from an evidence-based perspective, whilst also wondering about how this practice might influence the educational opportunities available to children in the broadest of senses. This was underpinned by a combination of my interests, including facilitating play, participation, and social inclusion, as well as my position working with children in complex systemic contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005).

Additionally, I was curious about the experiences of children, parents, and professionals in relation to children's transition to school following deferring entry to school. This interest stemmed from my teaching background and was based upon my observation that starting school could be quite an emotive time for some children and their families in general. Hence, I was keen to learn more about this transition for children who were starting school one year later and how this was experienced by those involved.

Reviewing Literature

Whilst I was interested in school entry deferral and aware this was relevant to EPs across different LAs, I also felt strongly about selecting a topic where further research might have a unique contribution and a positive impact upon the lives of children, families, and professionals in some way. Thus, I explored the theoretical literature and nature of empirical evidence available related to school entry deferral, as well as reflected on my own context to guide the development of my research question.

When initialling searching for literature related to school entry deferral, I found myself struggling to find peer-reviewed published papers that were directly relevant, and hence I began to doubt whether I was completing my literature search in the most effective way. This led me to adapt my search strategy, whereby I used a wider range of terms, search engines and broadened my inclusion criteria beyond that of peer-reviewed published papers within the UK context. I found this was extremely helpful as it allowed me to consider school entry deferral cross-culturally and identify a range of relevant literature.

Theoretical Literature. I was particularly interested when reading papers related to children starting school (Connelly & Gersch, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2013), models of school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1998; Gorton, 2012; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Towers, 2018), as well as, learning about redshirting (Frey, 2005; Sucena et al., 2020) and transition practices (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Connelly & Gersch, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2013; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Reflecting on my reading enabled me to realise that the existing literature was mainly pre-occupied with explaining the reasons for the occurrence of delayed school entry as a phenomenon, which was sometimes set against models of school readiness or debated in terms of its value as an intervention (Gorton, 2012; Towers, 2018). This made me wonder about theories that might be relevant to explaining the experiences of those involved and/or how this may have impacted upon their lives. Reviewing the theoretical literature made me realise that I was more interested in taking an open-minded approach rather than being theory-driven moving forwards (Smith et al., 2009).

Empirical Evidence. When reading the empirical evidence available at the time, I noticed that researchers from the US and Germany were investigating the frequency, characteristics and sociodemographic background of children who had their start to school delayed, as well as the possible implication of this practice (Becker

& Tuppat, 2018; Larsen et al., 2020; Sucena et al., 2020). Additionally, most of the peer-reviewed articles available were approaching school entry deferral from a scientific paradigm using quantitative methodologies to attempt to explore statistical effects or associations (Becker & Tuppat, 2018; Larsen et al., 2020; Sucena et al., 2020). I also noticed that despite this being an important area of study, researchers had identified that there had been methodological challenges to exploring delayed school entry and questions about the validity of this body of research (Fastenau, 2015; Towers, 2018). This confirmed to me that I would be more interested in approaching this topic from an interpretative paradigm (Oxley, 2016; Smith et al., 2009, Willig, 2013).

Only a few studies had explored school entry deferral within the UK (Gorton, 2012; DfE, 2018, 2019). In England, research exploring delayed admissions for summer born pupils had explored a few different avenues, including surveying the number of requests received to LAs (DfE, 2018, 2019); admission authorities' policies and the proportion of requests granted (DfE, 2018, 2019); factors that may have been influencing parents' decisions (DfE, 2018); and early evidence about the impact of delayed entry on test performance (DfE, 2018). Whilst completing this thesis, further research also emerged exploring ongoing trends, whether LAs had been changing their approaches to granting requests, as well as parents' reasons and factors which may be affecting demands for delayed school entry (DfE, 2021c). Despite the emerging evidence (DfE, 2021c), I noticed there was a lack of qualitative research to provide depth of meaning with regards to how school entry deferral was being experienced by those directly involved.

Researcher Context

In addition to reflecting upon the available theoretical literature and research, I explored and reflected on my own context as a TEP. In the LA where I was placed and completed this research, early identification and response to needs was identified as a priority area within the strategy to provide inclusion for children and young people with SEND. This appeared pertinent to me given that EPs may be involved with pre-school children where school entry deferral is being considered by parents/carers as a response to needs (DfE/DoH, 2015). Additionally, I was aware that this topic aligned with service interests and some EPs responsibilities within the LA, including reviewing literature regarding educating children out of year group and supporting with decision

making on the LA admissions panel. Hence, I reflected that further research may be of relevance to EPs with different responsibilities across ecological systems to support children, their families, and other professionals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005).

When considering the possible contribution or difference that further research could make to the lives of children, families, and professionals, I wondered whether exploring multiple experiences of school entry deferral might have several possible implications depending on the findings. My view was that exploring experiences of school entry deferral might enable further discussions around the meaning of this practice from a systemic perspective (Fox, 2009). Additionally, I considered whether such research might give voice to those experiencing school entry deferral and enable EPs to better understand individual's responses. I also wondered whether this may allow new understandings to be formed about ways of supporting children and parents throughout their lived experiences. This also contributed to the development of my research question.

Identifying a Research Question

Although I was acutely aware of my interest in interpretive paradigms and qualitative research, generating a research question was not an easy process for me as it represented making a commitment to the start of my research journey. I was aware that there were many different research opportunities available, and I felt unsure about which research question to commit too! Engaging in research supervision at this point was particularly helpful for me as it enabled me to identify my main area of interest based upon my reading and learn more about my own position. With that, I formulated my initial research questions which were:

- What are children's, parent/carers', and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral?
- How do individuals involved in school entry deferral make sense of their experiences within their wider contexts?

Whilst I was interested in exploring the experiences of children involved in school entry deferral as evident in my first research question, I was unsure whether parent/carers would give informed consent for their children to participate in my research given that they would be very young, may not be aware of their school entry deferral, and/or able to verbalise their experiences about this. Hence, I was aware that I may need to adapt my research questions to ensure their suitability (Agee, 2009).

Following gaining ethical approval from the UEA Ethics Committee (see Appendix A), attempting to recruit participants, and reflecting upon this in research supervision, I decided to narrow the scope of my research questions to focus upon understanding parents' and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral. This felt the most ethically appropriate decision given my difficulties in gaining informed consent for children's participation and concerns around asking children about their additional time before starting school. It also appeared the most methodologically sound as I was hoping to explore experiences of school entry deferral in a meaningful and systemic way. From reflecting upon my research questions further, I additionally noticed that they appeared to be asking or focusing on the same thing from an interpretive perspective. Hence, my revised research question was as follows:

- How do parents and professionals make sense of their experiences of school entry deferral?

Epistemological Position. As explained by Smith et al. (2009), research questions are grounded in our fundamental assumptions about epistemology. Hence, formulating research questions can reflect a researcher's beliefs about knowledge and what data is able to tell us. My research question reflects my interests in studying the lived experiences of multiple individuals involved in school entry deferral (Smith et al., 2009), which led me to a phenomenological approach to my research. At a deeper level, it communicates my ontological position of relativism and epistemological position of interpretivism (Mead, 1934; Scotland, 2012; Sultana, 2014). This is based upon my belief that individuals may have different subjective experiences of phenomena which reflect their equally valid realities (Clement, 2019). This explains why I was keen to understand the realities of those involved in school entry deferral and focus on how they made sense of their experiences within their specific contexts (Oxley, 2016).

My research question is also underpinned by my beliefs about knowledge being constructed within wider social and cultural contexts. I believe it is important to learn from the perspectives of individuals participating in a phenomenon to gain understanding (Scotland, 2012). I think that this belief stems from my own life experiences, where I have both learnt, not learnt, and misunderstood due to my own 'social GRRAACCEESS', relationships, and experiences within my specific cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Burnham, 1992, 1993; Burnham, Alvis Palma, & Whitehouse, 2008; Butler, 2015; Roper-Hall, 1998). Based upon this belief system,

it was important to me that my research question would 'give voice' to those experiencing school entry deferral and emphasise a commitment to each individual participant, whilst acknowledging my position interpreting through a hermeneutic lens. This contrasts to a positivist standpoint which might have alternatively aimed to elicit absolute knowledge about an objective reality and viewed this as value neutral as opposed to being situated within a given context (Scotland, 2012).

