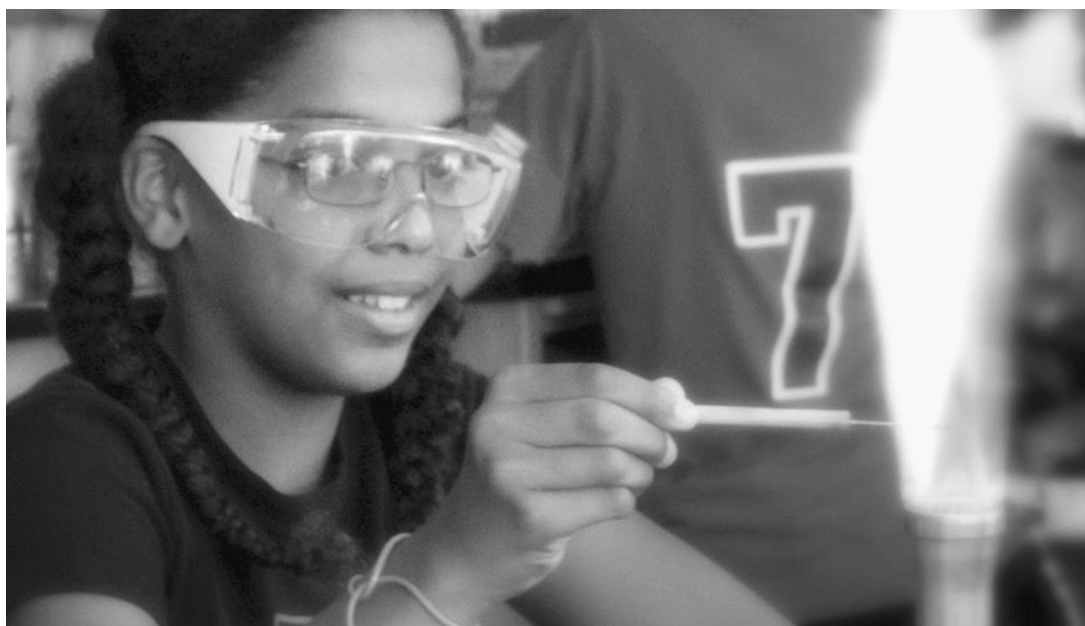


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## **Acceleration and the K-5 Gifted Child**



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### WHAT IS REALLY MEANT BY ACCELERATION?

The word *acceleration* conjures up images of velocity: a prize-winning horse gathering his strength to fly across the finish line, or the hands of a concert pianist executing arpeggios in a blur of breathtaking speed. In the context of school districts, acceleration is generally thought of as the process of moving gifted students through a curriculum at rates faster than are typical for their grade or age level. This concept is at the root of concerns among some administrators and teachers that acceleration tends to *hurry* children, potentially harming their natural development (Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989).

Yet to the gifted children themselves, the experience feels less like hurrying and more like the curriculum has caught up with them. A second grader who reads the Harry Potter books and asks her teacher about multiplying fractions could not possibly be advancing at her natural pace if she has to do the work of peers who can hardly read, add, or subtract. A third grader investigating the impact of an invasive plant species on the local ecosystem will undoubtedly struggle in a class where he must submit to much more basic science instruction.

Consider these comments made by three gifted students recently moved into accelerated programs.

“I feel like what I do in school is more like what I do at home.”

—*third grader*

“I’m in my stride now.”

—*fifth grader*

“I don’t have to ‘sneak read’ anymore. There’s something for me to learn all day!”

—*second grader*

So what is actually being accelerated? Not the children themselves, by their own account, but the curriculum. Author David Elkind, noted for his book *The Hurried Child* (2001), made this clear distinction with regard to accelerating the gifted.

In fact, acceleration is really the wrong word here. If it were correct we would have to say that a child who was retained was “decelerated.” When an intellectually gifted child is promoted one or several grades, what has been accelerated? Surely not the child’s level of intellectual development—that, after all, is the reason for his or her promotion! What has been accelerated is the child’s progress through the school curriculum. But this can be looked at a different way, not so much as acceleration as *tailoring*. What promotion does for intellectually gifted children is to make a better fit between the child’s level of intellectual development and the curriculum. . . . 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. (Elkind, 1988a, p. 2)

John Feldhusen (1989) made a similar point: “Acceleration is a misnomer; the process is really one of bringing gifted and talented youth up to a suitable level of instruction commensurate with their achievement levels and readiness so that they are properly challenged to learn the new material” (p. 8). Acceleration, therefore, is not as

much a process of applying pressure as it is one of removing restraints, restoring *their natural pace and level of learning*. The goal is to tailor the level and complexity of the curriculum to the ability and academic readiness of individual children (Colangelo et al., 2004, p. 53).

