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Whose entry to primary school is deferred or delayed? Evidence from the English National Pupil Database

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Abstract

This paper explores national patterns of entry to primary school in England over the past decade. It focuses on deferred entry (where children begin Reception with the cohort below) and delayed entry (where children miss some or all of Reception, and enter Year 1 with their 'normal' cohort). In 2014, the Department for Education's (DfE's) guidance began to be updated to clarify the 'right to request' later entry. Analyses of the National Pupil Database (NPD) show a rise in deferral rates from this point. However, rates of delayed entry remain fairly steady after this time. Variation by local authority in deferral rates has become wider over recent years. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), as recorded in the NPD, are now much more likely to defer entry, alongside those who would be youngest in their 'normal' cohort (August-borns). Children from families eligible for free school meals (FSM) and from families speaking English as an Additional Language (EAL) are less likely. When these factors are interacted, children with SEND from more advantaged families (proxied by FSM and EAL) are most likely. Alongside additional inequalities in patterns of deferral and delay, these findings interrogate the DfE's assessment that 'good progress has been made' in terms of 'right to request' later school entry, and that, 'the system is now working well'. They also raise wider questions around the accessibility, fairness and efficacy of such quasi-policies which confer a 'right to

request' aspects of a child's education, rather than enshrining them through legislation as an unconditional, mainstreamed option for all.

KEYWORDS
inequalities, primary school, school admissions, school entry, special educational needs and disabilities, summer-born

Context and implications

Rationale for this study

Before this study, there was no national quantitative evidence on patterns of and inequalities in deferred and delayed entry to primary school in England.

Why the new findings matter

New findings show that children from more advantaged (higher-income/English-speaking) families are more likely to be deferred and to enter reception with the cohort below.

Implications for policy-makers

Policy makers should consider whether a system relying on non-statutory guidance and 'right to request' later school entry adds to inequities, if access to the option is not equitably accessible. They should transparently assess the current situation, using new evidence, and ensure all children's needs are met when beginning primary school.

INTRODUCTION

In England, as in many other countries, the vast majority of children are educated together within a school year-group cohort. Within the English system, children become eligible to enter primary school in the September following their fourth birthday. At this point, August-borns have just turned four, while September-borns are turning five, and there is a year's difference between the oldest (born 1 September) and the youngest (born 31 August) within each standard 'normal' cohort.

UK and international evidence shows, on average, many disadvantages to being relatively younger within-cohort: in England, summer-born. They span multiple experiences and outcomes, including academic 'attainment', designation with 'special educational needs', diagnoses with medical conditions, vulnerability to bullying, well-being and mental (ill-)health, teacher perceptions of children, 'ability' grouping within and between schools, extracurricular activities, children's own self-concept, their attitudes and beliefs about school, and aspirations for the future (Campbell, 2014, 2021a; Crawford et al., 2007, 2013; Department for Education, 2010; Gorard, 2018; Gorard & Siddiqui, 2018; Sharp et al., 2009; Sykes et al., 2009).

Through the 2000s, there was an accumulation of English research on and interest in these relative age effects and the summer-born disadvantage. This included a synthesis

and summary by Cambridge Assessment (Sykes et al., 2009), an international review by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Sharp et al., 2009), and analyses of multiple datasets by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (e.g., Crawford et al., 2007). This culminated in internal evidence-gathering and analysis by the Department for Education (2010). By 2014, the Schools Admissions Code had been updated to state:

> Parents may seek a place for their child outside of their normal age group, for example, if the child … has experienced problems such as ill health. In addition, the parents of a summer born child may choose not to send that child to school until the September following their fifth birthday and may request that they are admitted out of their normal age group—to reception rather than year 1.
>
> (Department for Education, 2014, p23)

After a 2015 session of the Education Select Committee (Long, 2021), the Minister of State for Schools issued guidance to 'parents, local authorities, schools and admission authorities', emphasising that 'there are no barriers to prevent these children starting school out of their normal age group', and promising to 'ensure that summer born children can be admitted to the reception class at the age of five if it is in line with their parents' wishes' (Gibb, 2015).

By the 2020s, specific information on later entry for summer-born children had been made available for parents (Department for Education, 2020) and Admissions Authorities (Department for Education, 2021a), and processes and requirements for later entry are embedded within the statutory Schools Admissions Code (Department for Education, 2021b).

Initial developments in this area were welcomed by some parents (e.g., Mumsnet, 2019), and to an extent those involved in grassroots campaigning for the right to deferred admissions for summer-born children (Campaign for Flexible School Admissions for Summer Born Children, online, nd). However, the eventual decision of the Department for Education not, as previously pledged, to enshrine in legislation the unconditional right to defer for summer-borns (Department for Education, 2022) has provoked dismay from campaigners, who argue that this lack of action will exacerbate 'postcode and birth lotteries of luck and privilege' (Schools Week, 2022).

Hunter (2022) conducted in-depth qualitative research on selected parents' reasons for and experiences of the process of requesting deferral over recent years. Her findings support the contention that the current system is inequitable, and begin to suggest that the 'right to request' may have resulted in 'privileged' or 'advantaged' parents having better access to the option. One participant reports:

> To be able to access this, first you got to know about it, then you've got to stand your ground against people who don't want you to do it, and then finally you may have to fight […] This is not something that people find easy to access … if they don't have English as a first language, or if they are themselves learning disabled, or if they're already holding down two jobs and just don't have time.
>
> (Participant i10, Hunter, 2022, p66)

Such indications of social inequity are at odds with the impact presumably intended by the Department for Education's retention of discretionary deferred entry—which assumedly is not that only the informed and privileged should benefit, but that children who would feasibly be better served by education with the cohort below should access this placement when appropriate (Department for Education, 2021b). Bliss, a campaign group for babies born prematurely (who are gestationally younger and who are more likely to have disabilities and 'special educational needs' [Alterman et al., 2021; Libuy et al., 2022; Mackay et al., 2010]) emphasise the desirability of the option. They have 'argued for many years for greater flexibility, particularly for children who are born premature in the summer months and have fallen into a different school year group as a result' (Bliss, online, nd).

How complete is the evidence on inequities in access to later entry?

From the perspectives of equity and social justice as well as in terms of efficiency and of best serving children, the key question then is whether the tweaks to guidance and policy that have been made over recent years, and the 'right to request' deferral, do in fact help those who may be better placed in the cohort below—or whether, overall, the system as it currently stands disproportionately benefits relatively advantaged groups, as begins to be suggested by the qualitative evidence and campaigners' reports (Hunter, 2022; Schools Week, 2022). It is also possible that answers to this question are more nuanced: the two possibilities are not inherently in direct binary opposition to one another, and may intertwine.

So how much and what exactly is known about how patterns of deferred entry are playing out, at scale? Across the board, nationally, do advantaged parents tend more often to utilise the option of later school entry? Or, on average, countrywide, is deferral taken up reasonably evenly, across social groups? Are the children deferring mostly those who may be thought potentially to benefit most from or to be suited to joining school with a younger cohort? And crucially, how do these two dimensions—family social advantage and individual child development—interact with one another?

The Department for Education has partially monitored the situation through several surveys of parents and local authorities (LAs; Department for Education, 2018, 2019, 2021c). Findings from these surveys have been used to justify not legislating for the right to defer, instead retaining guidance and the 'right to request'. Announcing this decision, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System stated: 'Data suggests that the system for summer-born admissions is now working much better than it was in 2015', and 'I am reassured that good progress has been made on this issue and that these improvements suggest the system is now working well' (Department for Education, 2022).

There are various significant limitations, however, to the Department's evidence. Reporting the research, its authors warn that respondent parents are not nationally representative—for example, 'Over a third of respondents were located in just two LAs so … it is not intended to represent the national population' (Department for Education, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, p10). There may also be bias in the parents themselves who chose to respond to the surveys.

The publications additionally caveat that coverage of local authorities is incomplete, and that schools who are their own admissions authorities (a rapidly increasing proportion in recent years) were not surveyed. Reporting warns:

> …it is important to consider potential response bias. For example, [respondent local authorities] may have been more likely than others to participate as they may have had a greater interest in the topic of summer-born admissions due to receiving more enquiries from parents of summer-born children.
>
> (Department for Education, 2019, p7)

Alongside these limitations due to sample selection, it is not clear whether the Department for Education's findings, from these partial respondents, actually suggest that 'the system is now working well'. Surveyed parents who deferred their child's entry were more likely to be higher-income, which may indicate bias and inequalities according to family advantage of the sort long predicted by researchers (Crawford & Greaves, 2013), and suggested by parent campaigners (School's Week, 2022) and qualitative accounts (Hunter, 2022).

On the other hand, the surveys indicate that respondent parents requesting deferral were more likely to have children born premature, children with diagnosed or possible 'special educational needs' and/or disability, and children born at the extreme end of summer (August; at which chronological point they are more likely to be premature-born children whose age since conception would place them in the year group below). Hunter's (2022) self-selected qualitative

sample reflect these tendencies. This indicates that at least some among the groups of children intended to benefit from the 'right to request' deferral may be more likely to access it.

The Department for Education's research also highlights great variation over respondent local authorities in numbers of requests received, numbers granted and criteria for agreeing requests. In certain areas, all requests were automatically allowed, while others reported, 'We only allow those with a very strong case' (Department for Education, 2018, p12). This echoes the 'postcode lotteries' reported by campaigners (School's Week, 2022). Findings suggest, however, that, in the most recent year surveyed, more respondent LAs were automatically agreeing requests for deferred entry for summer-borns (Department for Education, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). This is one of the reasons stated by the Department for Education (2022) for not legislating an automatic right to deferral.

But an increased approval of requests submitted (in selected surveyed LAs) does not necessarily reflect an equality in access to potential deferral for all those children who are intended to benefit from the option. Parents' feedback on the process of applying varied from 'describing it as "very easy" and "straightforward", to "complicated" and "very stressful"' (Department for Education, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, p9)—so it is plausible that some may be deterred from perusing the option at all, or from completing their application.

Again, this inconsistency is reflected in Hunter's (2022) study, where extreme 'variation in systems and processes' (p71) was found across areas and schools, as well as a requirement for 'parent ability and capacity to engage with the process' of applying for and gaining later entry for their child (p74). Some of Hunter's participants reported a need to 'become experts in law', while others described an 'emotionally gruelling' experience with huge 'impact on … time and … mental health' (p78).

The Department for Education's surveys (and Hunter's study) thus provide indications of issues arising in implementation, and highlight disparate practices across LAs. They also suggest potential patterns to be investigated, at full scale, in the characteristics of families deferring. As self-acknowledged, they do not provide a comprehensive national quantification of the (changing) extent of deferred entry, or how this differs by pupil or family background.

Additionally, though they suggest higher-income parents are more likely to request later entry, and that prematurity and special educational needs / disability (SEND) are a reason cited for deferral, the Department for Education's surveys do not examine the relationship between these two factors. Both child and family-level characteristics may be influential and intersect with one another. Hunter (2022) reports that 'parents rarely detailed a single reason … even when it was directly asked of them', instead citing, 'a combination of things' (p69). She reports that factors likely to correlate with parental advantage and social situation were described as instrumental by participants (not only income, but also knowledge of the school system, of the guidance and legislation, and of educational philosophies). At the same time, she reports, parents considered factors at the level of their child, including their development, disabilities and prematurity.

EVIDENCE GAPS AND THE CURRENT RESEARCH

So the quantitative research to date does not tell us whether, among children who may be less developmentally 'suited' to their 'normal' cohort, those whose families are more advantaged tend to be more likely to use the option of later entry to Reception. This is a key consideration in evaluating the evolution of the option to request deferral in terms of who is benefiting from the policy and the ways in which it may or may not be exacerbating inequalities.

