

Types of acceleration and their effectiveness

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Taken from a series of GERRIC presentation modules, this article explains types of acceleration, disproves negative notions on acceleration, and provides international guidelines on the subject.

Types of acceleration and their effectiveness

Acceleration is a strategy that allows a student to progress through school at a faster than usual rate and/or younger than typical age. There are several forms of acceleration to consider for any individual student. The main ones used successfully in Australia are:

- **Subject acceleration**, where students are promoted to a higher Year for one or more of the subjects in which they excel (i.e. display talent, in Gagné's terms). A graphic example of this was the profoundly gifted Terry Tao, now a successful and well-adjusted young man, who was doing high school math at the age of 7, while still attending his South Australian primary school for other subjects.

Subject acceleration may be sufficient in itself for many gifted students, but it can also be seen as a form of trial for a possible full grade skip.

- **Grade skipping**, where students are promoted to a higher Year for all subjects, e.g. Jordan who was moved from Year 1 at the end of one school year into Year 3 at the beginning of the next, or Cassie who was skipped from Year 6 into Year 8.

If a highly gifted student needs more than one grade skip it is usual for only one grade to be skipped at a time, with a settling in and reassessment period before the second (or third) skip is effected.

- **Early entry**, which usually means that a gifted child who displays academic and social readiness begins school at a younger age than most other children do (eg at age 4 rather than at age 5). This is a form of grade skipping but has the added advantage of being the most unobtrusive/least disruptive form of acceleration.
- **Telescoping**, where a student, or a group of students, completes two years in one, or some similar rapid progression through material.

- **Radical acceleration**, where highly/profoundly gifted students skip several grades, and/or experience several forms of acceleration, during their school years.

Isn't acceleration hot-housing and therefore stressful?

No. It is important to realize that acceleration does not mean that gifted students are being made to speed up and learn faster than they are already willing to, but rather that schools are allowing students to progress at something closer to their natural or preferred rate of learning.

Holding back gifted students is much more likely to be stressful for them, or harmful in other ways (such as teaching them to 'coast' along, which may deny them the opportunity to learn to cope with intellectual challenges).

Acceleration means we have taken off the brakes!

David Elkind, well-known for his book, *The hurried child*, makes this point when he states: 'Promotion of intellectually gifted children is simply another way of attempting to match the curriculum to the child's abilities, not to accelerate those abilities. What promotion does for intellectually gifted children is to make a better fit between the child's level of development and the curriculum.' (Elkind, in Smutny, Veenker & Veenker, 1989, p.105.) That is, Elkind acknowledges the legitimacy of acceleration as a strategy for the gifted. A characteristic of gifted students is their ability to 'reason at a level usually found in a student some years older', so acceleration is a logical way of addressing this.

What does the evidence tell us?

The research evidence on the effectiveness of acceleration is very positive. For example, contrary to many people's expectation, the evidence shows that acceleration does not damage students socially or emotionally.

In fact, grade skipping has been found to aid social relations (as well as academic achievement), while concurrent enrolment has been found to enhance psychological adjustment.

Most forms of acceleration have been found to produce substantial academic benefits, too, as Karen Rogers (2002) reports:

- Gifted early entrants to school were found to be on average six months ahead in their achievement, compared to their age peers, while there were also slight gains in social skills and self-esteem.
- Studies of single-subject acceleration have found that it produced academic gains of about three-fifths of a year's growth. Telescoping was found to have

similarly large positive effects.

- For concurrent enrolment the academic gains were small but positive.
- The research on grade skipping has produced very positive findings, with over one additional year's academic achievement resulting, 'and the students performed at least as well as their older-aged gifted peers in the new grade level'.

The Senate Committee (2001, p. xiv) concluded that 'there is overwhelming research evidence that appropriate acceleration of gifted students who are socially and emotionally ready usually has highly advantageous outcomes.'

But doesn't it cause social adjustment problems?

On the contrary, the somewhat surprising finding (given teachers', and some parents', concerns about this matter) is that grade-skipping tends to produce a strong improvement in social adjustment (along with a small gain in self-esteem). As Rogers (2002, p. 168) comments: 'It is noteworthy that when these children do move to the higher grade, they are, in fact, more likely to make friends, perhaps because the older children may have similar interests or are slightly more socially mature.'