The meaning of acceleration, then, has more to do with *tailoring* and *matching* than speeding or hurrying. This includes responding to the smaller tempos and rhythms of gifted learners as they shift and change within and across activities and subject areas. A student's pace may quicken while reading a story, slow down while designing an art project, and leap and halt while exploring the ecological features of a local river. Teachers should assume that the learning needs of accelerated students will change as they advance and require either an adjustment in pace or a break in the routine of a class (by doing an in-depth project, for example). Staying focused on the evolving abilities, interests, difficulties, and learning styles of the child prevents teachers from slipping into a lock-step approach to acceleration.

## IS ACCELERATION NEEDED AMONG YOUNG GIFTED CHILDREN?

Is acceleration needed among young gifted children? Yes, it is. Research has long established acceleration as the most effective way to educate gifted students of all ages (Benbow, 1991; Gallagher, 1969; Kulik & Kulik, 1984; Reynolds, Birch, & Tuseth, 1962; Southern & Jones, 1991a; VanTassel-Baska, 1986). Some educators in the field resist acceleration for younger students because they associate it with the pushed-down curriculum of the mid-1980s, when an increasing number of students were failing to assimilate content previously taught at higher grades (Morrison, 1995, p. 303). The position papers on *developmentally appropriate instruction* (disseminated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] to address this problem) have led some teachers to question the wisdom of acceleration, particularly in the primary grades. In addition, constructivist theory, which emphasizes the need for young students to discover and structure concepts in their own way, can sometimes prevent gifted children from acquiring new content more quickly in a teacher-directed format (Agne, 2001).

Yet, as Bredekamp (1987) points out, the NAEYC documents clearly show that developmentally appropriate instruction means both *age-appropriate* and *individually appropriate*. Hence, even in the youngest grades, teachers need to recognize giftedness when they see it and not generalize about a child's cognitive development because of preconceptions based on age.

Despite studies clearly showing the detrimental effects of holding gifted students back (Colangelo et al., 2004; Southern & Jones, 1991a; Stanley, 1979), few teachers understand the real harm of a weak or nonexistent policy on accelerated instruction. Young gifted students, so impressionable and responsive to outside influences, experience repeated obstacles to their *natural* impulse to inquire, investigate, and explore. Meeting a wall of resistance for the first four or five years of school causes many of these children to settle into a pattern of underachievement.

The following is the true story of a remarkable young man who faced considerable difficulties later in life as a result of early neglect.

At the time Steve was attending school, his town was focusing most of its attention on providing special services to impoverished and new immigrant

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children. Steve was a quiet boy, fascinated by science and in love with creative writing. By third grade, his mother said, he had written a novel and filled two notebooks with journal notes on botany and astronomy. In school, he scored at the top of his class and teachers placed him in the fast group in a few subjects, where he quickly mastered more advanced material. On the surface, he seemed a happy, well-adjusted child.

Later in his life, however, things fell apart. Before the end of his first year at Columbia, he dropped out. His mother said he was shocked by the demands of his coursework and the abilities of his high-achieving peers. He felt inadequate for the first time in his life. He eventually earned a B.A. but had to attend the university part time and required a great deal of assistance to get through.

Although Steve is now pursuing advanced degrees in science, his parents often express regret that they didn't realize how easy achievement for all those years was damaging their highly gifted son. "He had incredibly unrealistic expectations—that if a task was even slightly difficult, there must be something wrong with *him*. He just never seemed like a kid who would ever have a problem like this." Steve needed better organizational skills and research skills in addition to counseling and emotional support. He didn't learn much of this in school because he slacked off and ignored whatever bored him. Since he could still pull an "A" out of his hat with little effort, there was no incentive to learn anything that didn't interest him.

What Steve's parents learned is that *not* intervening in the life of a gifted child from the earliest years is an intervention in itself. Steve did join the most advanced groups in reading, math, and science when these were offered and relished an after-school scholars' program for students interested in science. But these opportunities provided only minimal challenges. Steve quickly assimilated the more advanced content and, as before, settled into a familiar routine of letting his mind wander while the other students caught up. Ultimately, Steve learned to adjust to the slow pace. For him, boredom became a cue to return to imagining a new cast of characters for stories he would write later.

"I just assumed this was how school was, and so it never occurred to me to talk to anyone about it. So I would just bring stuff from home to work on during those times I knew I'd have nothing to do. I had a notebook for writing, a sketch pad to draw characters, monsters and aliens, environments, plot ideas, and so on."