Methodology and Design Decisions

Following formulating my research question, I found making methodological decisions much more straightforward as I was aware that IPA may be appropriate following university teaching around qualitative research methodologies. IPA appealed to me due to both its focus upon how individuals make sense of their own lived experiences and its attention to interpretation, where it acknowledges that the researcher plays a role in making meaning of participants' accounts whilst attempting to understand a phenomenon as experienced (Hefferon & Gil-rodriquez, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Where I was aware of some of the theoretical underpinnings of IPA from initial university sessions, further reading around this methodology helped me to better understand the combination of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography in more depth (Oxley, 2016; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015). The idiographic sensibility of IPA was another key feature that was attractive to me as a researcher due to its interest in the particular, individual nuance and detail, and understanding personal meaning in context (Oxley, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). This reassured me that IPA would be methodologically consistent with my epistemology.

I also found comparing IPA to other qualitative methodologies and approaches helpful for ensuring this would be most appropriate for addressing my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). For example, Thematic Analysis appeared less suitable as it would not incorporate an idiographic approach and has been argued to be more appropriate for research questions "focused on something other than (just) personal experience and sense-making" (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 42). Grounded Theory would also not focus upon experiences or personal meaning to address my research question, where it would be more suited for exploring factors to develop an explanatory level account or theory (Mills et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

Whilst using IPA, I found Yardley's (2015) framework for addressing validity helpful for ensuring the quality of my research. Although in-depth consideration was given to each of Yardley's (2015) key principles including sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance, I would like to have improved the validity of my research further. For instance, one way in which I would have liked to have improved my research validity is by gathering participant feedback with regards to my analysis to ensure this represented participants' perspectives (Smith & Osborn, 2015). However, it is acknowledged that there could be complexities around this within the context of a multi-perspectival design and this may limit the extent to which feedback can be used constructively. Providing further participant information may also have improved the validity of my research in terms of sensitivity to context (Yardley, 2015), although I was keen to take a cautious approach to protect the anonymity of participants as far as possible.

Design. I discussed the possibility of adopting a multi-perspectival design in research supervision, as I wanted to check whether IPA could be used to explore the experiences of different participant groups without conflicting its commitment to idiography. Research supervision and further reading reassured me that a multiple perspective design would align with my hopes to explore experiences of school entry deferral from more than one perspective whilst retaining an idiographic focus (Larkin, et al., 2019). A multi-perspectival design also appealed to me as I felt it was particularly relevant to the practice of EPs, whereby it seemed to echo person-centred principles in beginning with an idiographic approach and encompass relational and systemic thinking through the analysis of information gathered from multiple perspectives (Fox, 2009; Rogers, 1980).

As previously mentioned, I was also aware that there may be constraints upon the feasibility of including young children in my research, whilst I was keen to facilitate this if ethically possible. Moreover, I was aware from my reading that many individuals may be involved as part of children's delayed start to school and have their own experiences, hence I felt that adopting a multiple perspective design would enable the systemic aspect of this phenomenon to be explored. Again, reading around multi-perspectival designs reassured me of how more complex designs can be helpful in similar situations (Larkin et al., 2019).

Participant Selection. When designing the study, I knew it would be important to adopt a purposive approach to sampling to ensure that participants would be a

homogenous group in terms of having meaningful lived experiences of school entry deferral (Hefferon & Gil-rodriquez, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Following considering different taxonomies for multi-perspectival designs, I decided to recruit a directly related group of participants who had been immersed together in their experiences (Larkin et al., 2019). Although there are many different potential designs, a directly related sample seemed very relevant to me as it involved recruiting groups of people in the same environment/system who may have differing perspectives about their experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). I also admired how this type of approach had been used by other researchers to investigate complex systemic phenomenon (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). As a result, I explored possible ways of recruiting directly related groups of participants in my placement context with support of the Principal Educational Psychologist and developed a specific criterion for each participant group.

I decided to try to recruit parents/carers of summer born children who had been deferred and subsequently started school in the autumn term via a LA admissions officer, as this was in line with my hopes to gather meaningful and contextual information about parents' experiences of school entry deferral (Smith et al., 2009). This also drew upon the recommendations of other researchers around exploring delayed entry at a time closer to transition (Gorton, 2012). From my perspective, I was additionally keen to ensure that parents/carers (and children if taking part) would have time to settle into school settings before recruitment, following reflecting upon my time as an EYFS Teacher. I also felt that this timing may enable myself role clarity as a Postgraduate Researcher, rather than a TEP offering psychological guidance or advice.

To recruit directly related groups of professionals who had been involved with children who were deferred and could provide rich reflections on their experiences as part of this involvement (Smith et al., 2009), parents/carers were also asked for gatekeeper permission to pass on information about the study to relevant professionals who met the selection criteria. Where I was aware of the range of professionals that might be involved with children who had their start to school deferred as part of the request process and children's start to school (DfE, 2020, 2021c), I chose to set the criteria to be inclusive of a range of professionals as multi-perspectival designs can be used "across many diverse settings and populations" (Larkin et al., 2019, p. 182). Additionally, I aimed to recruit a sample size of between 6

and 12 participants who had experienced school entry deferral to allow for a balance of detail and perspective (Reid et al., 2005; Hefferon & Gil-rodriquez, 2011).

Research Methods. I made the decision to use visual research methods and individual semi-structured interviews primarily because I believed this would enable participants to think, communicate and be heard when sharing their experiences of school entry deferral (Reid et al., 2005).

Where I had first come across and been inspired by other researchers using visual methods in my prior role as an AP (see Borrett & Rowley, 2020), it was important for me to explore whether these would be compatible with my research question and subsequent methodological decisions. With regards to my research question, I felt that visuals could enable participants to show me something about their experiences of school entry deferral and provide an insight into how this might have felt from their perspective, therefore being very appropriate. When reading further, I learnt how visual methods had been used similarly by other IPA researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences (Bartoli, 2020; Boden et al., 2019). Additionally, I found that researchers have used visual methods with a range of participant groups (Bartoli, 2020; Borrett & Rowley, 2020; Lipponen et al., 2016), thus being appropriate for the different groups within my multi-perspectival design. My reading also informed my subsequent decision making and criteria for the visual stimuli (Bartoli, 2020), as I was keen for participants to have time to choose what might most meaningfully represent their experiences.

I decided to opt for using individual semi-structured interviews and planned to conduct these online via Microsoft Teams with adults, whilst considering both online and face-to-face semi-structured interviews for children if possible. Firstly, I decided to use individual semi-structured interviews as I believed this would enable me to gather rich accounts of participants' experiences, where such detailed stories might be less likely in questionnaires or highly structured interviews (Clement, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). I also decided that individual semi-structured interviews may be more appropriate than focus groups within the context of a multi-perspectival design with directly related groups, where other researchers using the same taxonomy noted this had been preferred by participants for confidentiality, to help them feel less exposed and for practicality purposes (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). I designed a flexible semi-structured interview schedule to guide discussions, including using visuals as a catalyst (Bartoli, 2020) and open-ended questions around participants' experiences of

school entry deferral and transition to school (Gorton, 2012), with flexibility to hear about different topics raised (Clement, 2019).

My decision to conduct the semi-structured interviews online with adults was necessary due to the context of the ongoing pandemic, where Microsoft Teams was assessed as appropriate by the UEA Ethics Committee (see Appendix A). Hanna and Mwale (2017) also identified five benefits to video conferencing as a method for data collection, including how this can provide flexibility for scheduling interviews; ensure both virtual and visual interaction; enable data capture through the recording of audio and video; reduce power imbalances that may arise from navigating public/private spaces; and give control to participants when offered as a choice. From my perspective, I also thought this might enable participants to feel more comfortable in sharing their personal experiences, visuals, and stories about children having a deferred or delayed entry to school. To negate any limitations around technology and possible difficulties with internet connections, I planned to leave plenty of time for each individual interview and discuss what might happen if issues should arise with participants at the start of each personal interview (Hanna & Mwale, 2017).

Ethics. When designing this study, I considered a range of ethical issues that could arise within university seminars and research supervision, before applying for and gaining ethical approval from the UEA Ethics Committee (see Appendix A). I carefully considered all my responsibilities to participants (BERA, 2018; BPS, 2021), including how to manage risks that may arise due to the recruitment of directly related groups, and the use of visual research methods and virtual interviews. For example, I provided transparent information about the study within participant information sheets and consent forms to acknowledge that whilst every attempt would be made to secure anonymity for participants, this could not be 100% guaranteed due to the nature of the study (Larkin et al., 2019). I also ensured participants had opportunities to ask questions via email, within initial virtual meetings and within the context of individual interviews, which was particularly important for clarifying any questions around the use of visual research methods and children's participation. Whilst considering ethics and gaining ethical approval when designing my study was a somewhat anxiety evoking experience for me as a researcher, I was pleased to have thought about this in-depth as this made it easier for me to ensure that my ethical responsibilities were held in mind throughout all subsequent aspects of my research project.