Additionally, because the Department's research covers the years 2015 onwards, it does not offer a time series showing changes in deferral rates and entry patterns before and after

policy quasi-intervention in this area. Nor does it show whether there have been changes over time in tendencies to defer among families with different characteristics.

This paper therefore complements and triangulates the Department for Education's surveys, Hunter's qualitative study, and reports from campaigners, to provide a more comprehensive sense of patterns. Using data for entire national cohorts, it investigates what can be known about longitudinal trends, about who tends to defer—among all children, not just selected respondents—and about inequalities in take-up of the possibility of deferral. It addresses, so far as possible using national administrative data, limitations in terms of coverage and representativeness in the existing research, and can be used in conjunction with this evidence to build a more complete picture of the situation over the past decade.

DATA, VARIABLES AND APPROACH TO ANALYSES

Information from the School Census and the Early Years Census within the National Pupil Database (NPD) is used for analyses. Annual records, at January of each year, for all children within state-funded education are available at the pupil level. This is de-identified data, accessed through the ONS's Secure Research Service. Every pupil is assigned a unique, anonymised identifier within the NPD, so individual pathways can be built.

Data on each child's year and month of birth is provided, and ten distinct consecutive cohorts of children are investigated. The first was born between September 2004 and August 2005. All this cohort were eligible for state-funded pre-school in January 2009, and all were eligible for entry to primary school at 'normal' Reception age during the academic year September 2009–August 2010. Their 'normal' academic Year 1 then fell in 2010–11. Therefore they are picked up in the data, if attending state-funded education, at January 2009 (pre-school), January 2010 ('normal' Reception age), and January 2011 ('normal' Year 1 age). The last cohort investigated was born between September 2014 and August 2015, and are picked up at January 2019 (pre-school), January 2020 ('normal' Reception age), and January 2021 ('normal' Year 1 age).

As well as identifying whether children are attending state-funded education at each time point, the NPD contains a variable 'NCyearActual*', which according to the Department for Education's guide for NPD users, denotes 'The year group in which the pupil is taught for the majority of their time, regardless of their chronological age.' Thus a child who falls into the September 2014–August 2015 cohort, who defers entry and enters Reception with the subsequent cohort, will be picked up as being educated in Reception, with the younger group, when they are 'normal' Year 1 age.

Outcome variables

This is therefore the first of three key binary outcomes investigated in analyses: whether children are recorded as being educated in Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age. This will pick up many of those who deferred entry and joined school with the later cohort. This variable is named 'Reception at Year 1' throughout the results section.

'Reception at Year 1' is not a precise indicator, however, because it will also pick up children who, for example, are recent arrivals to England and who were placed with the younger year group at the discretion of their school. It will also contain children who entered Reception with their 'normal' cohort, but who were 'held back' and continued in Reception at Year 1 age, and possibly children educated in mixed year-groups. Because the primary concern of this research is to assess which children are actively being deferred (or delayed; more on this below) in their entry to primary school, two further variables are constructed.

The first is called 'Skip to Reception' throughout the results section. Children are denoted as such if they were (a) picked up as attending pre-school and therefore in the country and the education system in the January before 'normal' entry to primary school; (b) not present in primary school Reception class in January of their 'normal' Reception year; and (c) present in primary school Reception class in the January when they are 'normal' Year 1 age.

A second variable is also considered, called 'Skip to Year 1'. This denotes children who were (a) picked up as attending pre-school in the January before 'normal' entry to primary school; (b) not present in school Reception class in January of their 'normal' Reception year; but (c) present and educated in Year 1 in January of 'normal' Year 1 age. These children would appear to have missed at least part if not all of the first, Reception year of primary school—but on later entry to be placed with their 'normal' cohort. This delayed—rather than deferred—entry has been highlighted as occurring by researchers (Crawford & Greaves, 2013), campaigners (https://summerbornchildren.org/home-2/), in the Department for Education's guidance (Department for Education, 2022); and in parliamentary briefings: 'many parents whose request is accepted find that their child's deferred entry into school may not be into the reception class but rather into year 1, meaning the child misses reception year' (Long, 2021).

None of these variables are perfect. 'Reception at Year 1' will overestimate the proportion of the whole population of children at Year 1 age who actively deferred entry. 'Skip to Reception'/'Skip to Year 1' will produce underestimates, because they only include the population of children who attended funded pre-school (while all children are eligible for this, some do not attend—for example, an estimated 6%–7% in 2019–20 [Children's Commissioner, 2022]). However, considered together, they can give a sense of patterns and trends.

Key pupil and family characteristic variables

The intention of the 'right to request' deferral seems to be that children who might be best served by entering Reception with the younger cohort may access this option. The Department for Education's Code of Practice indicates that this will include children with medical and/or special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and those born premature:

> Admission authorities must make decisions … taking account of … information about the child's academic, social, and emotional development; where relevant, their medical history and the views of a medical professional … and whether they may naturally have fallen into a lower age group if it were not for being born prematurely.
>
> (Department for Education, 2021b, pp 25–6)

To approximate this group so far as possible in the data available, a child-level 'SEND' variable is created. It denotes children who were recorded with any level of SEND in the NPD during their pre-school years, and/or who are recorded with a statutory Education Health and Care Plan (in earlier cohorts, a Statement of Special Educational Needs) in Year 1. These are children who have been assessed and attributed SEND at an early stage, outside of the primary school system itself, where attribution is extremely messy, distorted and unreliable (Campbell, 2021a; Hutchinson, 2021).

In England, 7.4% of babies were reported as being born premature (pre-37 weeks gestation) in 2020 (calculated using data from ONS, 2022). The NPD contains no information on due date or prematurity, but there is an overlap between groups of children born premature and those reported with SEND (Alterman et al., 2021; Libuy et al., 2022; Mackay et al., 2010)—so some premature children should be captured within the SEND variable.

To approximate family-level 'advantage'/'disadvantage' around the point of school entry, two variables are used. The first is FSM—whether a child is recorded as eligible for free

school meals in Year 1, which roughly proxies family low-income. FSM as a measure is, again, imperfect in many respects (Campbell, 2021b; Gorard et al., 2022), and the record at Year 1 is 2 years post the application for primary school. Estimates here will therefore give a sense of general national trends and relationships, rather than precise quantifications. To triangulate this and provide an alternative indication of relevant family circumstance, EAL is used as a second measure—whether children are recorded as speaking languages in addition to English at home. While children denoted EAL are a vastly heterogeneous group, within the group, parents who are recent arrivals to England and/or who have limited English may be less familiar with and able to navigate the system of school applications and the 'right to request' later entry. Again at the high, average national level, EAL may therefore approximate family disadvantage in the context of applying for deferral.

Additional variables

The NPD contains indicators of children's recorded gender and ethnicity, and the LA in which their school is situated. These variables are also used in analyses.

Analyses

Findings below firstly describe the national proportions of children in each cohort, over the decade, who fall into the three outcome groups defined above: 'Reception at Year 1' (an overestimate of percentage deferring), 'Skip to Reception' (an underestimate of percentage deferring), and 'Skip to Year 1' (an underestimate of percentage delaying). This provides some indication of the changing extent and nature of later entry to primary school. Distributions of children falling into each group are also reported at the local authority level: this provides some triangulation of the 'postcode lottery' proposed by campaigners (School's Week, 2022) and suggested by research (Department for Education, 2018; Hunter, 2022). Child and family characteristics are also tabulated with each of the outcomes, to investigate whether the patterns have followed different trends for different groups.

These initial descriptive analyses are for all children in each cohort, regardless of birth month—because the Department for Education's guidance and Code stipulate that any 'Parents may seek a place for their child outside of their normal age group' (2014), regardless of birth month.

Regression modelling then focuses solely on children born in the summer months (defined as April–August in the Department for Education's policy), to whom the 'right to request' particularly pertains. Child- and family-level characteristics are considered in combination and in interaction in order to explore which are most strongly predictive of the three outcomes representing later entry, and whether they account for, attenuate or moderate one another. Linear probability models are used here in order validly to compare coefficients across specifications (Mood, 2010); key models are also checked with logistic regressions and estimated marginal means, and results are equivalent (available upon request).

FINDINGS

The national picture

Figure 1 shows the national percentage of children born in each cohort falling into each of the three groups: 'Reception at Year 1', 'Skip to Reception', and 'Skip to Year 1'.

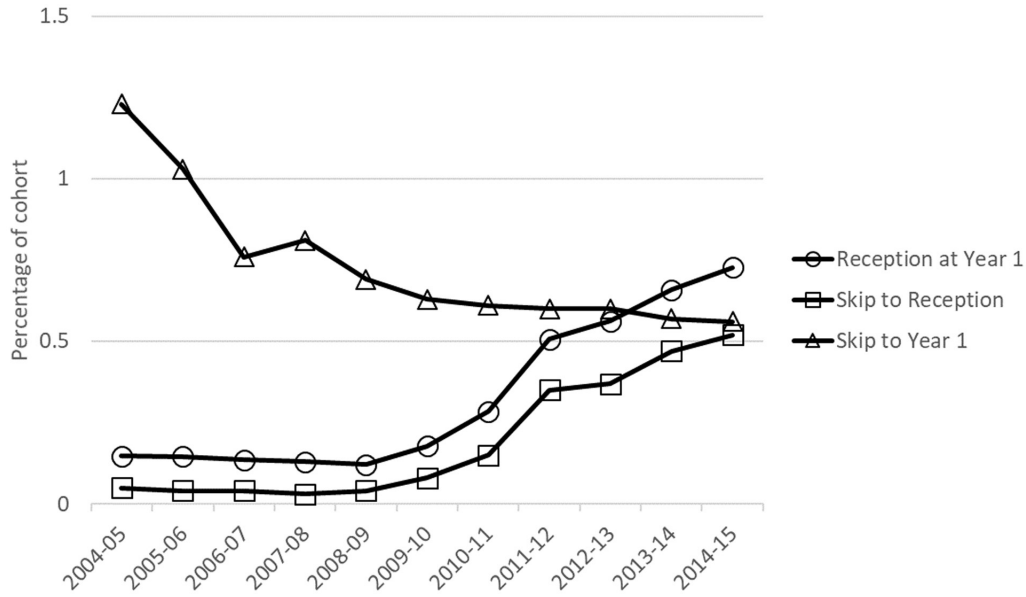

FIGURE 1 Patterns of later entry to primary school: cohorts eligible to begin Reception from 2010 (2004–05 born) to 2020 (2014–15 born). *N*s for 'Reception at Year 1': 0405 = 582,484; 0506 = 595,430; 0607 = 615,944; 0708 = 641,732; 0809 = 639,687; 0910 = 654,151; 1011 = 667,508; 1112 = 668,344; 1213 = 650,763; 1314 = 638,959; 1415 = 633,809. *N*s for 'Skip to Reception' and 'Skip to Year 1': 0405 = 539,819; 0506 = 554,267; 0607 = 575,240; 0708 = 602,141; 0809 = 599,359; 0910 = 612,523; 1011 = 626,418; 1112 = 628,430; 1213 = 611,787; 1314 = 591,432; 1415 = 598,131. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

The cohort born in 2009–10 were the first for whom 'normal' Reception entry fell after the 2014 update to the Schools Admissions Code (Department for Education, 2014): they were eligible in the 2014–15 academic year. Correspondingly, the uptick in proportions of children recorded as deferring: as in Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age ('Reception at Year 1') and as skipping 'normal' Reception entry and joining a year later, with the subsequent cohort ('Skip to Reception') begins with these children. The proportion missing at least part of their 'normal' Reception year then joining with their 'standard' birth cohort ('Skip to Year 1') does not drop steeply after this date, however—having fallen sharply in earlier years (more on this subsequently), it then declines quite gradually.