When asked if this really fulfilled him, he replied, "Not really. I remember wanting to learn trigonometry in fourth grade, and my older cousin taught me some, and I couldn't get enough of it. I can remember being sad that I would have to wait for years to really study it. What I think now is that if I'd been challenged in any of my classes, I could've been more prepared later. Columbia had a lot of kids from private schools, and they were really advanced and I just freaked."

Gifted children from underserved populations often suffer the same neglect, but for other reasons. A gifted bilingual student wants to do more advanced work, but her broken English and the fear of losing a treasured connectedness with her own

community holds her back. An exceptional child from a broken home yearns to be noticed, but life hardships and weak skills in some content areas make him a “diamond in the rough” (Baldwin, 2003, p. 90). A third-grade gifted child with a disability can explain the chemical properties of different soils and the physics of flight, yet she struggles to write a paragraph. It is unlikely that these gifted children will be accelerated because most schools feel pressured to address perceived deficits in their students and improve skills.

Darrel changed schools three times from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of first grade. With little exposure to reading or to books in general, Darrel refuses to try reading at all.

Sandi, a fourth grader, moved to Chicago from a rural area. Though considered gifted in her former school, Sandi has trouble concentrating in class and tells her mother that “everyone’s mean in this school.”

Debra lives with her father, a shopkeeper, in a low-income neighborhood. A third grader, she frequently worries about her father and the shop. Sometimes her teacher finds her dozing off in class.

Will these children be accelerated, given more advanced learning opportunities, and strengthened in the areas in which they are weak or vulnerable? Or will their gifts be swallowed up by a relentless focus on deficits and difficulties? Will their teachers discover that Darrel has created 25 original stories in rap, that Sandi has a sketchbook identifying dozens of native plants in Illinois, or that Debra helps her aunt do the accounts for her father’s shop? Consider the life of Tammy Debbins, a gifted first grader from the projects, whose school never saw her ability and whose greatest frustration in high school and beyond was that she wasn’t “very smart” (Torrance, 1980, p. 152). If acceleration doesn’t begin early in the life of gifted children—whatever their ethnic, socioeconomic, or cultural backgrounds—they are at risk of losing their way before they’ve had a chance to start.

Common difficulties that young gifted children have when *not* accelerated include the following:

- **Early underachievement.** Locked into a curriculum where they must repeat what they already know, gifted children can only underachieve. While they appear like achievers on the surface, inside they are stifling their gifts.
- **Loss of interest and joy.** It is in the critical early primary years that gifted children feel their natural curiosity and energy for learning ebb away as the walls of the curriculum close in.
- **Low self-esteem.** Sensitive and impressionable, they begin to look upon their gifts as “wrong” and to doubt their worth in deeper, more fundamental ways.
- **Social isolation.** Kept apart from other young gifted children, high-ability students often feel isolated and alone. Seeing no others like them, they assume the role of class oddities.
- **Behavior problems.** Some young children feel so disgusted with school that they channel their abilities toward disrupting the class or withdrawing into their own world.

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- **Poor coping skills.** Prolonged underachievement in young gifted learners almost guarantees diminished expectations and an inability to cope with new academic or creative challenges, especially later in their lives.
- **Avoidance of opportunity.** One of the saddest results of an early education that doesn't accelerate the gifted is the tendency among some children to avoid more challenging or risky work in order to secure their customary "A" grade.

Contrary to popular belief, holding gifted students to the regular curriculum *is* an intervention; it acts on their lives, confining and inhibiting natural development. The greatest danger for gifted children with no opportunity to learn is that they will accommodate themselves to a lifetime of waiting. An act of self-sabotage, prolonged underachievement has a soul-numbing effect on their growth as human beings.

### WHAT LEARNING OPTIONS EXIST FOR ACCELERATING K–5 GIFTED STUDENTS?

In kindergarten through the fifth grade, schools may offer a number of strategies within two general categories: grade skipping (one or more grades) and changes within specific subjects to create a better match for a child's ability and needs. It's important to note that these are not mutually exclusive. Two second-grade students may move up to the fourth grade and halfway through the year may need more advanced instruction in language arts and mathematics. Similarly, students who attend schools that don't grade skip or those who might be harmed by such a radical move also need alternatives—for example, a cluster group with a more accelerated curriculum, a mentorship that provides challenging projects within specific subjects, or a series of Internet courses.

Options for accelerating gifted students have existed for a long time (Davis & Rimm, 1988; Gallagher, 1985; Kitano & Kirby, 1986; Passow, Goldberg, Tannenbaum, & French, 1955; Southern & Jones, 1991a). What follows is a list of the more common practices in kindergarten through fifth grade.