Piloting the Interview Questions

I gained voluntary informed consent from a LA admissions officer to pilot the semi-structured interview questions with them to ensure that these were appropriate for exploring participants' visual stimuli, experiences of school entry deferral and the transition to school (Gorton, 2012). I was also keen to pilot the research to ensure that I had a sense of how the interview might feel for myself as a researcher, where I was aware of my own early level of skill in interviewing and how interviews might be experienced as "demanding" or "harder" than expected for new researchers (Smith et al., 2009, p. 67).

Piloting the semi-structured interview schedule was very helpful as it confirmed that the open-ended questions that I had designed appeared understandable and the semi-structured nature flowed well as a guide. I also checked whether it felt okay to ask participants about whether they would feel comfortable to share any best or worst aspects of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009), where I was keen to ensure that those taking part would not feel pressured to do so whilst having the chance to share more about these aspects of their stories if they so wished. This reassured me that these questions were appropriate and did not come across as impersonal or as extracting information from participants.

Following discussing the pilot with the LA admissions officer, I decided to talk more to participants at the start to explain the semi-structured nature of the interview and the rationale for using visual research methods further. This was to help build further rapport with participants and enable them to know a bit more about why they had been asked to do this from my perspective (e.g., to help me imagine their life experiences in more detail). When reflecting upon the pilot, I felt proud of my research journey so far and excited to begin recruiting participants to learn about their experiences of school entry deferral. I also noticed that practising the semi-structured interview schedule helped me to know this more fluently, although I personally found having a prompt sheet nearby reassuring as a researcher.

Recruiting Participants

When embarking on recruiting participants from directly related groups, I was quite nervous to begin with as I was unsure how much interest I would have from the different participant groups and how easy this would be in practice.

The first stage of my participant recruitment involved finding parent/carers of children who had their start to school deferred by one year, who were accessed via a LA admissions officer who provided gatekeeper permission and forwarded an email invitation to parents/carers who met the selection criteria on my behalf. Following sending the email invitation, participant information sheet and consent form (see Appendices B and C), I quickly had interest from around six parents/carers which translated into four parents who chose to take part in the study. I was really pleased to have interest from parents/carers who appeared keen to take part and promptly returned their voluntary informed consent forms, following asking any questions they had via email or an initial virtual meeting where this was preferred.

The next stage involved attempting to recruit relevant professionals via parents/carers who were involved in the project with their agreement. Following gaining informed consent from parents/carers and discussing the subsequent stage in recruitment with them, all the parents/carers who took part agreed to pass on a participant information sheet and consent form to relevant professionals who were involved with their child or had been involved over the past year (see Appendices B and C), with their child's Headteachers awareness in case safeguarding issues were raised. To ensure that participation was entirely voluntary, professionals were asked to contact the researcher via email if they wanted to take part in the study.

Despite parents/carers agreeing to share the information with relevant professionals, I only had interest from one professional to begin with and really struggled with this aspect of my recruitment. From my perspective, this was a little bit disappointing although understandable due to the ongoing context of the pandemic coupled with the demands of many professional roles. Following research supervision, I decided that it would not be appropriate to seek ethical approval to attempt to recruit further professionals in a different way, given that the parents/carers who had taken part in my research had provided their informed consent based upon my research project involving directly related groups of participants and my sampling strategy. Additionally, I felt that changing the recruitment method may not support my hopes to gather information about participants' sense making of school entry deferral in a contextualised, systemic, and relational way (Larkin et al., 2019), although perhaps an indirectly related group taxonomy may have been more straightforward.

Further help from parents/carers managed to support me in recruiting two professionals in total, which was to my absolute delight! Although this was a much

smaller group of professionals that I had initially hoped for, I reminded myself that my research aims were to explore multiple experiences of school entry deferral and consider how individuals made sense of their experiences as opposed to gather a set number of participants. Further reading reassured me that there is not one 'correct' size for a sample (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Idrees et al., 2020), where multi-perspectival IPA retains its commitment to idiography and has been used with case studies and small samples previously (de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Idrees et al., 2020; Larkin et al., 2009; McInally & Gray-Brunton, 2021).

As previously mentioned, I also had difficulties with the last stage of my recruitment which involved attempting to explore the experiences of children who had started school one year later following school entry deferral. I decided that it would be most appropriate to narrow the scope of my research question to ensure its suitability (Agee, 2009) due to my difficulties in gaining informed consent for children's participation and concerns around asking children about their additional time before starting school. For example, one parent expressed worries that this might have had a negative impact upon their child's confidence, another parent talked about their child not being aware that they had additional time before starting school and a further parent talked about being unsure whether their child would be able to participate in a meaningful way.

Although I found this very difficult as I really wanted to enable children to participate in this research if possible and took this to research supervision to discuss this further, I think that narrowing the scope of my research question was the most ethical and methodologically sound decision given the concerns that arose. In general, I found recruiting participants to be a bit of an emotional journey where I was worried about how this would impact upon the completion of my research project. However, I was extremely grateful to those individuals who chose to take part and share their experiences of school entry deferral with me.

Data Collection

I found data collection to be an interesting, enjoyable, and validating experience as a novice researcher. When completing my first research interview with Nina, I remember feeling very nervous beforehand whilst eager to have the opportunity to find out about an actual parent's lived experiences of school entry deferral. In hindsight, I

had been working towards starting my research project for almost a year and this sense of anticipation felt somewhat weighty for me.

To my relief, I found the whole interview experience fascinating, and I was naturally gripped to learn about Nina's visual, her experiences of school entry deferral and her child's journey to school. When completing the following interviews with each individual participant, I found that the use of the visual research methods particularly intriguing where I wondered what the next participant might bring or tell me about when discussing their visual. Not only did the visuals appear to kickstart the interviews and put participants in a position of controlling the first topic of conversation (Bartoli, 2020), I could not have imagined the visuals chosen by each participant and I felt that this added a very personal dimension to the semi-structured interviews.

Whilst completing the interviews I was again very aware of my ethical responsibilities towards participants (BERA, 2018; BPS, 2021), for example, when double checking that participants were still giving their voluntary informed consent to participate and when reminding them that they could stop the interview at any point. I found that leaving plenty of time for each participant's semi-structured interview was very important to ensure that the conversations did not feel rushed, to provide participants with the opportunity to take breaks if desired, and to accommodate for difficulties with internet glitches which occurred on one occasion (Hanna & Mwale, 2017).

Following my difficulties with recruiting professional participants, I was very relieved when completing the individual interviews with Janet and Mia. Hearing about their individual stories and positions seemed to offer a different perspective which gave me a sense of validation that my decision to adopt a multi-perspectival design was of value. Over the course of working together with parents and professionals, I also started to notice patterns in conversations that I was having around school entry deferral and had to work hard at bracketing these in the moment to ensure that I was being present for the individual (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Analysis

Following transcribing the interviews individually which took a considerable amount of time, I began analysing the data using the principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) and an adapted six-stage process to accommodate the multi-perspectival design and visual research methods (Bartoli, 2020; Gaffney, 2020; Larkin et al., 2019;

Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). When trying to start data analysis, I felt very overwhelmed by the task ahead, and the notion of conscious incompetence from the four stages of competence model resonated with me (Curtiss & Warren, 1973).

Once I managed to shift my mindset and decided to just focus on one stage at a time, I found that I really enjoyed the first two adapted stages of IPA (Bartoli, 2020; Smith et al., 2009). This naturally suited me as an individual where it involved looking at one participant's transcript, reading and re-reading their account to immerse myself in their data alongside their visual stimulus, and beginning to note initial comments (Bartoli, 2020; Smith et al., 2009). Moving between the part and the whole at these early stages of data analysis (shifting between words and sentences) felt comfortable to me (Smith et al., 2009), and I found myself getting lost when concentrating on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual points of interest. This represented the start of my own sense making process and the double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2015), where I tried to understand the information provided by the participant who had already tried to make meaning of their school entry deferral experiences (Smith et al., 2009). My understanding of the visual provided by the participant emerged based upon the content of the individual's account, where meaning could not be gained from looking at the visual alone without context (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011).

Although I felt ready to move onto stage 3 of IPA following completing the initial comments and started focusing on making sense of extracts to develop emergent themes for the individual participant, I began to stray away from the data when exploring connections across themes in stage 4 and shifted back towards unconscious incompetence (Curtiss & Warren, 1973). This later became apparent when I tried to collate extracts to create an individual participant table, which was a somewhat frustrating revelation for me as I became aware again of my own level of early skill. Ultimately, it was within stage 5 where I repeated this process for each participant where I began to move from the frustration accompanying my conscious incompetence towards conscious competence (Curtiss & Warren, 1973).

