

Let them skip a grade

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What about academically strong children? Are our public schools doing enough for them? Can our schools do more for them—without, that is, diverting resources away from either struggling students or the students in the vast middle?

One thing schools could do to help academically strong children to realize their potential is to set aside their prejudice against allowing them to skip a grade.

A more liberal use of academic acceleration would be great for the children who are languishing in their classrooms. Allowing children to skip will not cost a cent, and identifying those children who would benefit from skipping would take even less time, effort, and money than do current ways of accommodating academically strong children.

By “academically strong” children, I mean children for whom reading, writing, and calculating come easily. They are the children who didn’t need to be taught these skills in the early grades, but who simply picked them up by watching and experimenting. They enjoy collecting facts and contemplating theories. They reason well. They want to understand things, and they will work hard to understand them merely for the sake of knowing.

Academically strong children stuck in classrooms with their peers-in-age are often bored and restless. While their classmates are trying to place the names of the provinces on the map, they already know the capital cities, if not the populations and chief industries as well. As their classmates are learning to add two-digit numbers, they’re figuring out how to multiply them.

It’s not just that they are bored and restless, and sometimes disruptive. Because they are not challenged to learn, academically strong children occasionally fail to learn how to learn when the matter is difficult. When school finally becomes hard for them, in, for instance, grade 11 or 12 math or science, they find themselves at a loss, not having developed the study habits and attitudes of mind that their classmates developed years ago. Keeping them among their peers-in-age not only prevents them from flourishing; it can, in fact, cause them to slide backwards.

The experience of running up against his native limit can be profoundly troubling for an academically strong teenager, because so much of his self-identity is bound up with being bright enough to succeed without really trying.

The Nova Scotia Department of Education hasn’t out-and-out banned skipping. As with failing, though, skipping is a practice the department strongly discourages. A child may skip a grade only if it is absolutely clear that he or she has exceeded all learning outcomes during the year. This is a wrong-headed approach, for it makes skipping a grade a reward, like a gold star. Skipping should, rather, be used to facilitate a child’s education. The question to ask of an academically strong child isn’t what his or her grades are, as a child’s grades might be low

because she's bored and doesn't care, or because of sloppiness and inattention, traits often found among bright children. The question to ask is simply whether having the child skip a grade will help that child to develop as a learner.

Right now the policy at schools is to devise an Individual Program Plan (IPP) for each academically strong child, one that adds topics to those in class or that directs the student to go deeper. This policy is not serving academically strong children well. The IPP is not usually drawn up and implemented until December or January of the school year. As well, because students, even into grade six, are required to be under the eye of a teacher, students typically have to pursue their IPP in their classroom, while the teacher is talking or their classmates are involved in an activity. This is at least distracting for the student, and one has to wonder whether having a child ignore his teacher promotes good manners. It's also the case that even academically strong children don't want to have to do more school work than their classmates.

But even were these problems ironed out, IPPs would still run a distant second to putting the child up a grade. That is because with an IPP, most the child's day is still given over to mastering information she has already mastered and acquiring skills she has already acquired.

The research of which I'm aware does not show that skipping an academically strong child from grade 1 to 3 or grade 2 to 4 causes that child academic or other difficulties down the road. Critics of skipping like to say that it isn't good socially for a child to be younger than his classmates. But, in fact, academically strong children make and keep friends more easily among older children, for older children are more likely to share their interests and value their abilities. And, of course, children mature socially, sexually, and every other way at different times and rates. Whatever stage a child who has been accelerated is at, there are bound to be others in his new grade who are also at that stage.

Letting academically strong children skip a grade will help children to reach their potential and won't put anyone at disadvantage. The schools really ought to get over their prejudice against it.