#### **Skipping Grades**

- **Early admission to kindergarten.** Children who are academically and emotionally ready can begin their formal schooling at a chronological age younger than the minimum age stipulated by district or state policy. It is designed for the four-year-old who would benefit from entering school up to one year earlier than normal.
- **Early admission to first grade.** This option allows qualified children to skip kindergarten and enter first grade. Parents are frequently the ones who put this option in motion due to concerns that their child will be misplaced in kindergarten. Their advocacy—in the form of standardized testing (through an independent psychologist), a portfolio of their child's work from home, and the possible use of the Iowa Acceleration Scale (see page 12, How Is the Appropriate Form of Acceleration Determined?) in their communications with the school—will often determine whether their child can attend first grade.

- **Further grade skips.** Some gifted students—particularly highly gifted—require more than one grade skip. Though these students are a minority within the gifted population, it is as important for teachers to be aware of their unique needs as it is to understand those of children with severe disabilities. As exceptionally gifted children acclimate to the new grade, they often surpass that level quickly and then struggle with the slow pace that they experienced before. Teachers, parents, and administrators need to maintain a watchful eye on these students to ensure that they're learning at an appropriate pace.

### Content Acceleration

Providing content that matches the abilities and unique learning needs of young gifted students is critical both for those children who've skipped grades and those who have not. Content acceleration ensures that (1) all gifted students can advance at their own pace and level, particularly in the areas in which they have special abilities, and (2) underserved gifted populations have equal opportunities to experience and develop their special abilities. For gifted students who do not test well, content acceleration is a lifeline.

- **Continuous progress.** As she or he masters content, the child advances to new content. Continuous progress does not automatically result in accelerated study, but the format allows gifted children who learn more quickly than peers to advance at a faster pace.

- **Self-paced instruction.** With self-paced instruction, the child essentially determines the pace of learning in an assignment or project. Gifted children need some opportunities for learning situations in which they are not adjusting themselves to the pace requirements of a teacher or an assignment. This encourages them to own the learning process. At the same time, gifted students require some kind of contract and guidelines (mutually agreed upon) to support them in determining how much time they should spend on each facet of their work.

- **Subject matter acceleration.** This may take a number of forms. A third grader may leave his classroom for math and language arts in a fifth-grade classroom. Or he may use fifth-grade-level materials and assignments (determined by the teacher with some input from him) to pursue advanced study in a "continuous progress" format or do an independent study with a mentor. He may also undertake higher-grade content in an afterschool or summer intensive program. Fast-paced math and science classes in the model pioneered by Julian Stanley (1979) are an example of this.

- **Combined classes.** Like "continuous progress," combined classes do not automatically translate into acceleration, but they provide the environment for it to happen. For example, a third/fourth-grade split room allows gifted third graders to work with fourth graders both academically and socially. This option can, in some instances, result in a grade skip later.

- **Curriculum compacting.** A now-familiar strategy for differentiating the curriculum, curriculum compacting often begins with preassessment to determine the child's level of mastery in a subject or unit (assessment may mean a simple pretest in a skill area or a more extensive evaluation of the child's abilities through observation, consultation with parents, and review of a child's portfolio). In curriculum compacting,

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gifted children essentially buy back time for themselves by learning the “required” content more quickly and eliminating what they already know. With the time they gain, they either advance to more challenging content sequentially or divert from the path to investigate a related issue or idea. The teacher works with the students to establish specific goals, a timeline, and conditions for satisfactory completion of their work.

- **Accelerated grouping.** Grouping gifted students together results in clear benefits in both the social/emotional and academic areas (Kulik & Kulik, 1987). This may take the form of a cluster group that pools advanced students from more than one class in a grade. Or it may involve a smaller group of gifted and/or highly motivated students who come together to study a particular subject, culminating in a project.

- **Telescoping curriculum.** Telescoping has the same principle as curriculum compacting except that this option results in an advanced grade placement. For example, a child or a group of children complete three years of primary school in two. The time saved does not lead to more advanced work in a subject or alternative projects determined by the teacher and student, but to placement in a higher grade. At the college level, a similar principle is operating in summer intensive language programs where students learn the first year of French in 10 weeks.

- **Mentoring.** A gifted child works with a mentor, ideally someone with special expertise, who can provide a much more advanced and rapid pace of instruction in a particular area of interest. This option has proven helpful for highly gifted students who cannot always gain the stimulation they need from the school’s accelerated program options. A fourth grader who writes like a high school or college student can advance his ability far more by working one-on-one with an author who can give him the expert feedback and support he needs. A fifth grader with a passion for South American reptiles will blossom under the tutelage of a researcher who has spent time in the rainforests of Costa Rica. Mentors lift the ceiling off a child’s achievement and can afford to be more responsive to the child’s learning styles and needs. (See Chapter 2 for more information.)