Despite this, I continued to oscillate between different stages of competence yet again when exploring themes within each participant group and across all participants in the last stage of the adapted six-stage process (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011; Larkin et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009). This last stage was something which I found extremely challenging, as I wanted to attend to all unique details within individual

participant interviews and struggled to comprehend how to connect some of the divergence across participants' accounts. I also wondered whether adopting a multi-perspectival design was making matters somewhat more complex for me as a researcher (Larkin et al., 2019), although I think I would have found this stage difficult even within a traditional IPA methodology due to my inexperience. Research supervision was particularly helpful at this point in guiding me back towards my data and enabling me to focus again on making connections across the accounts of participants using the individual participant tables as a reference point.

Upon reflection, I think that my own level of competence moved in an iterative way and reflected the dynamic nature of the hermeneutic circle itself (Smith et al., 2009).

Research Contributions and Implications

My Professional Development

Reflecting upon my research has highlighted to me just how much I have learnt through engaging in my first large scale research project and how this has made a significant contribution to my professional development as a Postgraduate Researcher and TEP.

Completing an in-depth literature review has improved my skills in critically selecting, reading, evaluating, and summarising theoretical literature and research around a topic over time, as well as, understanding how thinking around this will frame and inform subsequent research aims and questions (Hart, 1998). Through engaging in this research project, I have also learnt that research questions can be argued to communicate assumptions about epistemology (Smith et al., 2009) and I have had the opportunity to reflect upon my own ontological and epistemological position (Mead, 1934; Scotland, 2012; Sultana, 2014).

It is evident to me that I have gained skills in planning, designing, and conducting research from the conception of my research question around multiple experiences of school entry deferral; to understanding ethical issues and my responsibilities (BERA, 2018; BPS, 2021); to selecting IPA as a methodology (Smith et al., 2009) and planning an innovative design (Bartoli, 2020; Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011); to piloting my research, collecting and analysing data (Smith et al., 2009).

I have enjoyed using IPA as a methodology to address my research question (Smith et al., 2009) and found using a multi-perspectival design helpful for exploring school entry deferral as a complex phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011), whilst acknowledging that this was at times challenging for me as a researcher. Using visual research methods was something that I feel really added richness and meaning to the data (Bartoli, 2020). I would be keen to continue developing my understanding and skill in incorporating visual research methods into other studies should the appropriate opportunity arise.

Importantly, I hope to continue developing my research-practitioner skills post-qualification to be able to support further understanding of complex and systemic phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2009).

Existing Evidence Base

In addition to contributing to my own professional development, I have argued that this research further extends the available research (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c) by providing an in-depth exploration of parents' and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral in England. To my knowledge, this is the first study exploring the experiences of multiple individuals involved in children having a delayed school entry in England, where it compliments a previous study exploring delayed school entry in Scotland (Gorton, 2012). This research also contributes to the wider international research around voluntary delayed school entry as a phenomenon, which tends to have been investigated using predominantly quantitative approaches (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Datar, 2006; Dougan & Pijanowski, 2011; Gorton, 2012; Larsen et al., 2020; Martin, 2009; Mendez et al., 2015; Sucena et al., 2020; Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017).

Although my research is not without its limitations, I also feel that it contributes to evidence bases more concerned with IPA as a methodology (Smith et al., 2009), which may be relevant to research-practitioners in the field of educational psychology (Crowley, 2019; Edmonson & Howe, 2019; Gaffney, 2020; Oxley, 2016; Wagner & Bunn, 2020) as well as other research areas (Bartoli, 2020). Uniquely, my study combined aspects of a multi-perspectival design and visual research methods when drawing upon the work of previous researchers (Bartoli, 2020; Borrett & Rowley, 2020; Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011), which I think added richness to exploring different individuals' lived experiences of school entry deferral. This may be

of interest to other researchers in the future who are considering using IPA as a methodology and the potential flexibility of IPA research (Bartoli, 2020; Larkin et al., 2019).

Implications for EP Practice

Although the findings of my research were not intended to be generalisable and the approach taken was not an empirical frame of reference (Larkin et al., 2019), I hope that the combination of different stakeholder groups employed in this study will be helpful for EPs wishing to understand more about this phenomenon from some different perspectives.

When thinking about some of the possible implications of my research for EPs, I revisited the themes which I identified from my data analysis, and these directly informed the suggestions. For example, one of the implications identified included listening to parents and professionals' perspectives about school entry deferral, understanding that reasoning may be multi-faceted and exploring reasoning with those considering delayed school entry, which was based upon the subordinate theme 'Reasons for Deferral as Multi-Faceted'.

As I outlined within my empirical paper, I do not claim that my research will represent the experiences of all parents and professionals in relation to children having a delayed start to school, although it might provide helpful reflections and create dialogue around this practice which could be used to support parents and professionals who are considering deferred school entry moving forwards.

Thoughts for the Future

Dissemination

As outlined by BERA (2018, p. 32), researchers have "a responsibility to make the results of their research public for the benefits of educational professionals, policymakers and the wider public". Following approval of this doctoral thesis by the course team and external moderators, the findings of this research will be disseminated in hope that this will help others in the future. Firstly, a one-page summary will be made available to all participants who expressed a wish to receive feedback about the research, which will include a summary of the findings and an overview of the research implications. Secondly, this research will be disseminated within my placement context as a TEP, which may include sharing a one-page

summary with a range of different professionals and sharing a presentation on my research in the context of Team Meetings, Peer Supervision and/or Continuous Professional Development. I also hope to disseminate this research to a wider audience by presenting at a conference for EPs/TEPs/Early Years Practitioners and seek publication opportunities.

Future Research

Despite my research contributing to the evidence available around school entry deferral by providing insight into some parents' and professionals' experiences in the context of England, there are limitations to my research as well as unanswered questions which could be addressed by future studies.

As acknowledged within the limitations of my findings, the experiences of children, other stakeholders and key professionals were not captured within my research despite my attempts. Future research could seek to expand upon my findings by exploring the experiences of children or other groups of professionals involved in children having a delayed start to school (e.g., Teachers, Paediatricians, Speech and Language Therapists, EPs, Medical Professionals, etc.), possibly utilising IPA with an indirectly related sample to assist with recruiting particular groups of participants (Larkin et al., 2019). This might further support understanding of school entry deferral in practice.

As the views of summer-born children who started school following their fifth birthday are missing from the evidence base in England, I think this is an important line of enquiry to address given that children will have their own realities and perspectives about their educational journeys. Considering the ethical concerns and difficulties around gathering informed consent for children's participation identified in the present study, I think that it may be helpful to consider this in consultation and collaboration with parents/carers as key stakeholders. Participatory research approaches may be particularly suitable from my perspective (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

There are also opportunities for future research exploring the impact of delayed school entry on children's outcomes over time to expand on the preliminary analysis of this practice upon children's early phonics screening scores (DfE, 2018). I think that exploring a range of outcomes (e.g., cognitive, emotional, social, etc.) over the course

of children's school journey would be helpful, as opposed to focusing on one particular outcome area alone.

Conclusion

Within this account, I have reflected upon my research journey of exploring parents' and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral.

As outlined, I became interested in children having a delayed start to school due to my ongoing professional experiences over the past five years, including my background as an EYFS Teacher, AP and TEP. My interest in this area led me to conducting a literature review, where I identified there was a lack of qualitative research to provide an in-depth understanding of how school entry deferral was being experienced by the multiple individuals involved in this practice. This informed my research question alongside my epistemological position (Smith et al., 2009), as well as the subsequent multi-perspectival design which I adopted (Larkin et al., 2019).

Although I experienced some struggles when recruiting participants, I found working with parents and professionals to be an enjoyable, interesting, and validating experience when finding out about their experiences of school entry deferral. The use of visual research methods added a personal dimension which I really valued. When completing my data analysis using IPA principles (Smith et al., 2009) and an adapted six-stage process (Bartoli, 2020; Gaffney, 2020; Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009), I found myself frequently moving through different levels of competency, which to me appeared to correspond with the dynamic nature of the hermeneutic circle itself (Smith et al., 2009).

I feel that this research has several contributions, including extending the available small evidence base around children having a delayed entry to school in the context of England (DfE, 2018, 2019, 2021c) and adding to the innovative research interested in using IPA in flexible ways to provide further insight into complex phenomenon (Bartoli, 2020; Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). Despite having limitations, I hope that my research will be of use to individuals who wish to understand delayed school entry further. In the future, I plan to disseminate these findings to continue creating dialogue around delayed school entry and hopefully enable future research to better understand this practice.