The most recent cohort is children born 2014–15. They are picked up in the January of their 'normal' Reception year in 2020, and at January of their 'normal' Year 1 in 2021. At this point, 0.73% of the cohort are recorded as being educated in Reception at Year 1 age (the upper-bound overestimate of deferral rates), and 0.52% as having attended pre-school then entered school for Reception later, with the cohort below ('Skip to Reception', the lower-bound, underestimate of deferral); 0.56% are picked up as present at pre-school, not in school at January of their Reception year, then in Year 1 with their 'normal' cohort ('Skip to Year 1', the underestimate of delayed entry). These are small percentages and absolute numbers are correspondingly small: 4605 of 633,809 children this year are in 'Reception at Year 1'; 3130 of 598,131 experienced 'Skip to Reception'; 3341 of 598,131 'Skip to Year 1'. Note also that 'Skip to Reception' is a subgroup of 'Reception in Year 1'. So even in the most recent year, though there has been a steep increase, it is from a low baseline, and the numbers of children deferring / delaying to enter Reception at a later point than when they are first eligible are not large.

The picture by local authority

Proportions of children in each local authority who experience deferred entry are correspondingly generally small, but there is increased variation by area in more recent years. Figure 2 approximates the share of LAs with each proportion of children educated in Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age, covering the populations of children of Year 1 age from 2011 to 2021 (the cohorts corresponding to Figure 1). These are smoothed kernel density plots and average over contiguous values, and are used to blur the edges of reporting and ensure non-disclosure—as numbers in some areas are extremely small. Figure 2 shows that, in 2011, no LAs educated more than 1% of their Year 1 aged children in Reception, and most contained barely any children in this situation. In contrast, in 2021, there are areas where over 2% of Year 1 aged children are in Reception with the cohort below, and there are fewer LAs with no or close to no children. There is greater variation between areas in the later years.

Figure 3 conveys a similar picture. In 2011, there was no LA in which more than 0.5% of children attended pre-school, were not in school at January of 'normal' Reception age, then attended Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age. The distribution begins to widen in 2016—'normal' year 1 age for the cohort born 2009–10, who were the first subject to the amended Code. By 2021, there are areas where over 2% of children fall into this group, and there are greater differences between LAs, with some still containing no children placed with the cohort below.

Finally, Figure 4 shows the share of children in each LA in the 'Skip to Year 1' group—those who attended pre-school, were not in primary Reception by the January of the year in which they were first eligible, but who are found in Year 1 with their 'normal' cohort in the subsequent year. Only the years 2013 to 2021 (the cohorts born 2006–07 onwards) are

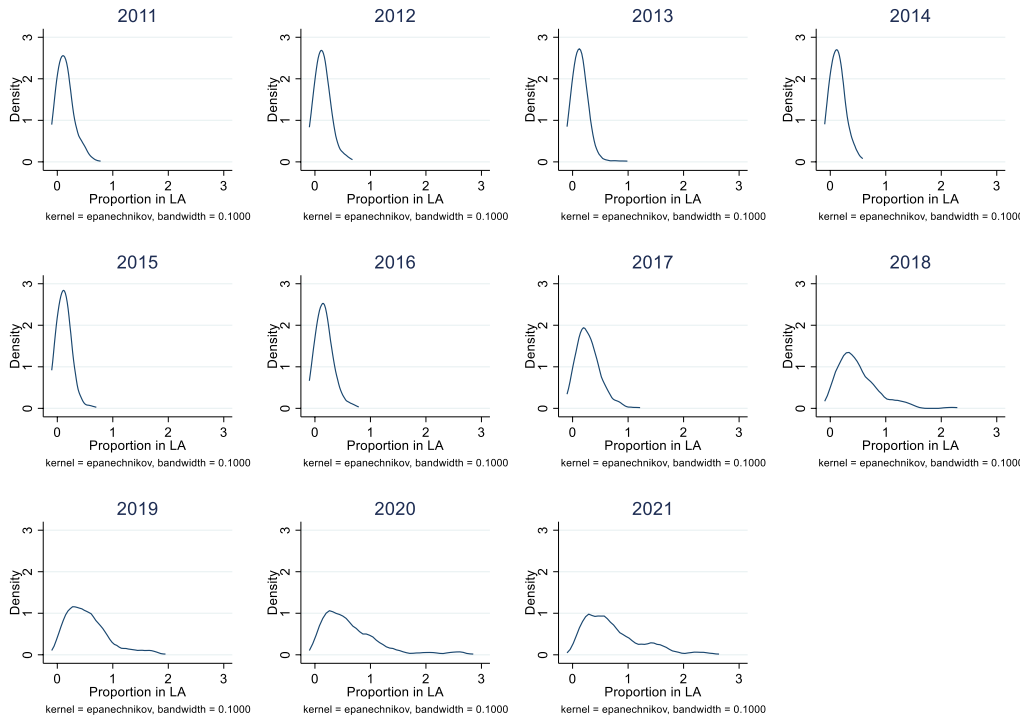

FIGURE 2 Share of proportion of children in Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age ('Reception at Year 1') in each local authority. *N* LAs 2011–19 = 150; *N* LAs 2020–21 = 149. City of London and Isles of Scilly are excluded. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

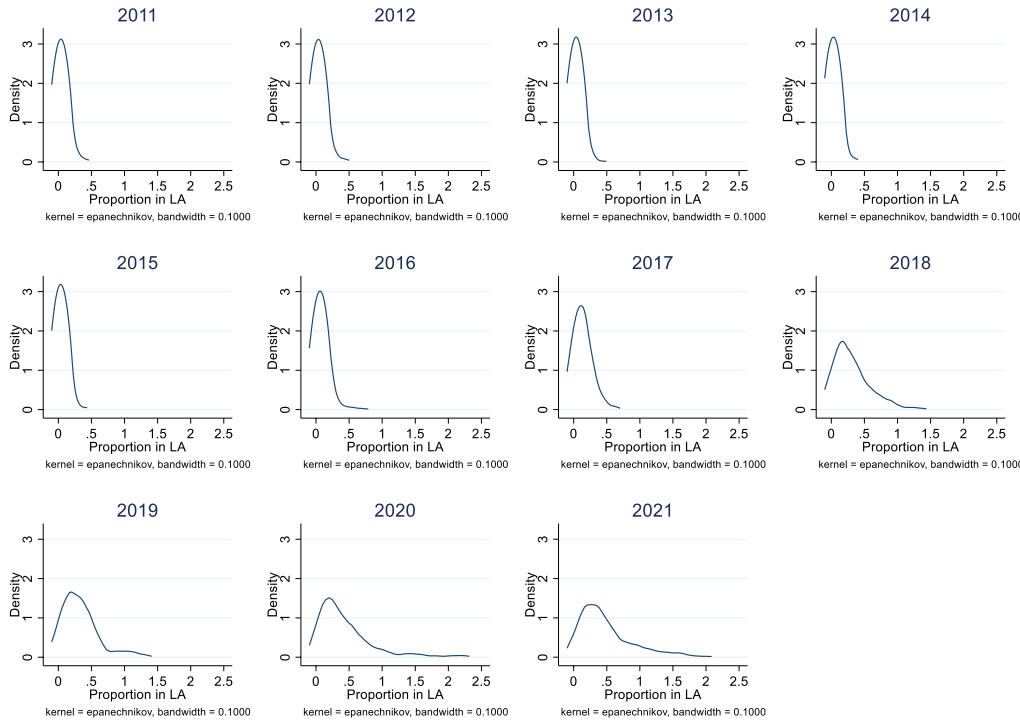

FIGURE 3 Share of proportion of children in pre-school, not in school at January of 'normal' Reception age, then in Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age ('Skip to Reception'), in each local authority. *N* LAs 2011–19 = 150; *N* LAs 2020–21 = 149. City of London and Isles of Scilly are excluded. *Source*: National Pupil Database.

shown here. This is because the first two cohorts (Year 1 2011 and Year 1 2012) contain areas where nearly 40% and nearly 20% of children (respectively) fall into this group, and this distorts the scale of graphs and obscures variation in later years. The widespread absence of children in these earliest cohorts from Reception in January of their first 'standard' year in certain areas captures the end of previous policies of staggered entry, more common through the 2000s. At this time, some authorities filtered children into Reception at different points in the year according to their birth month—oldest first (see, e.g., Crawford et al., 2013, p12). By the 2006–07 cohort, this practice at the LA-level appears to have ceased, and is also reflected in the decrease nationally of the proportion of children skipping to Year 1 shown in Figure 1.

Figure 4 suggests even after the cessation of LA-wide policies of staggered entry, there has been variation across areas in the proportion of children missing at least part of Reception then being educated in Year 1 with their 'normal' cohort, across all years. In some LAs in 2021, up to 2% of children experience this; in others, none.

Differences by child and family characteristics

Figures 5–8 now examine how changes in patterns of later entry differ according to children's birth month; whether they have SEND (as defined earlier); gender; whether their family is low-income (proxied by recorded FSM eligibility in Year 1); or speaks English as an additional language (EAL).

Figure 5 shows that the uptick in proportions of children in Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age after the 2014 update to the Schools Admissions Code is entirely driven summer-borns

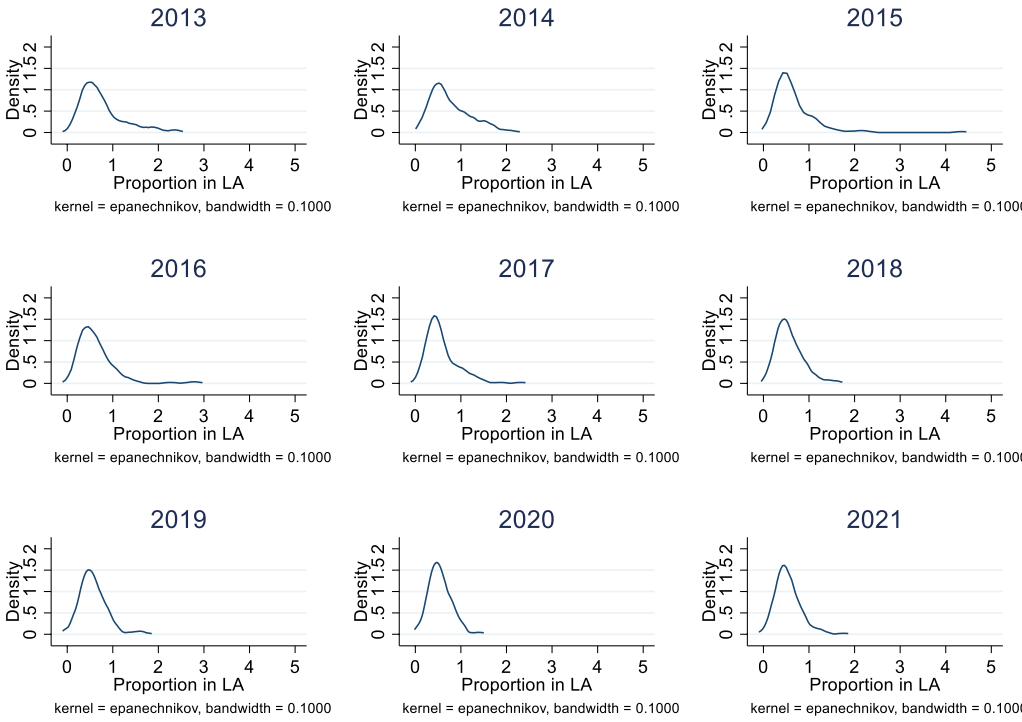

FIGURE 4 Share of proportion of children in pre-school, not in school at January of 'normal' Reception age, then in Year 1 at 'normal' age ('Skip to Year 1'), in each local authority. *N* LAs 2011–19 = 150; *N* LAs 2020–21 = 149. City of London and Isles of Scilly are excluded. *Source*: National Pupil Database.