A testimonial from the large-scale Richardson study supports this positive conclusion: 'Our files are full of stories about youngsters, named or unnamed, happily studying two, three, even four years ahead of their age-mates. In general, the social adjustment of these precocious youngsters is improved by placing them with their intellectual peers rather than their age-mates' (Daniel, 1989, pp. 50-51).

However...

While the research evidence shows that acceleration usually has positive consequences for gifted students, it is not a 'magic bullet' that cures all academic and social problems.

Acceleration alone may not be enough to eliminate a student's existing social difficulties (in the words of one student: 'Acceleration didn't make me a social misfit. I was one already!'), so social skills may need to be addressed separately.

Also, a single grade skip is unlikely to be sufficient to satisfy the academic needs of a highly-to profoundly gifted student.

There are documented cases where acceleration did not produce the positive outcomes usually found, but in most of these a large part of the failure may be attributed to the inappropriate ways in which the acceleration process was managed.

Hence: acceleration needs to be seen as an ongoing process, not just a placement decision, so one that requires careful planning and implementation.

Fortunately, very practical guidance is available to enable teachers to increase the likelihood of success.

Guidelines for deciding whether and how to accelerate

Well established guidelines exist to help teachers decide whether acceleration may be an appropriate way to meet the needs of any gifted student and, if so, how best to implement it.

- Note that these are guidelines, not imperatives. That is, they need not all be fully satisfied before you accelerate a student. For example, if a 'trained psychologist' (#1) is not readily accessible, as in some rural or isolated communities or where the cost is prohibitive, acceleration should still be considered, using the other evidence available.
- Every decision about whether and how to accelerate a particular student should be able to be justified by referring to the evidence upon which it is based. Hence, judgments about both academic and social-emotional readiness must involve the collection of hard evidence, from a variety of sources, not just the interpretation of a single class teacher, or member of the school executive, however well intentioned. This is also why the second point made in guideline #3 is very important.

Appendix 1

International Guidelines on Suitability for Accelerated Progression Some of the guidelines used internationally to assist school Principals in determining gifted students' suitability for accelerated progression include the following:

1. It is not necessary for every gifted student to be psychometrically tested. However, in the case of students who are being considered for accelerated progression, there should be a comprehensive psychological assessment of their intellectual functioning, academic skill levels and social-emotional adjustment by a trained psychologist.
2. Academically, the student should demonstrate skill levels above the average of the class they desire to enter.

3. Socially and emotionally, the student should be free of any serious adjustment problems. Principals should be aware, however, that in some gifted students social or emotional difficulties may have been caused by inappropriately low grade placement. In such cases the situation may be alleviated by accelerated progression.
4. The student should be in good physical health. The student's size, however, should be considered only to the extent that competitive sport may be viewed as important in later years.
5. It is important that the student should not feel unduly pressured by parents/guardians. The student themselves should be eager to move ahead.
6. The receiving teacher must have positive attitudes towards the grade advancement and must be willing to help the student adjust to the new situation.
7. Judgments about the student's social and emotional maturity should include input from the student's parents/carers and the psychologist. Gifted students are sometimes rejected by their classmates. It is important that teachers do not confuse the absence of close peer relationships with social immaturity.
8. Ideally, grade advancement should occur at natural transition points, such as the beginning of the school year. However, mid-year advancement may sometimes be desirable where the student's prior teacher and receiving teacher may more easily confer about how best to help the student make a smooth transition.
9. All cases of accelerated progression should be arranged on a trial basis of at least six weeks. The student should be aware that if the trial period is not a success, they will return to the original grade placement. It is important that in such a circumstance the student should not be made to feel that they have 'failed'.

10. Care should be exercised not to build up excessive expectations from grade advancement. A small minority of gifted students are so far advanced in their intellectual or academic development that one year of accelerated progression may still leave them bored at school. For such students further advancement may be advisable at a later period in their schooling.
11. Decisions regarding accelerated progression should be based on facts rather than myths. The research literature on acceleration reveals that accelerated progression benefits the gifted student both academically and socially. Conversely, failure to advance a highly gifted student may result in poor study habits, apathy, lack of motivation and maladjustment.

References

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