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# Editorial: Being born at "wrong" time of year hurting students' success

DECEMBER 31, 2008

Seventeen years after the B.C. government abandoned dual-entry kindergarten, in which a new class of tykes entered school in January as well as September, it's time to revisit that bold experiment.

Malcolm Gladwell makes just such a recommendation in his fascinating new book, *Outliers*.

In the early 1990s British Columbia embarked on such a path only to cancel it abruptly, primarily over objections from teachers who complained that they hadn't been adequately consulted before the project launched.

Gladwell opens his book with the fact that a disproportionate number of pro hockey players are born in the first few months of the year.

When coaches first begin to select players for elite teams, they tend to choose players who are more physically mature. And since the cut-off date for age groupings in minor hockey is Jan. 1, a six-year-old born in January will tend to be nearly a year more mature than someone born in December.

This sets up a series of domino effects that result in the slightly older and bigger kids getting better coaching and more playing time. This attention actually does make them better players by the time pro scouts come looking.

Gladwell's point is that the system works against those born late in the year and prevents pro hockey from developing the best possible talent it can. That doesn't amount to a huge loss -- except, as Gladwell points out almost in passing, the same phenomenon occurs in education.

For that, he cites the research of economists Kelly Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey, who looked at math and science scores for fourth-graders. Those born at the beginning of the calendar year scored between four and 12 percentile points higher than those born at the end of the year.

"That's the difference between qualifying for a gifted program and not," Gladwell writes.

Bedard and Dhuey also discovered that children born late in the year are less likely to attend college, being underrepresented by 11.6 per cent.

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To address that, Gladwell muses that students in each elementary and middle school age cohort should be no more than four months apart in age instead of the 12-month spread that now exists.

"It would be a little more complicated administratively," Gladwell writes. "But it wouldn't necessarily cost that much more money, and it would level the playing field for those who -- through no fault of their own -- have been dealt a big disadvantage by the educational system."

In fact, the administration of B.C.'s dual-entry kindergarten was one of its downfalls. Teachers would have preferred to introduce each new group of kindergarten students as separate classes. What tended to happen, though, was the new students were brought into existing classes, which put pressure on the newcomers to catch up. That defeated the whole purpose of developmentally appropriate learning.

Not all children develop at the same rate. Ray Bourque, who was born in late December, was able to defy the odds and become a hockey superstar. But all things being equal, several months make a huge difference in a child's development, especially at age five or six.

Restructuring the educational system will likely cost more than Gladwell anticipates. What's obvious, though, is that the arbitrary nature of the present system is costing many students a shot at a good education and all the benefits to them and society that accrue from that.

It's time for the provincial government to learn from its earlier mistakes with dual-entry kindergarten and make the education system work better for all children, not just those lucky enough to be born early in the calendar year.

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