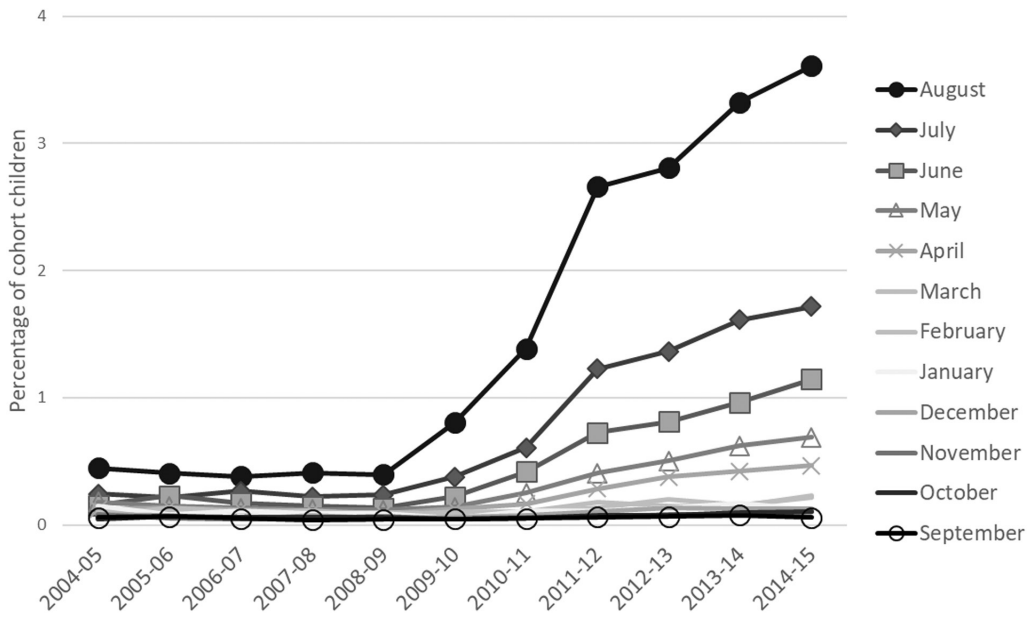

FIGURE 5 Percentage of children in Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age ('Reception at Year 1'), by birth month: cohorts eligible for Reception from 2010 to 2020. *N*s 0405 = 582,484; 0506 = 595,430; 0607 = 615,944; 0708 = 641,732; 0809 = 639,687; 0910 = 654,151; 1011 = 667,508; 1112 = 668,344; 1213 = 650,763; 1314 = 638,959; 1415 = 633,809. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

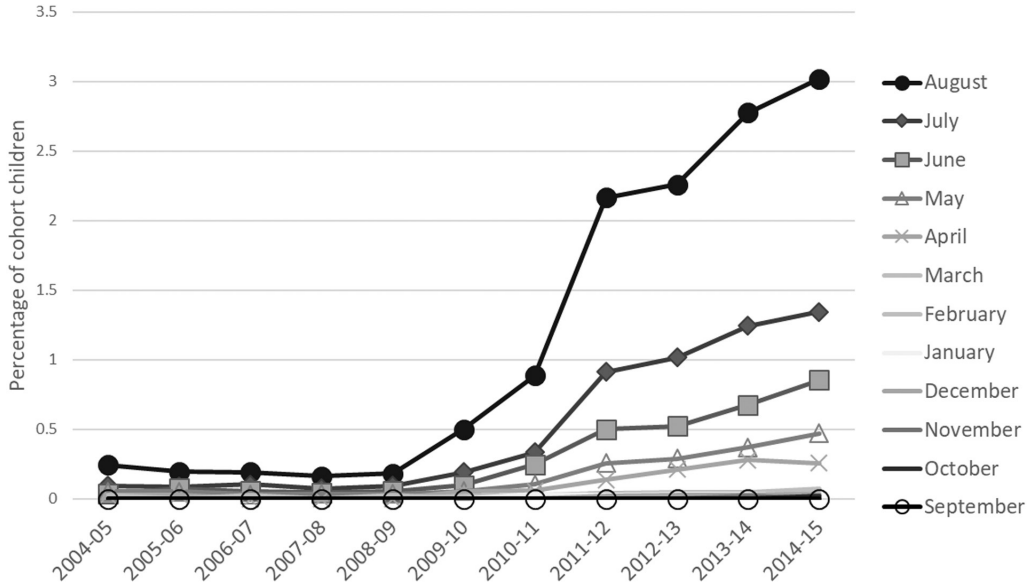

FIGURE 6 Percentage of children in pre-school, not in school at January of 'normal' Reception age, then in Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age ('Skip to Reception'), by birth month: cohorts eligible for Reception from 2010 to 2020. *N*s for 'Skip to Reception' and 'Skip to Year 1': 0405 = 539,819; 0506 = 554,267; 0607 = 575,240; 0708 = 602,141; 0809 = 599,359; 0910 = 612,523; 1011 = 626,418; 1112 = 628,430; 1213 = 611,787; 1314 = 591,432; 1415 = 598,131. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

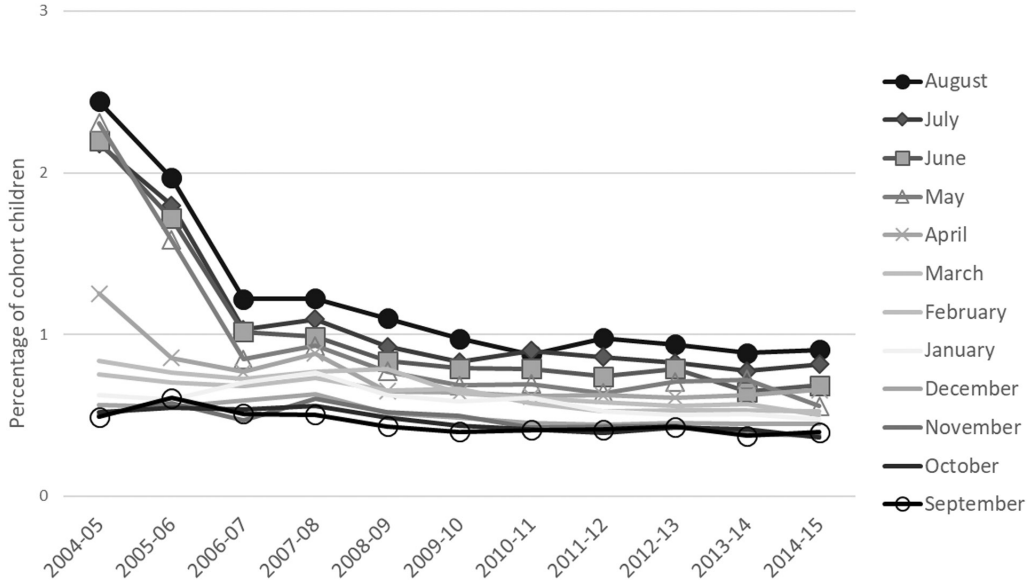

FIGURE 7 Percentage of children in pre-school, not in school at January of 'normal' Reception age, then in Year 1 at 'normal' age ('Skip to Year 1'), by birth month: cohorts eligible for Reception from 2010 to 2020. *N*s 0405 = 539,819; 0506 = 554,267; 0607 = 575,240; 0708 = 602,141; 0809 = 599,359; 0910 = 612,523; 1011 = 626,418; 1112 = 628,430; 1213 = 611,787; 1314 = 591,432; 1415 = 598,131. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

(defined in Department for Education policy and guidance as those born April–August), with negligible variation over time for relatively older children born in the earlier months. The increase is most pronounced among the youngest, August-borns—with 3.6% of

these children experiencing Reception with the cohort below by January 2021. Figure 6 shows a very similar overall pattern, where the increase in pre-school-attending children deferring entry to Reception to 'normal' year 1 age is driven by summer-borns, particularly August-borns.

Figure 7 shows a rather different picture. Though the chances of missing at least part of Reception and then being placed in Year 1 with their 'normal' cohort are incrementally greater the relatively younger within year the child, there is less of a pronounced difference for August-borns, and proportions of children born in each month experiencing this trajectory have been fairly stable, dropping quite minimally since the 2006–07 cohort. In 2013, 1.2% of August-borns who attended pre-school were educated in Year 1 with their 'normal' group, having skipped some or all of the Reception year at school; in 2021, 0.9%.

Figure 8 explores how patterns across the years and each of the three outcomes differ according to whether children are recorded with SEND. For cohorts beginning school before the update to the Schools Admissions Code in 2014 (cohorts 2008–09 and previous), children recorded with SEND were most likely to miss at least part of Reception, and to skip to Year 1. After 2014, they are most likely to be educated in Reception class at 'normal' Year 1 age (4.3%

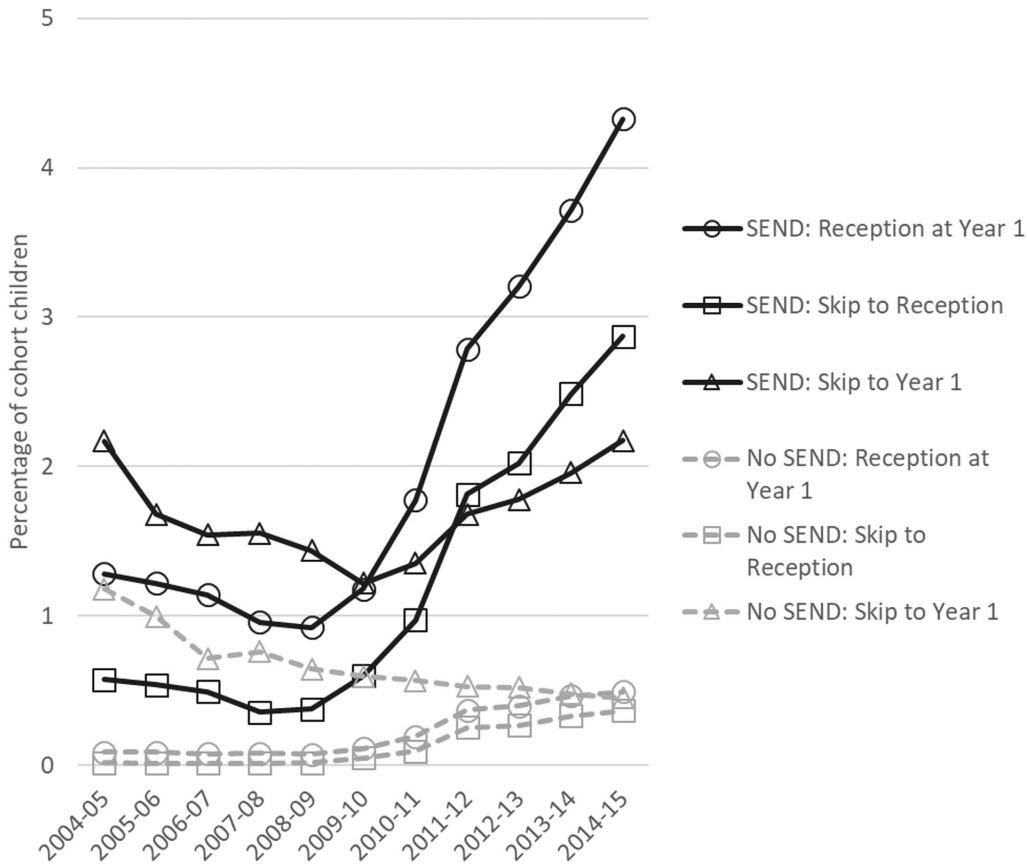

FIGURE 8 Percentage of children experiencing 'Reception at Year1', 'Skip to Reception', and 'Skip to Year 1', by recorded SEND: cohorts eligible for Reception from 2010 to 2020. *N*s for 'Reception at Year 1': 0405 = 582,484; 0506 = 595,430; 0607 = 615,944; 0708 = 641,732; 0809 = 639,687; 0910 = 654,151; 1011 = 667,508; 1112 = 668,344; 1213 = 650,763; 1314 = 638,959; 1415 = 633,809. *N*s for 'Skip to Reception' and 'Skip to Year 1': 0405 = 539,819; 0506 = 554,267; 0607 = 575,240; 0708 = 602,141; 0809 = 599,359; 0910 = 612,523; 1011 = 626,418; 1112 = 628,430; 1213 = 611,787; 1314 = 591,432; 1415 = 598,131. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

in the most recent cohort), and/or to be picked up as attending pre-school and subsequently being educated with the cohort below at Year 1. Insofar as this group are intended to benefit from the policy of 'right to request' later entry with the following cohort, this may suggest that some outcomes of the 2014 update to the Schools Admissions code are as intended.