- **Extracurricular programs.** Students can enroll in courses or workshops that take place in afterschool or summer programs. These programs offer advanced level content and, possibly, intensive telescoped curriculum. Offerings vary considerably. A highly gifted fifth grader may take a language class at a university extension program. An enterprising second grader may participate in an ecology summer workshop for older students.

- **Correspondence/Internet courses.** A gifted child enrolls in a course either through the mail (which could include videotapes or audiotapes) or, more commonly today, through the Internet. A number of sites offer advanced course work for gifted students (Kanuka, 2005). Sometimes, a small group of gifted students can work together in an online course.

### HOW IS THE APPROPRIATE FORM OF ACCELERATION DETERMINED?

Finding the right fit for accelerating a student can only come from *knowing the child*. In some instances, testing presents the best approach. Julian Stanley’s (1978) DT-PI



approach (Diagnostic Testing followed by Prescriptive Instruction) has benefited mathematically gifted children (Benbow & Stanley, 1983; VanTassel-Baska, 1996). Variations have developed from Stanley's approach, but in essence it follows this sequence: (1) assess a student to determine the extent of the student's knowledge and understanding; (2) design a program to meet specific learning needs, as revealed in the assessment (preferably in the context of a cluster group); and (3) reassess the student to evaluate growth and mastery. The child moves on to a more advanced level as she masters new content.

Though evaluations often involve some form of testing, they should include other sources of information on a child's academic growth, learning preferences, interests, and special talents. In the early primary grades, testing presents special problems. In the first place, young gifted students often develop in uneven ways. A first-grade child may read books at a fifth-grade level but have poor hand-eye coordination; a kindergartner may demonstrate advanced ability and knowledge in math but become fatigued and distracted in an accelerated second-grade math group. Young gifted children who lack experience with tests may score poorly or at least significantly below their real potential. This happened to a five-year-old named Mario.

At age five, Mario was a complex thinker. . . . However, he didn't perform well on standardized tests. . . . In many instances, the choices on the paper seemed too simplistic. At other times, Mario read more into the question than the test maker had intended, so his responses were frequently "wrong." One test question asked, "What is the color of coal?" The choices were black, purple, or gray. Mario marked all three. When the examiner asked him why, he responded, "It's black when I see it inside, it's purple when I see it in the sun, and after it's burned it's gray." (Smutny, Walker, & Meckstroth, 1997, p. 124)

Most educators today understand that even though standardized tests provide useful insight in a number of cases, they are usually an underestimation of what young gifted children can do. For this reason, more schools today seek additional sources of information (work samples, observations, informal talks with the child, parent anecdotes, portfolios of the child's work, etc.) to create a more complete picture of strengths and needs. In this regard, the Kingore Observation Inventory (Kingore, 1990) is an excellent tool for structuring classroom observations of children through analyzing categories of gifted behaviors. For early primary children, consultations with parents are also key to discovering hidden abilities, as families have not only stories to tell but evidence in the form of writing, sketching, inventions, books they read, experiments they conducted, and so forth.

Consider how these schools determined the appropriate responses to the following gifted children.

When Lira entered kindergarten, she was reading at the third-grade level and knew how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide. At the same time, Lira felt shaky about being away from home because her family had moved twice in the last two years. Reviewing Lira's test scores, projects, teacher observations, and parental anecdotes and consulting with Lira herself, the school decided to postpone skipping her to a higher grade. However, after several months, Lira was able to leave her kindergarten class for advanced language arts and math instruction (with a group of gifted children in first

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grade). She began to make friends with the older students. During the summer, preparations began to grade-skip Lira to the second grade.

Third-grade Keesha moved from a low-income urban environment to live with her aunt and uncle in a small town. She was significantly behind her grade because of conditions in her former school. Based on achievement tests and assessment of skill level, the school decided that she should repeat her grade. Since Keesha had been the smartest child in her former school, this was a serious blow to her self-esteem. The aunt campaigned for the possibility of the child skipping to the next grade halfway through the year based on evidence of her quick rate of learning. The teacher observed and documented Keesha's exceptional progress during the first month and made plans to telescope the third-grade curriculum. The possibility of this has greatly motivated the child.

Jaime is a highly gifted and highly creative fourth grader who wants to become a poet. His teacher said he routinely reads high school-level books, but his test scores don't show this ability. Both his parents and teacher believe he needs some kind of acceleration, but Jaime is nervous about being in a program with "serious brainy types." Jaime has agreed to try doing language arts with a cluster of gifted children in the sixth grade and is overjoyed that this will involve creative writing. At the same time, his teacher is compacting the math and science curriculum to give him more time to research specific topics in ecology. At present, Jaime feels comfortable with this arrangement.

