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Educating the Educators

Should we be paying more attention in class to raising the school starting age?

Primary, and pre-primary, education in Britain increasingly resembles an H. M. Bateman cartoon in which an aghast swarm of pushy parents encircle a toddler above the caption: "The four-year-old boy who couldn't yet parse Latin!"

We increasingly expect much of our children, at decreasingly young ages. Yet if you studied the impressive data on how early children in Britain are fed into the education system, and how many of them are kept on the conveyor belt until they acquire some sort of degree, you might be startled at just how many brickbats this apparently rigorous education machine attracts for failing pupils at even quite basic levels of literacy and numeracy. Is it possible that we are trying too hard? Or, at least, not trying hard enough in the right areas?

The biggest investigation for four decades into primary teaching in England recommends raising the starting age for formal schooling to 6. This is at least a year older than at present. But it is the same as most other industrialised nations; and still a year below many of them. Moreover, many of these countries do not drill children to read by the age of 4 or 5, being confident that they will become fluent readers, naturally, by 7 or so. School hours abroad are generally shorter too. We should follow suit, says the independent charity-funded Cambridge Primary Review because: "The English insistence on the earliest possible start to formal schooling, against the grain of international evidence and practice, is educationally counterproductive."

It is time that we stopped automatically sending those who share such a view to the back of the class, on the ground that they must be nature's slackers. They just may have the correct answer.

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