Appendices

Appendix A

EDU Ethics Approval Letter

EDU ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER 2020-21

APPLICANT DETAILS	
Name:	Naomi Bird
School:	EDU
Current Status:	**EdPsyD Student**
UEA Email address:	N.Bird@uea.ac.uk
EDU REC IDENTIFIER:	**2021_06_NB_AH**

Approval details	
Approval start date:	**15.07.2021**
Approval end date:	**31.08.2022**
Specific requirements of approval:	Applicant and supervisors to follow current university guidance and processes for approval should face-to-face data collection be needed and to contact Chair of Ethics as required.
Please note that your project is only given ethical approval for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethical approval by the EDU REC before continuing. Any amendments to your project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU REC Chair as soon as possible to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.	

Victoria Warburton EDU Chair, Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B

Parent/Carer Information Sheet and Consent Forms

Mrs Naomi Bird

Trainee Educational Psychologist &

Postgraduate Researcher

21/09/2021

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

An exploration of children, parent/carers', and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral: an IPA study

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – PARENT/CARER

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about children, parent/carers, and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral – where children have had their start to school delayed by one year. You have been invited to participate in this study because your child has been identified by the local authority admissions team as having had an additional year before starting school, following the decision to defer being agreed by the local authority admissions panel. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researchers:

Mrs Naomi Bird, Trainee Educational Psychologist and Postgraduate Researcher, Doctorate in Educational Psychology, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

Supervised by Dr Andrea Honess, Joint Course Director and Associate Professor on the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD), School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

If you decide you would like to take part, you will be asked to:

Step One: You will be asked to…

- Contact me (Naomi) via email to let me know if you are interested in taking part in this study and tell me whether you would like to have an initial meeting to find out more information.
- Read, sign, and return the informed consent form if you decide you want to take part.
- Select a visual stimulus such as an object, drawing or photograph that represents an aspect of your experiences of school entry deferral and your child's journey to starting school. This needs to be something that you own (i.e., have taken, made, or found), that is safe to share (i.e., that you feel comfortable with sharing in the study and that does not include identifiable information about other children/adults or people who are not in the study), and that you consent to being recorded (i.e., having a photograph or screenshot taken).
- Arrange a meeting for a semi-structured interview with me in the Autumn Term 2021 to share your visual stimulus and discuss your experiences of school entry deferral. This will need to be conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, and will be arranged at your convenience. You will need access to a quiet room away from other children/adults and a space that will not be disturbed for confidentiality.
- During the semi-structured interview, I will use an interview schedule to ask you questions about your visual stimulus, your experiences of school entry deferral and your experiences of your child starting school. I am interested in what you would like to tell me about your experiences, and you will be able to skip any questions you do not want to answer.
- This semi structured interview will last around 30 minutes and will be audio and video recorded so that I can create an interview transcript of what you told me about your experiences and look at this alongside the photograph/screenshot of the visual that you shared.

Step Two: You will be asked to…

- Share a participant information sheet and consent form with one or two professionals who have been involved with your child throughout their experiences of school entry deferral.
- This could be any professional who has been involved with your child throughout their experiences of school entry deferral, including an early year's practitioner, teacher, head teacher, educational psychologist, paediatrician, speech and language therapist, medical professional, etc.
- You will also be asked to share a copy with your child's head teacher to ensure they are aware of the research for safeguarding purposes.
- As participation in this study is entirely voluntary, other professionals do not have to take part in this study if they do not want to and will be able to make the decision to contact the researcher if they are interested in taking part.

Step Three: You will be asked to…

- Read a parental information sheet and consent form about your child participating in the study and read a child-friendly information sheet and consent form with your child.
- Contact me via email to let me know whether you would like to ask any questions or arrange an initial meeting so that your child can meet me before deciding if they would like to take part.
- Read, sign, and return the parental and child consent forms if you agree that your child can take part.
- Contact me via email to arrange a virtual or in-person meeting for your child (with an appropriate supervising adult, such as yourself or a member of school staff present) in the Autumn Term 2021 to share their visual stimulus and discuss their experiences of school entry deferral. This will need

to take place in a quiet room away from other children/adults and a space that will not be disturbed for confidentiality.

Step Four: You will be asked to…

- Contact me via email if you would like to arrange a meeting to discuss your experiences of the research process or read your interview transcript to check it is correct and complete. You can withdraw up until the point that the data is anonymised and analysed.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

It is expected that the interview will take 30 minutes in total, with the entire study taking approximately 2 to 3 hours of your time to allow time for contact via email and any additional meetings you would like.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers, anyone else at the University of East Anglia or anyone within the County Council.

You are free to stop the interview at any time. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study, your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results up to the point we have anonymised and analysed the data.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

The risks or costs associated with being in this study have been carefully considered. This includes considering psychological harms (e.g., feelings of worry/uncertainty about sharing your personal experiences), social harms (e.g., damage to relationships with other people involved in the study) and inconvenience (e.g., giving up time to participate in the research project).

To manage any risks, measures will be taken, and you can discuss these further with me in an initial meeting before deciding if you would like to take part. Firstly, the interview questions will be open ended, and you will be able to choose what information you share about your own personal experiences. Additionally, the information you share will be anonymised during data analysis by removing personal identifying details such as names of people, places and organisations and using pseudonyms (e.g., fake names). Although anonymity cannot be 100% guaranteed as you may recognise your own quotes and quotes from other people linked within the study, this risk will be minimised by presenting any sensitive information without any attribution (e.g., without a pseudonym) or as a group extract to prevent individuals from being recognised. However, your participation is voluntary, and you will be able to opt out up until the point the data has been anonymised for data analysis.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

By being in this study, you will have the opportunity to reflect on and share your experiences, which may support other individuals considering or experiencing school entry deferral. This research may contribute

to wider society by offering an in-depth understanding of situations where children have had their school entry delayed by one year within the context of England. It may also have an impact upon the way that professionals such as Educational Psychologists support children, parents and professionals involved in school entry deferral, from facilitating decision making process to enabling children's inclusion and transition into school.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2019).

Your information will be stored securely, and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings will be used as part of my doctoral thesis and findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Naomi will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact Naomi, Trainee Educational Psychologist and Postgraduate Researcher, at N.Bird@uea.ac.uk.

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. The feedback will be in the form of a one-page summary which will include information about the findings and an overview of the research implications. You will be able to receive this feedback after this has been approved by the course team and external moderators for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD) Programme.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Mrs Naomi Bird

Doctorate in Educational Psychology

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

N.Bird@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:

Dr Andrea Honess

A.Honess @uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Yann Lebeau at Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return this via email to N.Bird@uea.ac.uk. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or the Local Authority now or in the future.
✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time up until the point of the data anonymization and analysis.
✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Video-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Photographs/screen shots of my visual stimulus** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Reviewing transcripts** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

Signature: .....

PRINT name: .....

Date: .....

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2nd Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or the Local Authority now or in the future.
✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time up until the point of the data anonymization and analysis.
✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Video-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Photographs/screen shots of my visual stimulus** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Reviewing transcripts** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

Signature: ……

PRINT name: ……

Date: ……

Appendix C

Professional Information Sheet & Consent Forms

Mrs Naomi Bird

Trainee Educational Psychologist &

Postgraduate Researcher

21/09/2021

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

An exploration of children, parent/carers', and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral: an IPA study

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – PROFESSIONAL

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about children's, parent/carers', and professionals' experiences of school entry deferral – where children have had their start to school delayed by one year. You have been invited to participate in this study because you have been identified by a parent/carer as having been involved with their child over the past 12 months. Hence, you are a key professional who may have experiences working with a child who had an additional year before starting school. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researchers:

Mrs Naomi Bird, Trainee Educational Psychologist and Postgraduate Researcher, Doctorate in Educational Psychology, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

Supervised by Dr Andrea Honess, Joint Course Director and Associate Professor on the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD), School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

If you decide you would like to take part, you will be asked to:

Step One: You will be asked to…

- Contact me (Naomi) via email to let me know if you are interested in taking part in this study and tell me whether you would like to have an initial meeting to find out more information.
- Read, sign, and return the informed consent form if you decide you want to take part.

Step Two: You will be asked to…

- Select a visual stimulus such as an object, drawing or photograph that represents an aspect of your experiences of school entry deferral. This needs to be something that you own (i.e., have taken, made, or found), that is safe to share (i.e., that you feel comfortable with sharing in the study and that does not include identifiable information about other children/adults or people who are not in the study), and that you consent to being recorded (i.e., having a photograph or screenshot taken).
- Arrange a meeting for a semi-structured interview with me in the Autumn Term 2021 to share your visual stimulus and discuss your experiences of school entry deferral. This will need to be conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, and will be arranged at your convenience. You will need access to a quiet room away from other children/adults and a space that will not be disturbed for confidentiality.
- During the semi-structured interview, I will use an interview schedule to ask you questions about your visual stimulus, your experiences of school entry deferral and your involvement with the child during their transition to school. I am interested in what you would like to tell me about your experiences, and you will be able to skip any questions you do not want to answer.
- This semi structured interview will last around 30 minutes and will be audio and video recorded so that I can create an interview transcript of what you told me about your experiences and look at this alongside the photograph/screenshot of the visual that you shared.
- As participation in this study is entirely voluntary, you do not have to take part and can withdraw at any point during the interview process, and up until the point of that the data is anonymised and analysed.