However, children with SEND are also increasingly likely in these more recent years to enter school later than January of their Reception year and to then be educated in-cohort at Year 1, having missed at least part of Reception. In contrast, children with no SEND recorded become less likely to follow this trajectory in recent years, and more likely to follow the 'Reception at Year 1' and/or 'Skip to Reception' routes. Whether this indicates a tendency for children with SEND to experience less optimal school entry pathways in more recent years depends in part on what they are doing instead, when not in Reception: this is explored later in the findings.

Figure 9 show that across years, boys are more likely than girls to be in Reception at Year 1 age, and to 'skip to Reception' (the proxies for deferred entry)—increasingly so since the 2014 update to the Admissions Code of practice, when they have also become more likely than girls to 'skip to Year 1' (delaying entry). Note that there are also differences according

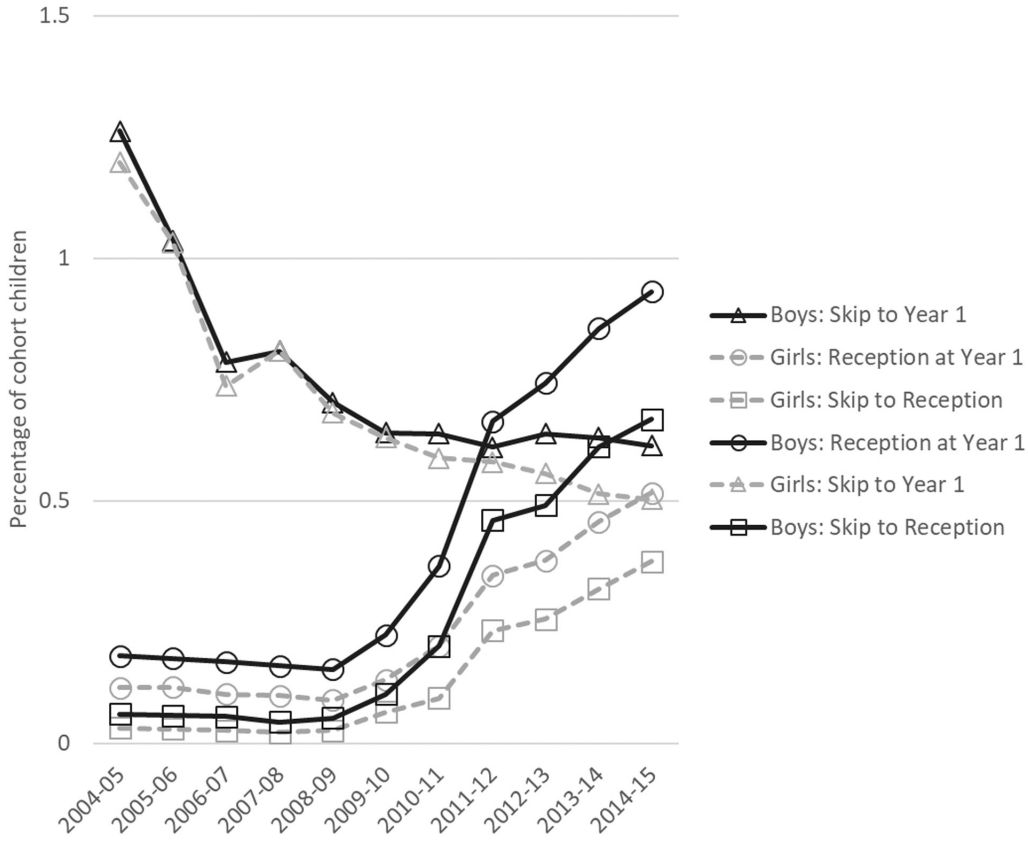

FIGURE 9 Percentage of children experiencing 'Reception at Year1', 'Skip to Reception', and 'Skip to Year 1', by gender: cohorts eligible for Reception from 2010 to 2020. *N*s for 'Reception at Year 1': 0405 = 582,484; 0506 = 595,430; 0607 = 615,944; 0708 = 641,732; 0809 = 639,687; 0910 = 654,151; 1011 = 667,508; 1112 = 668,344; 1213 = 650,763; 1314 = 638,959; 1415 = 633,809. *N*s for 'Skip to Reception' and 'Skip to Year 1': 0405 = 539,819; 0506 = 554,267; 0607 = 575,240; 0708 = 602,141; 0809 = 599,359; 0910 = 612,523; 1011 = 626,418; 1112 = 628,430; 1213 = 611,787; 1314 = 591,432; 1415 = 598,131. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

to children's recorded ethnic group, but numbers in many groups are small and disclosive, so they are not reported here.

Figure 10 explores patterns according to whether children are recorded as eligible for Free School Meals in Year 1. Across years, the proportions of children attending pre-school, then missing at least some of Reception, before being recorded in their 'normal' Year 1 group ('Skip to Year 1') fall—but children eligible for FSM remain more likely to experience this pattern than children not eligible. In the years since the 2014 update to the School Admissions Code, children not eligible for FSM have become more likely than those FSM-eligible to attend pre-school, then defer entry to be educated in Reception at Year 1 age ('Skip to Reception').

The message is fairly similar when an alternative measure of family circumstance—home language (EAL)—is considered (Figure 11). Among children who attended pre-school and were therefore in the country and the education system at the time of applying for Reception entry, EAL children are much more likely to experience skipping to Year 1, and missing at least part of Reception, than non-EAL children. Like patterns by SEND, this may reflect other aspects of the system in addition to the outcomes of 'right to request' deferred entry, and again, interpretation of whether it is problematic will depend partly on what children are doing when not in Reception—which is investigated later in this paper.

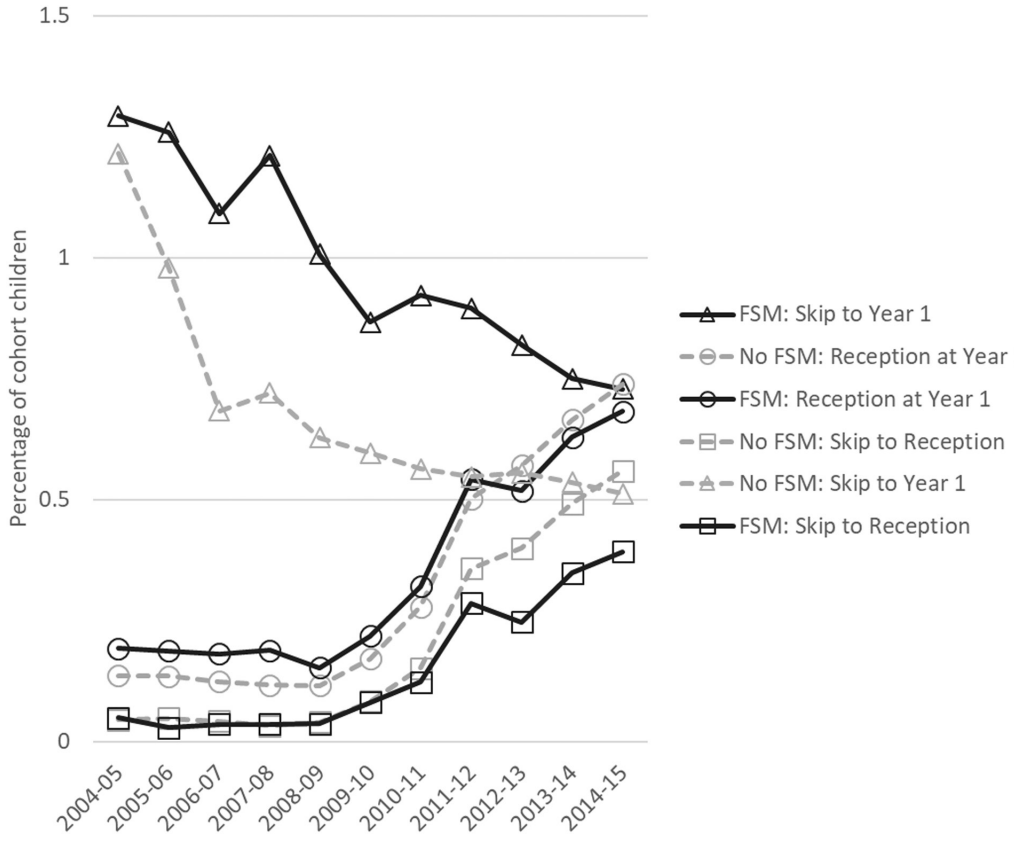

FIGURE 10 Percentage of children experiencing 'Reception at Year1', 'Skip to Reception', and 'Skip to Year 1', by FSM eligibility in Year 1: cohorts eligible for Reception from 2010 to 2020. *N*s for 'Reception at Year 1': 0405 = 582,484; 0506 = 595,430; 0607 = 615,944; 0708 = 641,732; 0809 = 639,687; 0910 = 654,151; 1011 = 667,508; 1112 = 668,344; 1213 = 650,763; 1314 = 638,959; 1415 = 633,809. *N*s for 'Skip to Reception' and 'Skip to Year 1': 0405 = 539,819; 0506 = 554,267; 0607 = 575,240; 0708 = 602,141; 0809 = 599,359; 0910 = 612,523; 1011 = 626,418; 1112 = 628,430; 1213 = 611,787; 1314 = 591,432; 1415 = 598,131. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

These analyses of whole national cohorts of children born across the year therefore suggest that, while children with SEND are most likely to experience deferred entry to Reception with the subsequent cohort since changes to the Schools Admissions code, they are also increasingly likely to miss at least part of Reception, and later to attend Year 1 with their 'normal' cohort. There are also indications that boys are more likely than girls to experience all pathways indicating later entry, and that children from more advantaged (higher-income and English-only speaking) families have disproportionately been experiencing deferred rather than delayed entry. This begins to suggest a mixed picture regarding whether 'the system is now working well' (Department for Education, 2022), which is further explored In Figure 12.

