



What is acceleration and why would we accelerate a child through school?

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In some ways, acceleration is a poor choice of word for an educational procedure that is a “freeing up” rather than a “pushing along”! When I want my car to go faster I press the accelerator. When I want it to slow down I press the brake. However when I accelerate a gifted child—by giving her access to a curriculum that is more suited to her needs than the curriculum of the grade she has been placed in based on her age—I am *not* applying pressure of any kind. Rather, I am freeing up the child so that she can learn at her natural pace and level which, for most gifted and talented students, is substantially beyond the pace and level of their age-peers!

Acceleration has been called “a coat of many colours” and indeed it can take many forms. For example, Janette, who shows talent in a number of school subjects, may “skip” from Year 2 to Year 4 at the end of Year 2 if she already knows the vast majority of the Year 3 work. Alternatively, if her talent principally lies in a specific subject, she may take that subject with the grade above hers—a single-subject acceleration—while remaining with her own grade for other subjects. If a young child is unusually mature for her age and is already reading and counting she may be permitted to start school early. A report that focuses specifically on the types, characteristics, and outcomes of acceleration, *A Nation*

Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students (nationdeceived.org), discusses no fewer than 18 different forms of acceleration! Some of these are described below with terms changed to match the Australian context.

Early admission to kindergarten: Students enter kindergarten prior to achieving the minimum age for entry as set by their education system’s policy.

Early admission to primary school: This practice can result either from skipping kindergarten or from acceleration from kindergarten to Year 1.

Grade-skipping: A student is considered to have grade-skipped if she is given a grade-level placement ahead of chronological peers. Grade-skipping may occur at the beginning of, or during, the school year.

Subject acceleration: This practice allows students to join a higher grade for one or more specific subjects in which they show readiness for advanced instruction.

Combined (composite) classes: Placement in the lower grade of a class that comprises two or more consecutive grades can allow gifted students to work on one or more subjects with the older children. If the gifted student performs extremely well and gravitates strongly towards the older classmates, then whole-grade acceleration may be desirable.

Concurrent (dual) enrolment: The student takes a course at one level and receives credit for a parallel course at a higher level (for example, taking high school algebra in algebra in a lower year of high school, and receive credit for both the year they are in and a higher year).

Advanced Placement: The student takes a course in high school which, upon passing a standardised exam, will give them credit for a subject at university.

Credit by examination: The student is awarded advanced standing credit (for example, in high school or university) by successfully completing some form of mastery test.

Acceleration in university: The student is awarded an advanced level of instruction at least a year ahead of what is customary. This may be achieved by using other accelerative techniques such as dual enrolment or credit by examination.

The common feature in all these modes of acceleration is that they allow an intellectually gifted student (children whose cognitive ability places them in the top 10% of their age-peers) to pass through the curriculum of a school subject (or, for some exceptionally gifted children, several or all school subjects) at an earlier age, and at a faster pace, than usual. Acceleration is ideally suited to gifted children because research has

found that these children already *do* have a naturally faster pace of learning than is usual for their age, coupled with a deeper capacity to grasp and use new concepts. It is an excellent response to intellectually gifted children who, sadly, are often seriously understimulated by the pace and level of work presented to them in the classroom.

Social and emotional issues

Some parents—and possibly even more so, some teachers and school administrators—feel uncomfortable with the idea of acceleration, and even with the word itself. “It sounds as if you’re *pushing* a child to learn at a pace that’s going to cause stress... or distress... or even failure” is a common concern. “And what will happen to a child who isn’t socially mature enough to work and play with kids older than he is? What about friendships? Are the older students going to reject him?”

Something that many parents of gifted children may be unaware of is that their children’s interests are likely to be much more akin to those of older children rather than to the interests and hobbies of their age-peers. Actually, this maturity of interests is quite natural; if a child *thinks* more like someone older, rather than like his or her classmates, the things that excite and interest that child (the books, hobbies and games she enjoys, for

example) are going to be more like those of her *developmental* peers—students who are older than she is chronologically but who may be a very happy match socially and intellectually. This is another reason why acceleration works so well.

Many teachers and school principals are poignantly aware that children who are intellectually disabled tend to gravitate, in the schoolyard, towards younger children—sometimes children who are much younger. In a similar way, and for much the same reason (searching for developmental peers who are more likely to share their interests) gifted children tend to seek out, and enjoy, the company of older students who are at similar developmental levels.

Talking with the school about acceleration

Over the last 15 years the attitudes of Australian teachers towards acceleration have become much more facilitative. This has occurred, in no small part, because of the accessibility of *A Nation Deceived* with its practical guidelines on how to prepare, implement and support acceleration for individual students. If you are the parent of a gifted student and you want practical, parent-friendly information that will help you prepare for a meeting with your child's teacher, go to nationdeceived.org.

Similarly, if you are a teacher or school administrator who wants well-tested

guidelines about accelerating students, you are able to access the report by going to nationdeceived.org. The report is practical, easy to read, and teacher-friendly. If you find it useful—and I believe you will—pass it on.

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