Step Three: You will be asked to…

- Contact me via email if you would like to arrange a meeting to discuss your experiences of the research process or read your interview transcript to check it is correct and complete. You can withdraw up until the point that the data is anonymised and analysed.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

It is expected that the interview will take 30 minutes in total, with the entire study taking approximately 1 to 2 hours of your time to allow for contact via email and any additional meetings you would like.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part, even if you know someone else that has chosen to participate. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers, anyone else at the University of East Anglia or anyone within the County Council.

You are free to stop the interview at any time. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study, your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results up to the point we have anonymised and analysed the data.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

The risks or costs associated with being in this study have been carefully considered. This includes considering psychological harms (e.g., feelings of worry/uncertainty about sharing your personal experiences), social harms (e.g., damage to relationships with other people involved in the study) and inconvenience (e.g., giving up time to participate in the research project).

To manage any risks, measures will be taken, and you can discuss these further with me in an initial meeting before deciding if you would like to take part. Firstly, the interview questions will be open ended, and you will be able to choose what information you share about your own personal experiences. Additionally, the information you share will be anonymised during data analysis by removing personal identifying details such as names of people, places and organisations and using pseudonyms (e.g., fake names). Although anonymity cannot be 100% guaranteed as you may recognise your own quotes and quotes from other people linked within the study, this risk will be minimised by presenting any sensitive information without any attribution (e.g., without a pseudonym) or as a group extract to prevent individuals from being recognised. However, your participation is voluntary, and you will be able to opt out up until the point the data has been anonymised for data analysis.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

By being in this study, you will have the opportunity to reflect on and share your experiences, which may support individuals considering or experiencing school entry deferral. This research may contribute to wider society by offering an in-depth understanding of situations where children have had their school entry delayed by one year within the context of England. It may also have an impact upon the way that professionals such as Educational Psychologists support children, parents and professionals involved in school entry deferral, from facilitating decision making process to enabling children's inclusion and transition into school.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2019).

Your information will be stored securely, and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings will be used as part of my doctoral thesis and findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Naomi will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel

free to contact Naomi, Trainee Educational Psychologist and Postgraduate Researcher, at N.Bird@uea.ac.uk

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. The feedback will be in the form of a one-page summary which will include information about the findings and an overview of the research implications. You will be able to receive this feedback after this has been approved by the course team and external moderators for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD) Programme.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Mrs Naomi Bird

Doctorate in Educational Psychology

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

N.Bird@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:

Dr Andrea Honess

A.Honess @uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Yann Lebeau at Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return this via email to N.Bird@uea.ac.uk. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or the Local Authority now or in the future.
✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time up until the point of the data anonymization and analysis.
✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Video-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Photographs/screen shots of my visual stimulus** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Reviewing transcripts** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

Signature: .....

PRINT name: .....

Date: .....

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2nd Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or the Local Authority now or in the future.
✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time up until the point of the data anonymization and analysis.
✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Video-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Photographs/screen shots of my visual stimulus** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Reviewing transcripts** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

Signature: .....

PRINT name: .....

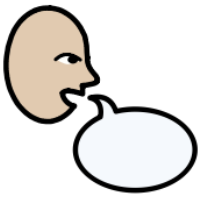
Date: .....

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

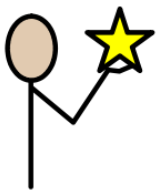
Semi-structured interview schedule

Check if participants are happy to take part and monitor for implicit signs of consent. Remind participants that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want to and can withdraw up until their data is anonymised and analysed. Explain safeguarding procedures. Explain about visual and interview structure. Explaining how I will be listening rather than responding or giving feedback. Do you have any questions? Record.



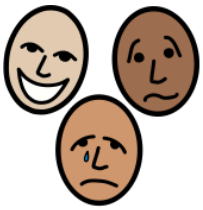
A. <u>Visual Stimuli</u>

1. Tell me about your photo/drawing/object. Please can you tell me about…?
2. What is it? Can you describe it to me? What else can you tell me about it?
3. What does it mean to you?
4. Why did you choose it? Can you tell me how you came to choose this…?

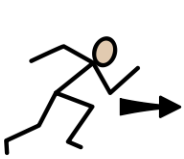


B. <u>Before School</u>

1. Tell me about what happened before you/X started school.
2. What did you do? How were you involved?
3. How did that make you feel?
4. What was the best experience? What was the worst experience?
5. What do you think now? How did you make sense of that?



C. <u>Starting School</u>



1. Tell me about X's transition to school.

2. What was it like? What happened when you/X started school?
3. What did you do? How were you involved?
4. To what extent has…been as you expected? How do you feel after…?
5. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences?

Prompts: Can you tell me a bit more about that? What do you mean by…?

Tell me what you were thinking? Sorry if this sounds like a silly question, but why did…?

Appendix E

Transcript Extracts

The extracts below provide examples of how the transcripts were coded. Those provided have been taken from two different transcripts (one parent and one professional), although full transcripts are available if requested for further transparency.

Within all of the extracts, initial exploratory comments can be found within the right-hand margin around descriptive (bold), linguistic (italicised) and conceptual (blue) content. There are also initial comments which indicate content that refers to the visual data (underlined) and researcher reflections which were 'bracketed' (purple).

The left-hand margin shows the emergent themes that were identified.

Parent Transcript Extract: Page 1

Emergent Themes	Original Transcript	Exploratory Comments
	R: Erm, so I just wanted to start off by asking you about your visual stimulus? Erm… P: Okay. R: Would you mind showing it to me so I can see it? [smiles] P: Yes, so I just put it together…let me…[holds drawing up to camera and smiles]	

Parent Transcript Extract: Page 2

Son as a whirlwind of energy Not wanting to contain him Not showing any readiness Expecting an uphill battle at school	P: So…I mean…I think it's er…a combination of two…two lines of thought because I asked my husband, I explained that I'm taking part in your interview and asked what he would choose. Because my…my initial association was the whirlwind because that's how our son, his name is XXX, how, I mean he still is a bit of a whirlwind but that's definitely how I felt about him last year. He's just really, really energetic, and er…into everything. Er…and I felt that…I think it was I, I just felt partly…it is a shame to have to contain him and make him calm down and make him…you know…learn and focus and sit down for long periods of time. Erm…but when I asked my husband about that he…he said that he would probably choose something to do with letters and numbers because last year we very much felt that, er, I mean it was obvious that er XXX's not interested particul…I mean he did, he did enjoy learning letters, but he…he wasn't particularly interested or showing any readiness in reading, writing, or counting so we, we expected that that would be a bit of an uphill battle, battle with him if he went to go to school. R: [Nods] Oh okay. P: So that's, that's why. [smiles and coughs] R: Ah that's really interesting, okay. Erm… what…I was going to say…is there anything else that you can kind of tell me about why you chose that and not something else or…?	**Explaining her thought processes for choosing her <u>visual.</u>** Talking to her husband about the research. Thinking about her associations to her son and <u>feeling he is like a whirlwind</u>. *Change in tense indicating over time (both was and is) and emphasising how energetic her son is by repeating 'really'.* Reasons for deferral. Not wanting to contain him. Feeling it would be a shame to have to make her son calm down and learn. Asking her husband what he would choose. Not showing any readiness in reading, writing, or counting. Expecting school would be an uphill battle. Link to models of school readiness?
Thinking behind deferral Summer born premature child Straightforward request Supportive pre-school teachers Applying for deferral	P: Er…I mean that just, I think that represents…that represents our…my, my thinking and our thinking behind that. Er…XXX, XXX is a summer born er child and he was born very early, so he was born three months early. So, he was due in XXX anyway, so we knew that we knew that it er was going to be quite a straightforward request for deferral. R: Okay. P: Erm yeah…And er his teachers in the pre-school, yeah were supportive and said yeah. Er…you know…we can see that that would be good for him erm…and then when the pandemic started, we just felt incredibly lucky that we did apply, because we applied before the pandemic. R: Mhmm.	**Talking about her thought processes.** <u>Drawing</u> represents her thinking. **Describing her son.** Summer born child who was born very early. **Talking about applying for deferral.** Request as straightforward. Pre-school teachers as supportive of deferral. Thinking it would be good for her son. Making sense of experiences through conversations with teachers. Thinking about applying before pandemic. Feeling lucky applied for deferral due to pandemic.