Figure 12 shows whether children deferring ('Reception at Year 1'; 'Skip to Reception') and delaying ('Skip to Year 1') entry were known to be in education (pre-school either in the private/voluntary/independent sector or local authority/school nursery in the maintained sector) at January of 'normal' Reception age. If children were absent from the NPD at this point, they were not in state-funded education in England, and were receiving no known provision. The proportion attending pre-school education in their 'normal' Reception year is

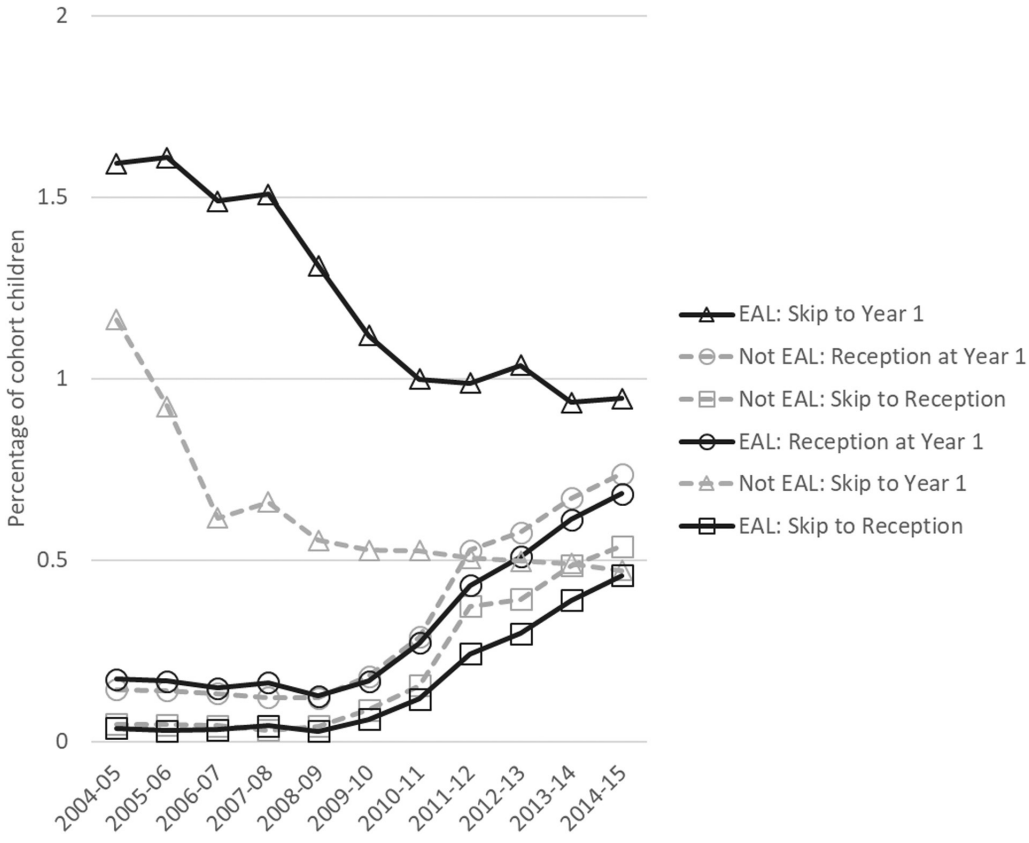

FIGURE 11 Percentage of children experiencing 'Reception at Year1', 'Skip to Reception', and 'Skip to Year 1', by home language (EAL) in Year 1: cohorts eligible for Reception from 2010 to 2020. *N*s for 'Reception at Year 1': 0405 = 582,484; 0506 = 595,430; 0607 = 615,944; 0708 = 641,732; 0809 = 639,687; 0910 = 654,151; 1011 = 667,508; 1112 = 668,344; 1213 = 650,763; 1314 = 638,959; 1415 = 633,809. *N*s for 'Skip to Reception' and 'Skip to Year 1': 0405 = 539,819; 0506 = 554,267; 0607 = 575,240; 0708 = 602,141; 0809 = 599,359; 0910 = 612,523; 1011 = 626,418; 1112 = 628,430; 1213 = 611,787; 1314 = 591,432; 1415 = 598,131. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

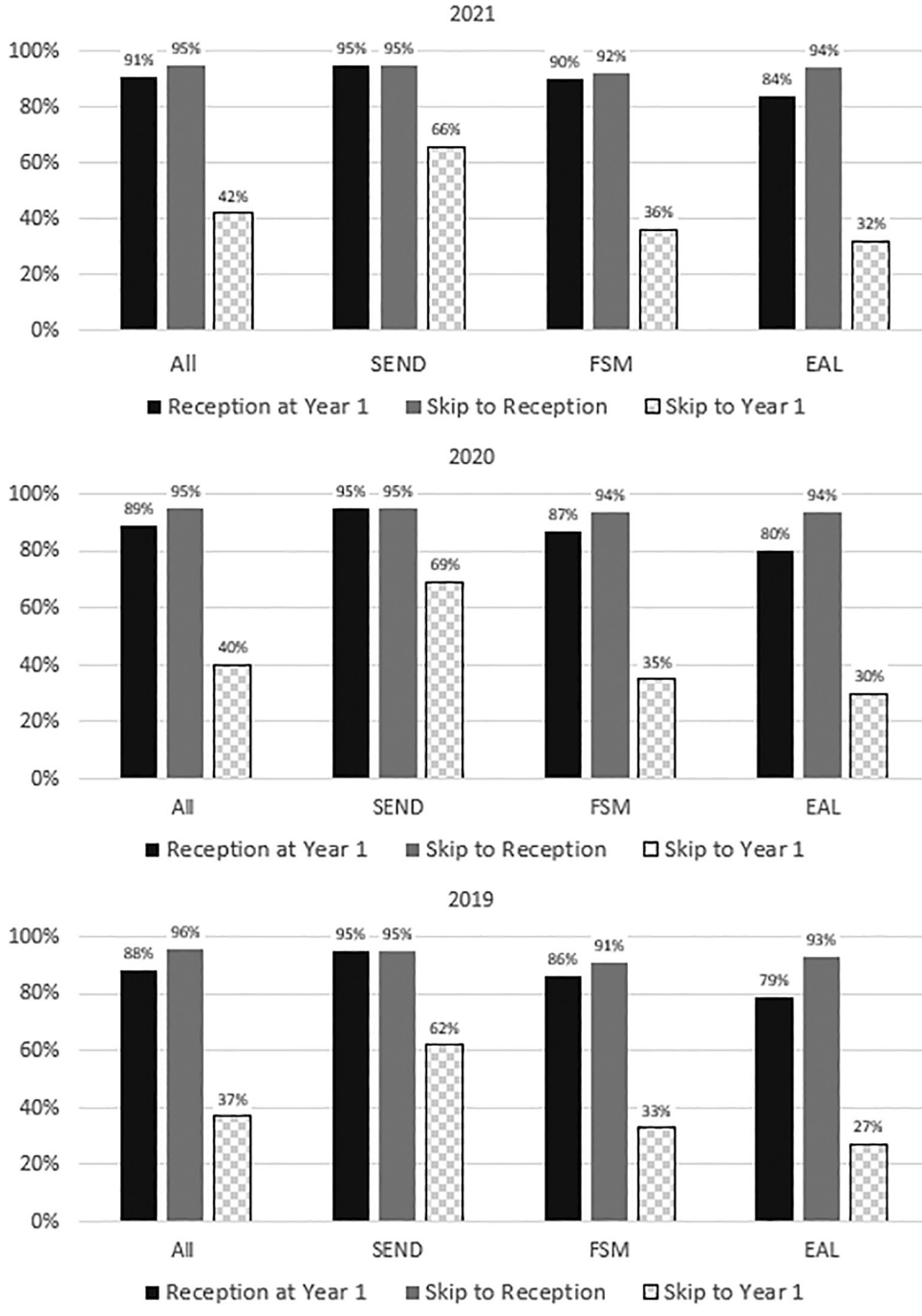

FIGURE 12 Percentage of Year 1 children experiencing 'Reception at Year 1', 'Skip to Reception', and 'Skip to Year 1', who were in funded education at January of their 'normal' Reception year (cohorts in Year 1 in 2021, 2020, 2019). *N*s: 2021: 'Reception at Year 1: All = 4605; SEND = 1674; FSM = 941; EAL = 877; 'Skip to Reception': All = 3031; SEND = 1082; FSM = 504; EAL = 504; 'Skip to Year 1': All = 3341; SEND = 819; FSM = 935; EAL = 1042. *N*s: 2020: 'Reception at Year 1: All = 4206; SEND = 1411; FSM = 705; EAL = 804; 'Skip to Reception': All = 2758; SEND = 914; FSM = 358; EAL = 425; 'Skip to Year 1': All = 3387; SEND = 720; FSM = 770; EAL = 1022. *N*s: 2019: 'Reception at Year 1: All = 3658; SEND = 1207; FSM = 552; EAL = 686; 'Skip to Reception': All = 2291; SEND = 743; FSM = 246; EAL = 342; 'Skip to Year 1': All = 3658; SEND = 653; FSM = 816; EAL = 1192. *Source*: Author's analysis of National Pupil Database.

shown for all children following each of the three pathways, then separately for children with SEND, for those recorded as FSM-eligible, and those recorded with EAL.

The latest cohort (born 2014–15; 'normal' Year 1 2021) and their immediate predecessors ('normal' Year 1 2020, 2019) are included, to ensure patterns are not an artefact of Covid times or other anomalies. The main messages are that, across all recent years, the large majority of children deferring entry were attending pre-school education at January of their 'normal' Reception year.

However, only a minority of children who delay and 'skip to year 1' were in education in the skipped Reception year: most appear to attend pre-school provision, then miss some schooling, before attending Year 1 with their 'normal' cohort. Though this period out of education is less common among children recorded with SEND, it still occurs for a third of those in this group picked up as 'skipping'; and it is more common among children FSM-eligible or with EAL.

Though the data cannot tell us why these children are not accessing any funded provision in their 'normal' Reception year, it begins to suggest that for some of those picked up as 'skipping to Year 1', the pathways and transitions to primary school may be problematic. In contrast to the deferring children, many of the delaying children are not accessing the funded early education to which they all have a right at this age.

Considering child and family characteristics in combination with one another

Linear probability regression models are now used firstly to explore whether the patterns above hold (a) when only summer-born children are considered in isolation; (b) when all characteristics are considered simultaneously (as they may correlate with and confound one another); and (c) when local authority is controlled for, given the variation by area shown in Figures 2–4 and given that children and families with different characteristics are dispersed unevenly across areas. These models estimate the child and family characteristics (among those measured and available in the NPD data) most strongly related to the three outcomes—at the average, national level. Next, a second set of models interact the key child-level factor of SEND with the respective family-level indicators of disadvantage—FSM and EAL. This investigates whether children with SEND whose families are more/less advantaged tend to be more/less likely to experience each pattern of later entry to Reception.

Regressions are reported here for the latest 2014–15 born cohort, who were eligible for Reception in 2019–20, and 'normal' Year 1 age in 2020–21. Because this cohort were hit by the Covid pandemic in the latter part of their 'normal' Reception year, models are replicated for the two previous cohorts to ensure findings are not skewed by the Covid period. They are equivalent in their key messages and available on request. Some findings are also reported for the 2008–09 cohort—the last before the changes to the Schools Admissions Code—for comparison, and checked in the previous 2007–08 cohort (available on request).

Controlling for factors simultaneously

The following specifications are modelled initially, for each respective outcome.

1. Empty (this provides the proportion of children experiencing the outcome among April–August summer-borns).
2. + SEND.
3. + FSM, EAL, gender, ethnicity.
4. + Local authority fixed effects.

