



Feature

The Many Faces of Acceleration: Creating an Optimal Match for the Advanced Learner

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America's school system keeps bright students in line by forcing them to learn in a lock-step manner with their classmates. Teachers and principals disregard students' desires to learn more—much more—than they are being taught.

Instead of praise and encouragement, these students hear one word—no. When they ask for a challenge, they are held back. When they want to fly, they are told to stay in their seats.

Stay in your grade. Know your place.

It's a national scandal. And the price may be the slow but steady erosion of American excellence.

—A Nation Deceived

Why Acceleration?

Gifted students are, by definition, more advanced than their age peers in some significant ways. Their rate of development has been faster than expected. They have reached a level of maturity that puts them out of sync with their age peers and with the curriculum of the regular classroom. Not only have these students acquired more information in a shorter time, but they think with the greater depth and insight of older students. The older they are, the greater the discrepancy between their level of maturity and that of their age mates.

It should be obvious, therefore, that gifted students need opportunities to work ahead of the curve.

Everyone needs a setting that matches his or her level and pace of learning. The right amount of challenge requires gifted students to stretch themselves and grow intellectually; too little challenge produces boredom and turnoff, an inevitable erosion of ability and commitment.

Worse yet, when school is habitually too easy, it teaches students that they are supposed to have all the answers without having to

The two most significant assets for gifted students are an appropriate educational fit and friends of similar maturity.

Further Reading

“Reading Instruction for Talented Readers: Case Studies Documenting Few Opportunities for Continuous Progress,” by Sally M. Reis, Jean E. Gubbins, Susannah Richards, Christine J. Briggs, Joan K. Jacobs, Rebecca D. Eckert, Joseph S. Renzulli, and Fredric J. Schreiber, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, volume 48, issue 4, Fall 2004, p. 315.

Iowa Acceleration Scale, Second Edition, Manual: A Guide for Whole Grade Acceleration, by Susan Assouline, Nicholas Colangelo, Ann Lupkowski-Shoplik, Jonathan Lipscomb, and Linda Forstadt, Great Potential, 2003

The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know? by Maureen Neihart, Sally M. Reis, Nancy M. Robinson, and Sidney M. Moon, Prufrock Press, 2002 (see especially chapter 1, by Karen Rogers)

Reforming Gifted Education: Matching the Program to the Child, by Karen B. Rogers, Great Potential, 2001

A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students, 2 volumes, by Nicholas Colangelo, Susan G. Assouline, and Miraca U. M. Gross, Connie Belin and Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development, University of Iowa (available for no charge at www.nationdeceived.org)

work. They are always first in the class and make effortless A's. This leads to what Carol Dweck, author of *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development* (Psychology Press, 2000), has called an "entity theory" of intelligence—the notion that one's ability cannot be changed. Students with this framework believe that hard work suggests that a person isn't very bright, and they often feel that they have to protect their image by avoiding situations in which they won't be instant experts. If they inadvertently stumble, they may feel devastated. In contrast, students who are accustomed to facing challenges are more likely to develop an "incremental theory," to believe that hard work will make them smarter. They look for learning opportunities. If they stumble, they figure that they just need to work harder. Students who hold the incremental theory have a sense of inner strength and resilience; those who have the entity theory don't.

Despite the evidence, the need for gifted students to move ahead hasn't been obvious to educators or to the general public. Some educators worry that bright students who are accelerated will be socially maladjusted or will be either unable to keep up with or rejected by their older classmates. Some don't like the idea just because it causes administrative difficulties. Some mistakenly expect that less capable students will be jealous, or they want to "protect" other children from feeling inferior.

A highly readable, two-volume book should serve as a wake-up call to educators, legislators, parents, and the public. The quotation at the beginning of this article comes from *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*. This important book argues that we are ignoring years of research that is overwhelmingly favorable to all forms of acceleration for gifted students, provided that the decision to accelerate is made thoughtfully.

Acceleration works. In terms of academic performance, student achievement is boosted roughly to the degree that the students are accelerated, grade for grade. In terms of personal adjustment, it improves students' ability to take on new challenges and does no harm to students' social and emotional functioning. A review of the literature on social-emotional development similarly concludes that, aside from warmly engaged and supportive families, the two most significant assets for gifted students are an appropriate educational fit and friends of similar maturity.

Initially, when gifted students move into appropriate settings with mental age mates and are no longer effortlessly at the top of the class, they may find it disconcerting. However, they generally discover that, as never before, they are where they belong. Students typically are happier with friends who match them in mental age. Not only do their interests and conversations mesh, but so do their ideas of how friends behave toward one another.