Professional Transcript Extract: Page 1

Deferred time developing and celebrating strengths	P: Uh, so I chose the visual because it's something that the little boy in question was very good at actually throughout his time with us, so, for his first year and the year having deferred. So, it was something that I spent quite a lot of time doing with him. That we were…we love doing at XXX, we do lots and lots of woodwork at XXX. So, it's something we're very comfortable with, although it's for…obviously for some people quite a daunting activity. But, for this little boy, he absolutely adored it. He was very comfortable with it, and it was something that I felt in the first year he was with us…really erm helped me to connect with him and we could really celebrate his own achievements. R: Okay [nods]. Mhmm. P: Something he did a lot of at home, and therefore he was very comfortable doing with us. And we were very happy to leave him to do it independently. Whereas, I mean, as you can imagine with woodwork, it's not something we necessarily feel happy to leave children to do. So, there were lots of things that he found a lot more difficult, but this was something that he really, really enjoyed, and gave him a bit of a release really, because it was something we	**Explaining her reasons for selecting her object – learning journey page.** *Repetition of "actually" indicating this was true or surprising?* Learning journey page represents child's strengths and time spent together. Little boy good at woodwork. Spending a lot of time doing woodwork together. Deferral as time to engage in strengths. Strengths as comfortable, enabling connection and celebrations. Little boy doing woodwork at home and nursery. Little boy as independent with woodwork. Little boy as finding lots of things difficult but enjoying woodwork. Woodwork as a release that could be celebrated.
Finding enjoyment in strengths		

Appendix F

Participant Emergent Themes

Following the initial coding and identifying emergent themes for one participant, these were collated and analysed further using abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualisation, numeration, and function techniques. After this, the themes that were identified were organised within a participant table with page numbers and key words for reference. This process was repeated for each participant.

An extract of emergent themes from each participant table is shown below (full tables of themes are not shown to try to protect the anonymity of participants).

Participant 1 Emergent Theme Extract:

Participant Themes Participant 1		
PPT Themes Emergent Themes	**Page**	**Key Words**
Multiple thoughts guiding deferral		
Thinking behind deferral	2, 5	Thinking, our thinking behind that, didn't want for him
Son as a whirlwind of energy	2	how I felt about him last year, really energetic
Not wanting to contain him	2	a shame to have to contain him and make him calm down
Not showing any readiness	2	he wasn't particularly interested or showing any readiness in reading…
Expecting an uphill battle at school	2	battle with him if he went to school
Summer born premature child	2	summer born…born three months early
Deferral as mitigating disadvantage	3	would be, you know, even more disadvantaged
Awareness of children struggling	3	kids can struggle
Awareness of summer born research	3	advantage if they start school later
Deferral about formal education	4	deterrent to me, about this formal education
Own experiences starting school	4	I went when I was XXX
Multiple reasons guiding deferral	4	prem child, turned four, environment read and write, not ready, guiding me
Maturity and enjoyment of formal learning	5	until he is more mature, get more enjoyment out of this formal learning
Request as straightforward	2	we knew that it was er going to be quite a straightforward request
Supportive pre-school teachers x2	2, 3	his teachers in the pre-school, felt it was a really good decision
Applying for deferral	2	we just felt incredibly lucky, we applied before the pandemic
Developing confidence, friendships, and school readiness	3, 7 3	he really sort of er come into his own, developed, so in the last year he became very confident and made nice friends
Developing confidence and friendships	3	we felt, 'Yes! He is ready…'
Developing school readiness	7	developed really close friendship, quite good close friends with, proper friendship
Developing friendships		

Participant 2 Emergent Theme Extract:

Participant Themes Participant 2		
PPT Themes Emergent Themes	**Page**	**Key Words**
Happy memories of nursery	1	summarises her time, that last time in nursery
Daughter happy at her leaver's festival	1	And it's her having her face painted at her leaver's festival. Being very very happy
Leaver's festival as lovely	1	It was so lovely
Time to identify and understand needs	2	sensory processing disorder, realised something was going on
Discovering needs	2	gave us time to get to grips with that
Getting to grips with needs	2	see an occupational therapist to help with that, work on the sensory processing
Supporting needs x2		
Developing friendships, confidence and understanding	1	Summarises how much she'd grown
Developing friendships x3	1, 3	making friends, formed some really lovely bonds, finally making friends
Developing confidence and friendships x2	2, 3	her confidence grew, she formed some social bonds, confidence had grown
Development as significant	3	it just felt so lovely, really really lovely
Deferral as the best thing for her development	4	the best thing we could of done for her development
Developing understanding	5	ability to understand, comprehension part
Development from multiple perspectives	5	every perspective, the sensory processing disorder, the communication…

Participant 3 Emergent Theme Extract:

Participant Themes Participant 3		
PPT Themes Emergent Themes	**Page**	**Key Words**
Help with deferral application		
Deferral as the right thing	1	Really thought we were doing the right thing when we decided
Quick response from the local authority	5	Asking the local authority, straight away we have the answer
Nursery familiar with the process	5	They've gone that process, know what is expected from their side
Nursery explained the process	6	Then we went though: What the process is like? What is involved?
Providing paperwork making it reassuring and easy	7	Provide us with all the paperwork that was needed, reassuring and…very easy
Nursery normalising deferral	7	'Oh, it's not the first time they have done that'.
Nursery happy to go through the process	6	And they happy to go through the process as well.
Nursery negotiated with school x2	10	The SENDCO lady, kept nagging the school and she managed this thing that…
EYFS Leader view	9	She likes the idea, they wait for him for next year
Difficulties with deferral application		
Late application for deferral x3	5, 8, 11	Applied for the process quite late, quite late, applied for this process quite late
Lack of information x3	8, 9	didn't have much information from them, wouldn't tell me, lack of information
Headteacher views x3	9	told me that if I don't send my child to school
Not much help from headteacher	9	have not had much help from the head teacher
Schools were very busy x2	9	schools were very busy, they were busy
Lost application	10	we discovered that the application that we sent to admission office was lost
Process as long	11	It was a very long…
Developing friendships, readiness, and communication	1	He finally learned…, making friends, socially, really moving forwards
Developing friendships	1, 2	he start making friends, he have someone he feel close to
Development as significantly different x3	1, 2, 4	very different er…to the previous year, very big difference, a big change
Development as such a lovely thing	2	there was such a lovely thing
Developing socially	2	socially is moving onwards
Developing readiness x4	2, 3, 4	he is ready to take…all friendship or any learning, ready to go to school, readiness
Developing communication	3	ready to answer the questions or, you know, tell you a bit

Participant 4 Emergent Theme Extract:

Participant Themes Participant 4		
PPT Themes Emergent Themes	**Page**	**Key Words**
Time to identify and understand needs		
Exploring difference	1	Something wasn't quite right, couldn't follow things as well as others at nursery
Diagnosis during deferral	1	They were important for the school deferral because we got his diagnosis
Supporting needs x3	2, 4, 5	help that we've had in the year, one-to-one, early help assessment agreed
Getting to grips with needs	2	extra year, change, lot of understanding, what he needs, occupational therapy
Understanding needs as significant x2	2, 5	for me, these are just everything, this time has brought us everything really
Noticing difference x2	3, 5	he was already quite different at that point, more normal, it wasn't quite normal
Understanding differences between siblings x2	6	My daughter
What is normal to him	6	XXX is normal for XXX
Not the general way	6	Not…the general way that children will do things
Additional support as important		
Activities to increase shared attention x2	3	activities to increase his attention, intensive work, carried on the bucket activity
Additional support as good x2	3	started on that which was good, so that was fantastic
Lack of support	3	doing it very much on their own, there wasn't much there

Participant 5 Emergent Theme Extract:

Participant Themes Participant 5		
PPT Themes Emergent Themes	**Page**	**Key Words**
Uncertainty and feeling pulled in different directions		
Being asked about her view x2	1, 2	Parents asking, they're asking us as professionals, what's going to happen next
Predicting the future x3	1, 2, 3	Crystal ball, know what the future, predict the future, predict the future for them
Not having the answers x4	1, 2, 3	We don't have the answers, can't tell parents, I don't know, we don't know
Educational psychologists as questioning deferral	6	Can you tell me how many …? How involved you were and why?
Uncertainty around long-term impact of deferral	7	That sees them through till they're nineteen, What's that going to look like?
Feeling pulled in different directions x2	10, 11	Pulled in different directions, the direction of parents, pulled in the direction
Decisions to support development	11	Going to be supported to develop
Deferral as variable		
Deferral works for some and not for others	1	worked for some children, hasn't supported other children, supports some parents
Child development dependent on early year's provider	3	aware of the targets and how to move a child forward, do anything with them
Can work and can achieve nothing	3	can work in the right preschool environment, seen it really achieve nothing
Possible benefits of deferral		
Child developing, growing, and blossoming	6	developing, growing, blossoming
Developing English as additional language	6	Developing English as additional language
Parent feeling secure and making friends	6	Mum feeling secure in the area, making friends, was in a good place with both
Deferral gives another year for transition preparation	7	Pressure off 'cause you've got another year
Deferral giving time and breathing space	7	Sort of that breathing space to…erm do a really good transition