TABLE 1 Regressions showing association between pupil and family characteristics and children experiencing 'Reception at Year1', 'Skip to Reception' and 'Skip to Year 1': 2014–15 born cohort, eligible for Reception in January 2020.

	Spec 1	Spec 2	Spec 3	Spec 4
Outcome: 'Reception in Year 1'				
SEND		7.46	7.51	7.51
(Ref: No SEND)		–	–	–
Boy			0.50	0.50
(Ref: Girl)			–	–
FSM			−0.54	−0.38
(Ref: Not FSM)			–	–
EAL			−0.23	−0.16
(Ref: Not EAL)			–	–
Constant	1.54	1.09	1.03	0.96
N children	267,248	267,248	267,248	267,248
N LAs				149
Outcome: 'Skip to Reception'				
SEND		5.50	5.58	5.57
(Ref: No SEND)		–	–	–
Boy			0.40	0.40
(Ref: Girl)			–	–
FSM			−0.63	−0.52
(Ref: Not FSM)			–	–
EAL			−0.24	−0.20
(Ref: Not EAL)			–	–
Constant	1.20	0.66	0.88	0.84
N children	251,277	251,277	251,277	251,277
N LAs				149
Outcome: 'Skip to Year 1'				
SEND		2.85	2.78	2.79
(Ref: No SEND)		–	–	–
Boy			0.03	0.03
(Ref: Girl)			–	–
FSM			0.20	0.19
(Ref: Not FSM)			–	–
EAL			−0.01	−0.04
(Ref: Not EAL)			–	–
Constant	0.73	0.53	0.31	0.33
N children	251,277	251,277	251,277	251,277
N LAs				149

Source: Author's analysis of the National Pupil Database. Models three and four control also for ethnicity. Model 4 controls for LA. Linear probability models.

Table 1 shows estimates for each of these models. The 'Reception at Year 1' outcome is experienced by 1.5% of summer-born children in the 2014–15 cohort (Specification 1: Constant). Among these summer-borns, SEND is strongly associated with being educated in

the cohort below at Year 1, with a probability 7.5 percentage points higher for these children compared to those without identified SEND (Specification 2). This holds when children's gender, ethnicity and family disadvantage (FSM and EAL) are controlled for (Specification 3), and when local authority is taken into account (Specification 4). So, on average, nationally, over 8% of summer-born children with SEND (as defined and measured here) were educated in Reception, with the cohort below, at 'normal' Year 1 age in 2021. Boys are also more likely than girls to be with the cohort below, though the magnitude of this difference is less than that by SEND. Children eligible for FSM and those with families speaking languages other than / in addition to English are less likely (though this last relationship is relatively small, particularly once area is accounted for).

Patterns are fairly similar for the 'Skip to Reception' outcome: 1.2% of children in the cohort who were present at pre-school were not at school in January of the 'normal' Reception year, and then were educated in Reception at 'normal' Year 1 age. Children with SEND have a probability around 5.5 percentage points higher than those without, including once controls are added. Boys are also more likely; children eligible for FSM and those with EAL are less likely.

Among summer-borns in this cohort, 0.7% experienced the 'Skip to Year 1' outcome: attending pre-school, then missing at least some of the school Reception year, before being picked up in Year 1 with the rest of their 'normal' cohort. Children with SEND are 2.9 percentage points more likely, but there are no differences between boys and girls when other factors are taken into account. Children eligible for FSM are, however, more likely to 'Skip to Year 1'.

To the extent that the 'Reception in Year 1' and 'Skip to Reception' pathways may be considered to proxy the deferral trajectory desired by campaigners and seemingly intended by the Department for Education's guidance and codes, it therefore could be interpreted as promising that children with SEND, some of whom might plausibly be better served by education with the cohort below, are much more likely to experience them.

On the other hand, disadvantaged children eligible for FSM and with families with English as an additional language are less likely to defer. FSM children are also more likely to 'Skip to Year 1', which may represent a less ideal pathway, particularly as Figure 12 showed that many in this group experience no alternative pre-school education during the missed Reception year. Children with SEND are also more likely to 'Skip to Year 1' than those without SEND—and again, while Figure 12 indicated some of this group are accessing pre-school during the 'normal' Reception year, some are not: which begs further detailed scrutiny.

To further explore intersections between child and family characteristics and to investigate whether, among children who may feasibly be served by later entry, those whose families are more advantaged tend to be more likely to successfully utilise 'right to request', additional regressions with interactions are modelled for each of the three outcomes. The respective specifications are:

5. SEND*FSM + gender, ethnicity, EAL, local authority fixed effects.
6. SEND*EAL + gender, ethnicity, FSM, local authority fixed effects.

For ease of interpretation, estimated marginal mean plots for the interacted variables (SEND*FSM and SEND*EAL, respectively) are presented. These graphs show the predicted probability of the given trajectory for each of the four groups (for example: No SEND+Not FSM/SEND+Not FSM/No SEND+FSM/SEND+FSM), estimated over the average of the other factors controlled for in the model. These interactions allow the relationship between each characteristic and the outcome to vary according to the other characteristic: because the association between children's SEND and later entry may depend on a family's disadvantage as related to income-level or language skills.

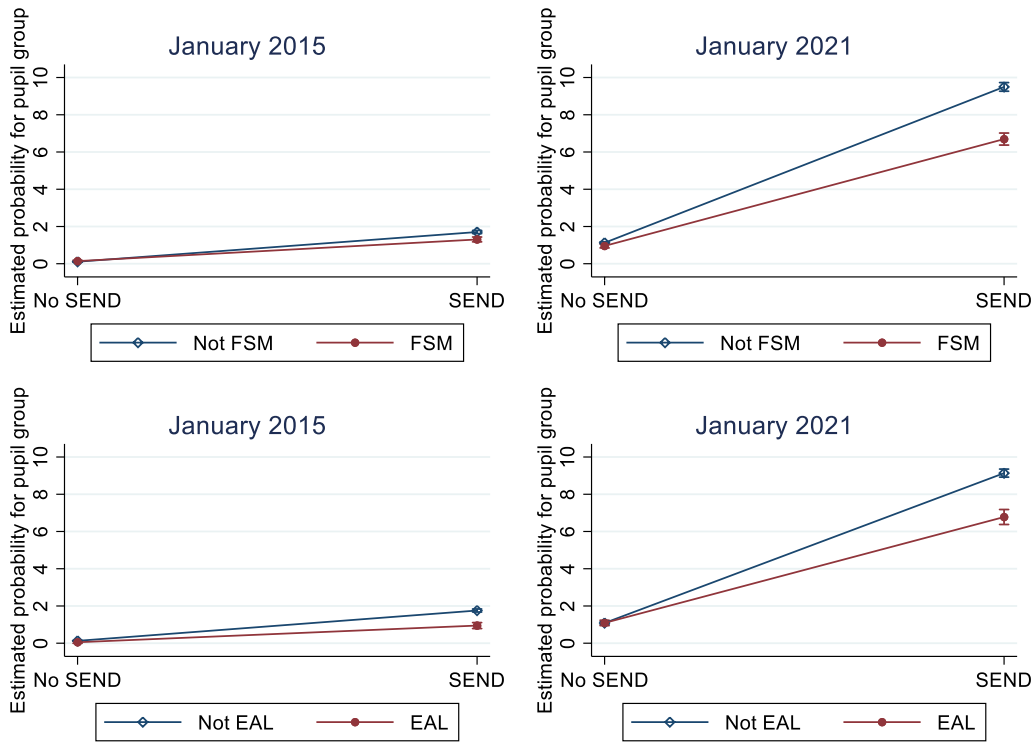

FIGURE 13 Estimated probabilities of experiencing 'Reception in Year 1' outcome, for children with each combination of SEND and FSM, and SEND and EAL: Children in Year 1 in 2015 and 2021. *N* Children = 267,248, *N* LAs = 149. Estimated marginal means averaged over controls for gender, ethnicity, LA, and the other characteristic not in the respective interaction. Separate models for FSM*SEND interaction and EAL*SEND interaction. *Source*: Author's analyses of the National Pupil Database.

As previously shown, Figure 13 indicates that children in the cohort before the changes to the Schools Admissions Code (the 2008–09 born cohort, whose 'normal' Year 1 fell in 2014–15) were much less likely to be educated in Reception at Year 1 age. However, even among this small group, it was children with SEND, who are not eligible for FSM (so on average from higher income families) and whose families spoke English only who were more likely. In the last cohort, whose 'normal' Year 1 falls in 2021, this difference is pronounced. So, as indicated in Figure 8, much of the steep increase in the proportion of children educated with the cohort below is accounted for by children with SEND.

It is among these children with SEND that differences by family advantage are found. In 2021, while there is little variation by FSM or EAL for children without SEND, 9.5% of those with SEND who are not eligible for FSM are educated in Reception at Year 1 age, compared to 6.7% of those from FSM-eligible low-income families. The same overall patterns hold among the populations of children who are of 'normal' Year 1 age in 2020 and 2019 (available on request), and they are reflected when the 'Skip to Reception' trajectory is modelled (Figure 14)—again, it is children with SEND, but more often higher-income, English-only-speaking children with SEND, who seem to be deferred to be educated with the cohort below.

Figure 15 presents a less straightforward picture: while in 2015, all FSM children were more likely to 'Skip to Year 1', by 2021 it is only among children with no SEND that this is the case. In 2021, children with SEND from families speaking English only are more likely than those with SEND and EAL—which might reflect a situation where English-only-speakers

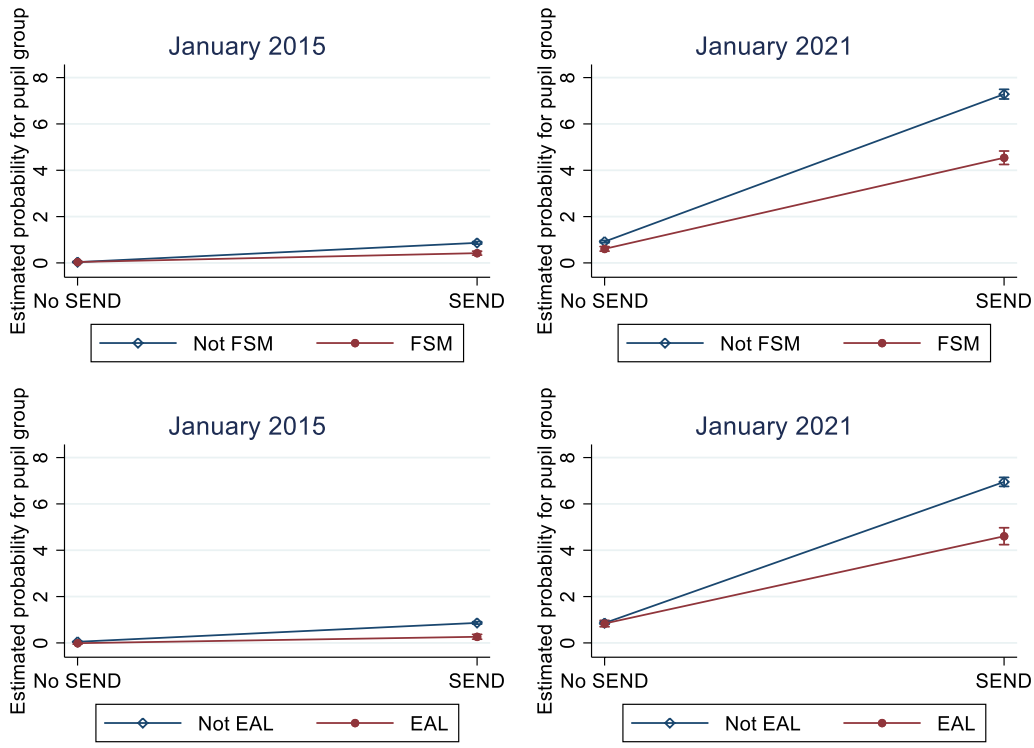

FIGURE 14 Estimated probabilities of experiencing 'Skip to Reception' outcome, for children with each combination of SEND and FSM, and SEND and EAL: Children in Year 1 in 2015 and 2021. *N* Children = 251,277, N LAs = 149. Estimated marginal means averaged over controls for gender, ethnicity, LA, and the other characteristic not in the respective interaction. Separate models for FSM*SEND interaction and EAL*SEND interaction. *Source*: Author's analyses of the National Pupil Database.

are more likely to apply for later entry, but where some are then channelled into Year 1 after missing part or all of Reception.

