

Is one-size-fits-all school entry fair to all children?

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Mona MacDonald worries that four-year-old children are not ready to begin formal schooling, not even grade primary ("Is early school entry fair to four-year-olds?", 30 June). And for that reason she opposes the new policy that will allow children who will turn five before the end of December to enter school in September.

MacDonald says many true and wise things in her article. But she neglects the advantages of the early school entry policy.

If allowing children to begin school at four years of age puts at risk those not ready for school, requiring children to remain out of school until they are five means that academically strong children who miss the cut-off date will not receive instruction at their level. The advantage of early school entry is that academically strong children will get the curriculum and challenges they need in order to learn.

That's not to say, though, that we should weigh the advantage of early entry for academically strong children against the disadvantages it poses for other children, thinking thereby to find the best single policy for all children. It would be a mistake to do this because there is no best policy for all children. Children differ from each other in all sorts of ways. What would really benefit individual children is a school-entry policy that take their particular abilities and interests into account.

Consider the "Rising Fives" programme at the Halifax Independent School. This programme takes children four years old who will turn five before the end of December. Class is most often more like daycare than like school, but now and then the children are offered bits from the grade primary curriculum. Come June, those children judged to have done well with grade primary material are allowed to proceed to grade one.

The fact is, some four-year-olds are ready for school, some are not. What the public schools need is an entry-year policy that enables children to get to their appropriate grade level. Adapting the Rising Fives programme for the public schools makes terrific sense. Neither parents nor their children should be stuck with a one-size-fits-all entry policy.

The old policy of requiring that children be five-years old has done much harm to academically strong children. Children who read above grade level and who already know the facts about biology or geography on the syllabus are bored and can become indifferent to their studies. Since they find it easy enough to pass or, even, to do well without much effort, they don't learn how to learn.

Not only is school a waste of time for such children, but, quite often, they suffer late in secondary school or early in university when they are finally required to apply themselves and to develop their native abilities.

Now one might think that the solution to the problem of academically strong children languishing in curricula below their abilities is to skip them a grade or two. And, indeed, that would be a solution. But public schools are reluctant to skip children.

Schools will skip a child only when they are satisfied that the child is already at the higher grade level in all areas. That is, a school will not skip a child even when that child could easily come up to the level of her peers in the higher grade were she put at that level. Many children who would benefit from skipping are left to stagnate.

This reluctance to skip children is easy to understand. It stems from caution. Things can go badly for a child who skips a grade. So, in order to avoid an occasional bad outcome, the school prefers to make the criteria for skipping difficult to meet, unfortunately to the detriment of many academically strong children.

By the way, while academically strong children are smart children, children who are not academically strong might be just as smart. For academically strong children reading, writing, and arithmetic come easily, and they just naturally care to investigate the world as scientists and critics do. Other children just as smart have different interests—sports, say, or art or fashion or interpersonal relationships. But wherever a child's interests or talents lie, all children must be able to read, write, do arithmetic, and know things about the world. That's why schools are right to put academics at the centre of schooling.

Early entry is good for four-year-old children who are academically strong, not so good for many other four-year olds. Five-year-old entry is no good at all for academically strong four-year olds, but fine for most others. Of course, just how strong academically a child is isn't usually apparent until the child has been at school for a while. But, out of fear, schools are averse to skipping academically strong children.

The solution, it seems, is to allow four-year olds to enter a programme designed to discover, in each individual child's case, whether the next step is grade primary or grade one.