In all three of these cases, the schools drew from the rich tapestry of the children's lives—their feelings, thoughts about proposed changes, feedback from family members, and demonstrated rate of achievement—to create a better match between ability and learning program. While the schools may or may not grade-skip these gifted students, they can still adjust the children's educational program to accommodate their learning pace. They can implement an assess-teach-reassess approach (similar to Julian Stanley's DT-PI) to guide advanced instruction in math or science and use portfolios of a child's writing to arrange for a gifted child to join a cluster group in a higher grade for language arts.

Obviously, the most radical form of acceleration (advancement to another grade) requires the most thorough assessment of the whole child. When a fourth-grade teacher looks at his enthusiastic inventor with an IQ of 140 and wonders how well she or he would fare in fifth or sixth grade, he needs to consider a number of factors:

- High intellectual ability
- Academic skill levels above the mean of the new grade
- Social and emotional maturity
- High motivation and task commitment
- Good physical health and a physical size that fits in with the new grade
- Supportive parents
- Enthusiastic and willing teacher
- Open-ended, trial basis for the change
- Availability of monitoring and counseling during transition (Benbow, 1991; VanTassel-Baska, 1986)

Parents, teachers, and administrators who need a counseling tool for evaluating the feasibility of a particular learning option can use the Iowa Acceleration Scale

(IAS; Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplik, Lipscomb, & Forstadt, 2003). The IAS is designed to aid educators and parents in making informed decisions about grade skipping and content acceleration. It includes a comprehensive summary of all of the relevant research on acceleration and information on appropriate aptitude and achievement tests for gifted children in different age groups.

Items receive a numeric value, making scoring easy. These scores result in categories that serve as rational guidelines for decision making, discussion, and planning. The form includes several sections for gathering information that will help determine whether whole-grade acceleration or other accommodations are most appropriate for a particular student. The sections include general information, critical items, school history, prior ability and achievement test results, prior professional evaluations, academic ability and achievement, school and academic factors, developmental factors, interpersonal skills, attitude and support, and a summary and planning sheet.

The IAS is an excellent tool for facilitating communication between parents and educators. The scale addresses the most critical aspects of the child's life and translates the data into numbers that teachers and administrators can understand and appreciate. In cases reported by parents to us, the IAS has been a deciding factor. Schools that might have been closed to moving a child to another grade now have an instrument that considers all aspects of the child in a responsible and systematic way.

An enduring question for the future is how schools can provide advanced coursework for gifted children who do not test well or who may have special challenges, including underserved gifted students (e.g., bilingual students, urban/rural poor, multicultural, twice-exceptional, highly creative). How do teachers and administrators respond to a request from a parent whose fourth-grade child is timid and excessively nervous in testing situations and therefore never scores well, despite her exceptional gift in mathematics? What can be done for a precocious kindergartner who reads *Wind in the Willows* and writes poetry in an Emily Dickinson style but is inconsistent and disorganized in the way she does assigned work?

In most cases, a gifted child who tests at an average or slightly above-average level will not be a candidate for grade skipping. Likewise, questions about the child's emotional maturity, high achievement in knowledge and skill areas, and even concerns about his or her physical size may hinder this process. The opposition to grade skipping is such that without clear evidence and documentation in all of these areas, many school officials feel leery of creating what they see as a drastic change for a young child. A four-year-old child who tells his mother that he "can see the world 100 years from now" and wonders what things people in the future might find from his life on Earth is probably gifted, but he may not need to begin school early. A second-grade painter who immerses herself in books about Van Gogh and comes home from school saying, "The teacher didn't like my painting, but I won't cut off my ear," may benefit more from advancement to a higher grade or from an interdisciplinary language arts program for gifted learners. The point is that many gifted children, regardless of their background, learning styles, and interests, need some form of acceleration. Consider these alternatives.

**A Gifted Third-Grade Bilingual Student in an Urban School.** At present, the school is reluctant to skip the child to the fourth grade. The third- and fourth-grade teachers work out an arrangement where the latter sends students needing extra help to the third grade and the former sends her gifted students to the fourth grade.

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The gifted bilingual student goes to the fourth grade for language arts and math. The fourth-grade teacher uses a curriculum from a gifted academy as a guide for further acceleration.

**Highly Gifted First Grader With Exceptional Artistic Talent.** The first grader's test results are inconsistent and the school psychologist is concerned about the child's emotional maturity. Her teacher compacts the math curriculum and a gifted coordinator mentors her and two other students in more advanced concepts and skills. For language arts, she joins a cluster group in the second-grade classroom that enables her to read at her ability level, write stories and poems, and create illustrations.