DISCUSSION

This paper set out to explore patterns of deferred and delayed entry to primary school, among the cohorts of children eligible to enter Reception from 2010 to 2020, who were 'normal' Year 1 age in 2011–2021. In a context where surveys, (Department for Education, 2018, 2019, 2021c), qualitative research (Hunter, 2022), and campaigners (School's Week, 2022) have suggested inequities in children's access to different entry pathways—but where the Department for Education has recently declared that the system of 'right to request' later entry is 'working well' (Department for Education, 2022)—it provides a national indicative mapping and further scrutiny of the situation.

The picture is mixed. Findings here suggest that, since guidance was clarified in the 2014 Schools Admissions Code, an increasing proportion of children have deferred entry to Reception, beginning school with the cohort below. Most of these deferring children seem to attend pre-school in the interim period. Numbers are still low, estimated as less than 1% of the cohort in 2021. In addition, analyses in this paper estimate roughly the same proportion in 2021 seem to have been delayed—rather than deferred—in their entry to school: missing

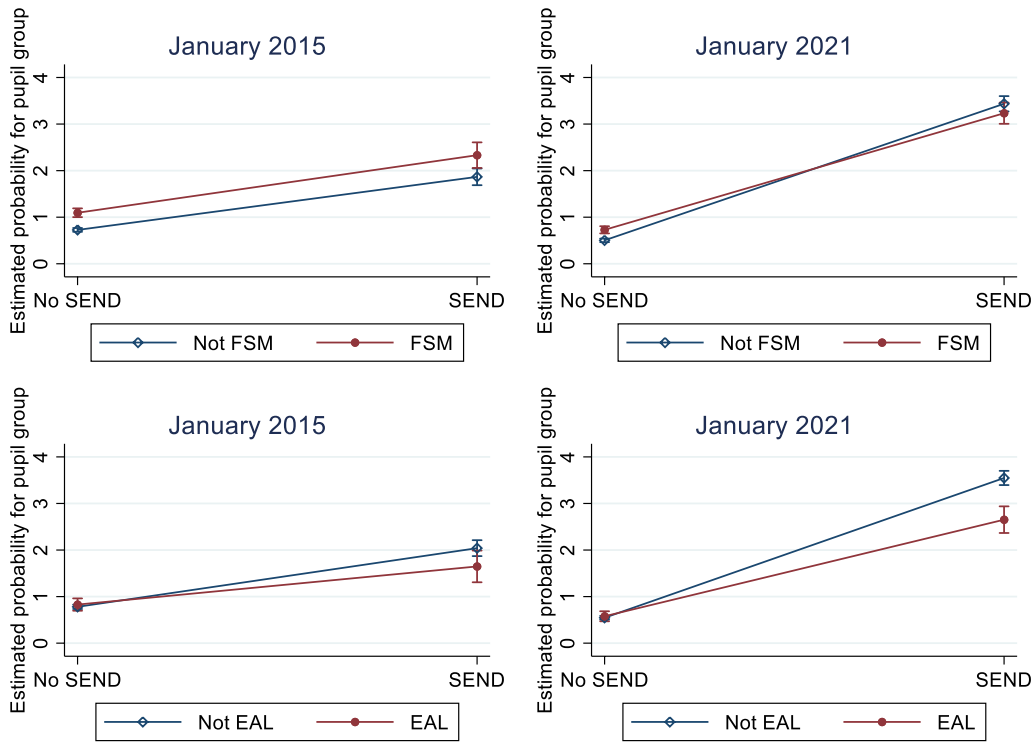

FIGURE 15 Estimated probabilities of experiencing 'Skip to Year 1' outcome, for children with each combination of SEND and FSM, and SEND and EAL: Children in Year 1 in 2015 and 2021. *N* Children = 251,277, *N* LAs = 149. Estimated marginal means averaged over controls for gender, ethnicity, LA, and the other characteristic not in the respective interaction. Separate models for FSM*SEND interaction and EAL*SEND interaction. *Source*: Author's analyses of the National Pupil Database.

at least part of Reception, then joining their 'normal' year group. Many of this delayed group do not appear to attend pre-school in the interim.

Across local authorities, there are indications of fairly wide variation in the proportions of children following later entry pathways. Some authorities appear to have more than 2% of their children deferring entry, while some have none; and the spread is similar for variation in the proportions of children delaying and missing (some of) the Reception year. This is congruent with the 'postcode lottery' in handling of requests reported by parent campaigners (School's Week, 2022), and with extreme variation in processes across admissions authorities reported by the Department for Education (2018) and Hunter (2022).

The uptick in proportions of children deferring entry after the 2014 update to the Schools Admissions Code seems entirely to be driven by summer-borns, and to be particularly pronounced among August-borns—the youngest at 'normal' school entry age. It also appears notably pronounced among children recorded with SEND. As these groups are intended to benefit from the policy of discretionary later entry with the subsequent cohort, this may suggest that the series of changes to the Schools Admissions Code and guidance confirming 'right to request' are working as intended to an extent. However, children with SEND are also increasingly likely to miss at least part of Reception after delayed admission. This may also reflect other issues with the primary education system and with availability of provision, but it could indicate that for some children with SEND, the 'right to request' and experiences of school entry are not playing out in an optimal manner. Further investigation of the transition to primary school for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities is needed.

What arguably indicates more clearly a sub-optimal realisation of the 'right to request' is the finding here that children eligible for FSM continue to be more likely than children not eligible, from higher-income families, to miss at least part of Reception before entering Year 1 with their 'normal' cohort—and not to be attending pre-school during this lacuna. Since 2014, children from higher-income families seem more likely than children eligible for FSM to defer entry, beginning Reception with the cohort below. Children from families speaking languages other than English at home (EAL) are also indicated as much more likely to experience missing at least part of their education during the Reception year, while delaying entry. This may again reflect other factors in addition to impacts of 'right to request' deferral. However, in more recent years children with EAL are also less likely than those from families speaking English only to join Reception at Year 1 age—suggesting barriers to access different school entry pathways for some families, who may be disadvantaged under the current system.

When family 'advantage' and child-level SEND are considered in combination with and controlling for one another—and other factors—summer-born children with SEND appear much more likely than other summer-borns to defer entry to primary school and to be educated with the cohort below. With controls, children eligible for FSM and with EAL are less likely. Crucially, when these family and child characteristics are interacted with one another, little variation by FSM or EAL is indicated among children without SEND. It is among children recorded with SEND that differences by both measures of family advantage are found. For example, in 2021, 9.5% of summer-borns with SEND *not* recorded eligible for FSM were educated in Reception at Year 1 age, compared to 6.7% of those from families eligible for FSM. This suggests that to some extent the 'right to request' policy may be reaching those children it is intended to benefit—summer-borns with SEND—but also that, within this group, more advantaged, higher-income and English-speaking families are more likely to access the option.

Limitations and caveats

As with the previous evidence base that this analysis has sought to add to and triangulate, there are various limitations and caveats to the research presented here. Firstly, this paper provides a more complete and nationally representative sense of patterns of school entry over the past decade—but it does not of itself provide direct evidence on whether deferred or delayed entry may be an effective pathway, either on average, or for individual children or particular groups. Given space limitations, neither do discussions in this paper directly address wider conversations around parents' reasons for requesting later school entry, which, as reported through Hunter's (2022) qualitative study, include knowledge of and concerns about the suitability of the early primary school curriculum and education system for young children. Some findings here may be taken to inform this discussion, however—such as the disproportionate increase in boys following later entry patterns, compared to girls—given that boys are often positioned as deficient within the early primary school system (Campbell, 2021a).

Rather findings in this paper are focused in the context of the previous research and of current policies and guidelines, in order to facilitate evaluation of whether the latter seem to be playing out as intended. Is it true that they need no further revision; that they are 'working well' (Department for Education, 2022)? Whether this is the case depends to an extent on ideological and value judgements and consideration of whether the apparent current situation—where more 'advantaged' families seem somewhat more likely to access deferred school entry, and where there is continued variation by local authority—is problematic.

Secondly, in terms of limitations, the measures of family and child-level factors used in this paper are rough, and proxies for delayed and deferred entry are also imperfect. It is possible that there is endogeneity between the measure of child SEND and entry pathways. Some families who have the resources and capacity to secure recognition and documentation of their children's needs in the years around school entry may also have a greater capability to negotiate the system of 'right to request', and to follow a later entry trajectory. So while, given the often demanding nature of both of these negotiations, there is no danger of 'false positives' in the group of children documented with SEND who defer or delay entry, there may be 'false negatives'—including children who do have SEND that is not yet documented in the NPD, and do NOT enter school later. Therefore the finding here of a notably higher likelihood of deferral for children with SEND may be an overestimate, and the system may be working less 'well' than intended, on its own terms.

So far as possible, then, given the national data available, analyses here distinguish groups; however, they should not be taken as exact reports of prevalence. Rather they are estimates, with error, of national trends, to be interpreted along with the other sources of evidence.

CONCLUSION

This research has provided a sense of national patterns of later—deferred and delayed—entry to primary school over the past decade. It indicates that extremely young (August-born) children are now most likely to join primary school with the cohort below, and that children recorded with SEND are also much more likely. However, in line with previous surveys, qualitative studies and campaigners' reports, it also suggests there might still be various problems with the workings of the current system relying on non-statutory guidance and 'right to request'. These include an apparent disproportionate tendency of more advantage families to utilise the right, an increase in the proportion of children with SEND missing at least some of Reception and then entering Year 1 in-cohort, a continued tendency for children eligible for FSM to experience this delay pathway, and notable variation by local area.

Therefore findings in this paper call into question the Department for Education's assertion that the 'system is now working well' (2022), and they beg further questions and considerations, and transparent explication of what 'working well' comprises. At the pragmatic level, is additional change or active intervention needed in order for school entry options and processes to function more optimally, particularly for children 'disadvantaged' by individual or family circumstances? At the higher level, more generally, does the Department's shying away from enacting legislation enshrining deferral as a mainstreamed option—relying instead on the quasi-policy of 'right to request'—represent a lack of integrity, clarity, or honesty in policy making? Given the unsurprising and predictable patterns by advantage in accessing the right, are such quasi-policies fair, efficient or effective in serving children; or do they inevitably compound or lend themselves to supporting the accumulation of advantage?

This empirical paper does not offer definitive answers, but it has provided national longitudinal evidence to inform these continuing debates.

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There are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available to approved researchers from Department for Education. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study.

ETHICS STATEMENT
None.

DATA
This work was produced using statistical data from ONS. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates. Thanks to the Department for Education for use of the National Pupil Database, and to LSE IT colleagues for facilitating and supporting access. The National Pupil Database can be accessed by approved researchers: for more information, see: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apply-for-department-for-education-dfe-personal-data.

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