Accelerative Options

There is a rich smorgasbord of accelerative options, but no one option is a good fit for every gifted student. In some options, gifted students remain with their age peers; others involve moving in with older students. Some are gifted programs; others are general education options adopted by gifted students. Gifted students usually can take advantage of a combination of accelerative options as they traverse the school years. All academically gifted students need at least one of the following opportunities; some need more:

- preschool playgroups with children a year older
- early admission to kindergarten or first grade
- in-class grouping by skill levels, usually for reading and math
- curriculum compacting and differentiation of instruction in regular classes
- advanced curriculum in self-contained (homogeneous) gifted classes or a special school
- pull-out, part-time classes (unfortunately, some of these don't provide genuine acceleration, and gifted students still have to endure the rest of the week in a regular classroom)
- mixed-grade classes, with gifted students telescoping or condensing two years in one or three years in two
- subject-matter acceleration (e.g., going to a higher class for specific subjects in elementary school or to one or more classes at a higher grade in secondary school)

grade skipping or double promotion
 participation in high-level competitions such as Mathcounts, the National Geography Bee, the American Mathematics Competition, or the Intel Science Talent Search
 high-level summer classes sponsored by colleges and universities, regional talent searches, and other organizations
 online classes that yield high school or college credit (these often lead to early high school graduation)
 Advanced Placement (AP) courses and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, both delivering college-level classes taught at the high school, so that students arrive in college with advanced standing
 concurrent or dual enrollment in high school and college
 early college entry, independently (if necessary) or in programs admitting students one to four years early
 enrolling in a selective college or university
 once in college, enrolling in an honors program or honors college, taking graduate-level classes as an undergraduate, engaging in undergraduate research with a faculty mentor, or participating in academic competitions

Another set of options is offered by full-time or part-time homeschooling, in which students typically progress at their own pace, transferring into a regular school (or a special program) at a level that is generally higher than usual.

Choosing among the Options

Your first step is to develop an in-depth picture of your child's characteristics, skills, and interests. Most gifted children have uneven ability profiles, and the more gifted they are, the more likely they are to demonstrate significant asynchrony in their development—way ahead in some areas, moderately ahead or average in others. On the whole, gifted children are more socially and emotionally mature than their chronological age would imply, but not quite up to the level that their mental age would suggest. But your child may be less mature or more mature than this rule of thumb would indicate. There are wide variations among gifted children in their social skills and awareness, their personal organization and time management skills, their activity level and attention span, their play interests and study interests, their fine and gross motor skills, and their ability to stick to a hard task until it's finished.

Next, look at the options available in your community. These will be determined by school board policies, administrators and counselors, the presence or absence of self-contained homogeneous classes or AP/IB programs, and so on. For example, if a first-rate college is not close by, you may not want to enroll your child in a second-rate institution.

You're lucky if you can find a program designed for students like yours, such as a self-contained class that provides acceleration at an individualized pace or an early entrance program that provides access to college and same-age peers. If not, then an initial grade skip supplemented by differentiated instruction from an understanding teacher may work at first, with additional options as needed later on. The goal is to achieve a match commensurate with your child's mental age and academic skills.

One instrument that may help you is the *Iowa Acceleration Scale*. This scale brings together estimates of your child's maturity in a range of developmental domains. It provides the kind of evidence that educators can use constructively in decision making. This scale summarizes not only the student's academic ability and achievement but school factors, such as the student's need to change buildings; motivation and participation in extracurricular activities; developmental factors such as age, size, and motor skills; interpersonal skills with peers and teachers; family and school support; and so on.

What about your child's preferences? You need to ask, of course, but you needn't abide by the answer. Many gifted children have had to go to extra trouble to forge friendships with their classmates and are hesitant to give them up. Furthermore, they may be terrified of getting into a new situation in which they may not be the star and don't feel 100 percent sure of success. If you believe that an accelerative option is appropriate, recognize your child's feelings and present the new step as an experiment. You can ask your

child to give it a good try over a period that is long enough to make the transition work: fix gaps in preparation, become comfortable in the new setting, and, above all, make new friends. If your child is still unhappy after, say, half a year, then the decision can be reversed. But that's not likely to happen.

Making It Work

The following tips can help you make the transition a smooth one:

Borrow textbooks for the new class. If your fourth-grader is to enter the sixth grade next year, borrow this year's fifth-grade textbooks.

Arrange for short-term tutoring before the change or after, or both, to address gaps that emerge.

Be sure that your child's basic skills are up to snuff. This includes typing speed, English usage and spelling, number facts, and so on.

Figure out whether the new teacher is receptive to having a younger student. Most are pleased to teach students who love to learn, however young they may be. But there's the occasional doubter who makes things difficult for a young student. Try to win the teacher's cooperation, but if you're not successful, put off the accelerative option for a year if necessary.

Arrange contact with some new classmates before the transition occurs. For example, over the summer invite one or two over for an outing (or a play date, if your child is younger).

Let your child decide whether to shift to an older group in out-of-school activities such as soccer, chess club, scouts, or Sunday school and when to make that change. It will come in due time.

Recognize the hard work that the change entails for your child. Don't look for all A's, and be sure to focus on effort and thoughtfulness rather than grades.

Remind your child from time to time that this is a new situation. (You may have to remind yourself as well.) Smart as gifted kids may be, often they lose sight of the fact that their new comparison group is at a different level from the old one. Help them enjoy being a part of the group.

Never ask your child about his or her status in the class.

Remind your child that this is an experiment to see whether the new situation fits. In the unlikely event that it doesn't, have an alternative plan in mind.

Finally, read *A Nation Deceived*. Familiarize yourself with the variety of accelerative options, the excuses people give for why acceleration is a bad idea, and the research that shows, quite to the contrary, that it is a good idea. Then devise a plan for your child and go for it. Your child deserves to be able to love school, to have meaningful friendships, and to feel strong and energized. Don't let America's schools hold back your child!

—Nancy M. Robinson, PhD

Nancy M. Robinson is professor emerita of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington (UW) and former director of what is now known as the Halbert and Nancy Robinson Center for Young Scholars, which provides early entrance programs to UW and summer programs for gifted youngsters.

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