**A Gifted Fourth Grader in a Rural Area.** With little understanding of acceleration, the school sees no reason to consider advancing the child to fifth grade. Yet his teacher compacts the curriculum in mathematics and also provides advanced instruction in language arts and social studies to several students through courses available on the Internet. The fourth grader also attends a special summer program for gifted math students at a college 20 miles away.

More often than not, the children themselves will tell us—through their achievements, enthusiasm, creative and innovative products, motivation, interests, and so forth—what form of acceleration will best meet their needs, when it should change, and how. Throughout the process, gifted children discover their own learning rhythms, and as they grow, they need new and different opportunities—more interdisciplinary study; course work that focuses on innovation and invention; time to explore the creative, the intuitive, the artistic. Gifted children not only learn more quickly than most students their age, but through a rich variety of ways and means. Accelerated programs, therefore, must address both their rate of learning and the depth and breadth of their thinking.

### **HOW DO SCHOOLS ENSURE THAT ACCELERATION IS WORKING?**

In those instances in which acceleration has failed to benefit a gifted child, most likely the adults did not take all of the steps necessary to ensure an appropriate fit between the child and the acceleration program. From our own experience as well as from the findings of other researchers, we offer the following guidelines for ensuring that accelerative learning options work for the gifted child in question.

- **The child is consulted at each step.** This may seem obvious, but it is remarkable how few schools consider consulting gifted children regarding decisions that involve significant changes to their lives. Input from the students—gathered at different times and in different contexts (for young children this is particularly important)—can be critical in making decisions about which forms of acceleration will best serve their needs and in making ongoing adjustments.

- **The guidelines for acceleration are clear to all parties.** Acceleration requires clear guidelines for its implementation. Children need to know what they should expect and what will be expected of them. All of the adults involved—from parents to teachers to administrators—have to know what their areas of responsibility and

accountability are and procedures they should follow when any problems arise. Obviously, guidelines emerge from the form of acceleration adopted. They should include underlying principles, goals and objectives, strategies for implementation and ongoing assessment, and strategies for establishing the lines of communication among all parties involved.

- **The guidelines are implemented correctly.** If schools don't implement the guidelines correctly, acceleration will fail to benefit gifted children. For example, if a child skips a grade and guidelines stipulate that the child should receive further content acceleration in his or her new grade, and this doesn't happen, then the grade skip is only a partial success. Or, if a new child joins a cluster group for gifted students but exceeds the level of that group, and the teacher does not assess the new student's level of expertise, the teacher has not followed the guidelines for accelerating that child.

- **The teacher's attitude is positive.** When a team is considering a grade skip for a child, they need to ensure that the receiving teacher is receptive and positive about providing for a gifted child. Likewise, a child qualified for content acceleration requires a teacher willing and able to implement it.

- **The teacher has knowledge in the area of gifted education.** Ideally, the teacher should have some understanding of gifted education. Many educators lack the expertise because teacher certification doesn't require course work in gifted education. However, widespread exposure to differentiation throughout the field has given many teachers experience in identifying students with special needs and making appropriate adjustments to the curriculum. Parents have also played an important role by sharing information from their own research and experience and by collaborating with teachers to create viable learning options for their children.

- **The level of giftedness matches the degree of acceleration.** A common error in acceleration occurs when a school assumes, once a change has been made (whether in the form of a grade skip or content acceleration), that the job is done and requires no further action. All gifted students, particularly highly gifted, require further adjustments as the months pass and they continue to progress at a rapid rate. Otherwise, they begin to face the same frustrations that they had before they began an accelerated program. Too often, schools assume that since a child has joined a cluster group in the fourth grade or has skipped from first to third grade, he or she is learning at his or her own pace and level of difficulty. Parents, teachers, and administrators need policies to ensure that "accelerated" children are, in fact, working at a pace commensurate with their ability, motivation, knowledge, and experience.

- **Proper monitoring and evaluation take place.** Ongoing supervision and assessment are critical in acceleration. Children who have negative experiences or drop out of a program option designed to meet the needs of gifted students were probably showing signs of difficulty all along. Parents and teachers should check in with children regularly, make them feel comfortable communicating their preferences and feelings about the change, monitor their work, and share information with each other on how they feel the program is working.

- **There is comprehensive assessment when a child has problems.** This would involve the child, child's teachers, the school psychologist or counselor, and parents and would also include evidence of his or her growth and progress (tests, assignments, projects, observation forms, anecdotes, etc.). Evaluation should focus

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on academic achievement, social/emotional well-being, and the development of passions and interests.

- **The acceleration process remains open and flexible.** This is one of the most important points. Despite all of the planning and preparation, a child should never feel locked into an accelerated learning program. Sometimes a gifted child, seeing all of the work that adults are doing on his behalf, will feel reluctant to speak up if he's dissatisfied or feels out of place. There is a balance to be maintained here. Once the adults and child make the best decision they can, given the circumstances, it's important to adopt a relaxed, "try and see" attitude. The child needs time to test the waters, breathe the air in his new situation, and participate fully in reaching a final decision.