Participant 6 Emergent Theme Extract:

Participant Themes Participant 6		
PPT Themes Emergent Themes	**Page**	**Key Words**
Deferred time celebrating strengths		
Deferred time developing and celebrating strengths	1	I spent quite a lot of time doing with him, celebrate his own achievements
Finding enjoyment in strengths	1	He really, really enjoyed, gave him a bit of a release
Remembered for his strengths	1	It's the thing we always remember him for
Recognising needs	2	We recognised very early on he had challenges with other things
Strengths as important	2	Always felt really important to celebrate with him
Progress during deferral	2, 3, 4	Really made progress, he just flourished, good progress, so much progress
Developing expressive skills x2	2, 3	flourish with his English, express himself, his thoughts and feelings, retell…
Developing self-help skills	2	Self-help skills, improved in that second year, toileting
Child participating	3	Opened up to all sorts of opportunities, activities
Child engaging with others	3	Also his engagement with others
Developing readiness	3	Then ready to go on to school, necessary skills
Developing language and confidence	3, 4	His language had come on so far, but also his confidence
Moment of achievement important for practitioners	3	A real moment of achievement, that's what we love to see
Toileting as ongoing and hard x2	3, 4	endless toileting issues hard, weren't making any progress, going on and on
Progress as affirming decision		
Feeling happy about decision	3	we were very happy we'd made a right, the right
Feeling pleased about decision	4	just so pleased that we've made the right decision
Feeling relieved and grateful	4	very relieved and grateful that actually we were able to give that to little child
Feeling pleased		Very pleased that we were able to do it, really pleased
Worried and nervous about not getting the deferral		
Feeling worried about not getting deferral	3	we were very worried about the prospect of him not getting the deferral
Discussing if deferral is the right decision	5	Is it the right decision?
Late application x2	6	Later application than normal
Feeling nervous x2	6	We were slightly nervous, a bit nervous about whether he would actually get it
Feeling deferral is appropriate	6	Entirely appropriate, he deserved it

Additionally, the table below shows the emergent themes that were identified for each participant.

Individual Participant Themes:

Participant's (PPT) Themes					
PPT1	**PPT2**	**PPT3**	**PPT4**	**PPT5**	**PPT6**
Multiple thoughts guiding deferral	Happy memories of nursery	Help with deferral application	Time to identify and understand needs	Uncertainty and feeling pulled in different directions	Deferred time celebrating strengths
Request as straightforward	Time to identify and understand needs	Difficulties with deferral application	Additional support as important	Deferral as variable	Progress during deferral
Developing confidence, friendships, and school readiness	Developing friendships, confidence and understanding	Developing friendships, readiness, and communication	Social participation versus exclusion	Possible benefits of deferral	Progress as affirming decision
Fluctuating enjoyment of pre-school	Feeling happy, glad, and relieved about decision	Deferred year: going from strength to strength	Well prepared for school	Possible difficulties despite deferral	Worried and nervous about not getting the deferral
Developing connections as valued	Multiple reasons for deferral	Feeling reassured, happy, and surprised during deferral	Transition not going well	Multiple reasons for deferral	Pushing for deferral: an important offer for families
Understanding formal learning and maturity	Transition to school going well	Multiple reasons for deferral	Uncertainty and worry during application	Transitions to school can be hard	Developing connection with family
Uncertainty, worry and explaining deferral	Deferral as invaluable	Reassurance, worry and stress about application	Awareness and acceptance of deferral	Supporting parents and schools with transitions	Multiple reasons for deferral
Feeling relieved and happy about development	From worry to reassurance about decision	A good transition to school	Multiple reasons for deferral	Supporting families and settings during deferral	Transition practices: meeting and sharing information
Transition to school as positive	Different approaches and responses to deferral	Deferral as better than expected	Making progress during deferral	Deferral as a mystery for some parents	Contact with parents: transition as a positive experience
Deferral making school easier	Different feelings associated with starting school		Deferral year as an emotional journey		

Appendix G

Once emergent themes had been identified for each participant, subordinate and super-ordinate themes were then explored at the group level. This involved revisiting the emergent themes within each participant table to identify patterns across participants as well as any themes that may have been missed.

Parent Theme Table:

Parent's Themes				Group Subordinate Theme	Super-Ordinate Theme
PPT1	**PPT2**	**PPT3**	**PPT4**		
Multiple thoughts guiding deferral	Multiple reasons for deferral	Multiple reasons for deferral	Multiple reasons for deferral	Reasons for deferral as multi-faceted	Understanding requests for deferred entry
Request as straightforward	Different approaches and responses to deferral	Help with deferral application	Awareness and acceptance of deferral	Varied experiences and responses to deferral	
		Difficulties with deferral application			
Uncertainty, worry and explaining deferral	From worry to reassurance about decision	Reassurance, worry and stress about application	Uncertainty and worry during application	Request for deferral as uncertain and worrying	
Developing confidence, friendships, and school readiness	Developing friendships, confidence and understanding	Developing friendships, readiness, and communication	Making progress during deferral	Development and progress as a happy relief	Making sense of the deferred year
Feeling relieved and happy about development	Feeling happy, glad, and relieved about decision	Feeling reassured, happy, and surprised during deferral			
	Time to identify and understand needs	Deferred year: going from strength to strength	Time to identify and understand needs	Strengths, participation and needs	
	Deferral as invaluable		Additional support as important		
Explaining school entry deferral	Explaining school entry deferral	Explaining school entry deferral	Explaining school entry deferral	Unique patterns and dimensions of deferral	
Fluctuating enjoyment of pre-school			Social participation versus exclusion		
Transition set against Covid	Transition set against Covid		Well prepared for school	Preparing for school and transition	Understanding children's transition to school
Transition to school as positive	Transition to school going well	A good transition to school	Transition not going well	Mixed experiences of starting school	

This process was then repeated for the next participant group.

Professional Theme Table:

Professional's Themes		**Group Subordinate Theme**	**Super-Ordinate Theme**
PPT5	**PPT6**		
Multiple reasons for deferral	Multiple reasons for deferral	Multiple reasons for deferral	Understanding requests for deferred entry
Uncertainty and feeling pulled in different directions	Pushing for deferral: an important offer for families	Pushes and pulls - different approaches to deferral	
Deferral as a mystery for some parents	Uncertainty and worry during application	Deferral as uncertain	
Progress as variable but important	Progress during deferral as affirming decision	Development and progress	Making sense of the deferred year
Supporting families and settings during deferral	Deferred time celebrating strengths	Strengths and needs	
Supporting parents and schools with transitions	Transition practices: meeting and sharing information	Transition practices	Understanding children's transition to school
Transitions to school can be hard	Contact with parents: transition as a positive experience	Mixed experiences of starting school	

Lastly, data was analysed across all participants and a table was created to demonstrate themes across groups.

Participant Super-Ordinate and Subordinate Themes:

Parent Subordinate Theme	Professional Subordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme	Super-Ordinate Theme
Reasons for deferral as multi-faceted	Multiple reasons for deferral	Reasons for deferral as multi-faceted	Understanding requests for deferred entry
Request for deferral as uncertain and worrying	Deferral as uncertain	Requesting deferral as uncertain and worrying	
Varied experiences and responses to deferral	Pushes and pulls - different approaches to deferral	Information and support as important	
Development and progress as a happy relief	Development and progress	Development and progress	Making sense of the deferred year
Strengths, participation and needs	Strengths and needs	Strengths, needs and participation	
Unique patterns and dimensions of deferral	Development and progress	Patterns and unique dimensions of deferral	
Preparing for school and transition	Transition practices	Preparing for school and transition	Understanding children's transition to school
Mixed experiences of starting school	Mixed experiences of starting school	Mixed experiences of starting school	

Relevant quotes were then selected from the transcripts by revisiting the participant tables and transcripts, which represented the iterative and dynamic nature of analysis.

Glossary

BERA:	British Educational Research Association
BPS:	British Psychological Society
DfE:	Department for Education
DoH:	Department of Health
EEF:	Education Endowment Foundation
EP(s):	Educational Psychologist(s)
EYFS:	Early Years Foundation Stage
IPA:	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LA(s):	Local Authority(ies)
SEND:	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
TEP(s):	Trainee Educational Psychologist(s)
UNCRC:	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF:	United Nations Children's Fund
UK:	United Kingdom
US:	United States

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