Young children experience extraordinary cognitive growth, particularly from kindergarten to third grade, and acceleration must respond to this in a sensitive manner in order to be effective. A child whose grasp of mathematics seems to have suddenly advanced by a leap so that she or he wants nothing more than to focus on the wondrous world of numbers, ratios, and patterns will thrive most in the hands of a teacher who recognizes the change and responds accordingly. Teachers should assess the child's work continuously (whether through observation, testing, or work samples) in order to tailor instruction to the developing child.

### WHY AREN'T THE SCHOOLS ACCELERATING YOUNG GIFTED STUDENTS?

Lack of information and philosophical bias are the main reasons why decades of research on acceleration as an effective practice for gifted students have not fostered new initiatives in the schools (Colangelo et al., 2004, pp. 6–9). Specifically, a teacher or parent who recognizes the need and wants to take action often faces the following hurdles:

- **Limited familiarity with the research on acceleration.** In other words, despite a plethora of research studies documenting the benefits and effectiveness of acceleration for the gifted, the schools have little understanding of how to translate it and little concern about the need to do so. Undoubtedly, this is due to a deeper resistance against any practice that would appear to disrupt the orderly progress of students from grade to grade and from one curriculum to the next.

- **Educational philosophy that students should be with their own age group.** Grade placement is a relatively recent phenomenon. Before World War II, it was not uncommon to have a mixture of ages in a single classroom. But schools today tend to hold to rigid views of child development and fail to recognize those whose development is out of synch with the "norm."

- **Concern that acceleration hurries students out of childhood.** This is the classic argument against the practice whenever a parent or teacher investigates the possibility. As mentioned previously, David Elkind's (1988a) comments on acceleration for the gifted are a useful rejoinder here, as he was the most eloquent voice against any practice that would hurry a child.

- **Fear that acceleration hurts children socially.** This is related to the previous concern. The argument goes that if the child skips a grade or attends a class with a higher grade, she or he will feel out of place and have problems making friends. Again, in the majority of cases, the accelerated child has an easier time socially and feels far more comfortable than with his or her own age group.
- **Political concerns about equity.** Equity is really about *equal access* to education, not about being equal in ability. A gifted child forced to twiddle thumbs while classmates learn is not getting equal access to education.

James Gallagher (2004) asserts that “it may be that what has to be changed is not written policy, but merely the attitudes of policy makers” (p. 40). In part, the problem may rest on a superficial sense of acceleration as the very frantic pace that drives us all to distraction. The very word *acceleration* presents, to many minds, images of haste and chaos. Changing the attitudes of policy makers, then, must entail a new way of conceptualizing acceleration—not as a frenzied, reckless pace but as a freedom to learn at a rate and level *natural for the child*.

In whatever form it takes, acceleration should be a *quicken*ing of the spirit as well as a challenge to the mind. To quicken is “to make alive, vitalize, excite, and stimulate” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1985). For students given a telescoped, hands-on math curriculum or advanced to a higher grade, the experience has an element of exhilaration and even joy. A mother once reported that after her kindergarten daughter was sent to second grade, she jumped into the car saying, “I’m free! I’m free!” A fourth-grade child who spent the year begging his father to teach him algebra finally gained admittance to a special math program and told his parents, “It’s a blast sitting with a group of kids like me and figuring math stuff out together.” Acceleration should be a “quickening,” a vital call to life. It must honor the concepts of thriving, wholeness, and aliveness in the child.

That these students come to life in classrooms where they can move at their own speed and level is a compelling reason for all schools to champion the cause of acceleration. Undertaken responsibly and wisely, acceleration is an act of compassion. It is like taking a large animal confined to a small cage and letting it run with beasts its size and strength. If the creature has not become crippled or weakened by its confinement, it immediately moves—flies, charges, hops, leaps, whatever is in its nature to do.

As both Elkind (1988a) and Feldhusen (1989) have said, “acceleration” is a misnomer. Bearing in mind that a gifted child in the regular classroom is “decelerated,” an accelerated option merely allows this child an opportunity to move at her own pace. What to some may appear a pressured, breakneck speed is completely normal to the child. The danger in losing sight of this fact is that we fail to recognize the child in our own classrooms who asks not to be “accelerated” but only for the opportunity to learn without hindrance. This is what the whole move to accelerate gifted children is about: the freedom to learn; freedom to move; freedom for children to be themselves, use their abilities, grow. And it always begins with the individual child whose wishes, aspirations, feelings, abilities, and sensibilities must be honored at each step.