

Debunking the Myths about Accelerated Education

Many schools claim to offer programs to address the needs of gifted and talented learners, but under close examination, very few actually do. Academically gifted students require a faster pace of instruction or they become restless and bored, and in the worst case scenario, disruptive or disengaged. If your child is a student who finishes class work well ahead of the rest and still manages to get an A+ in all subjects, this is a clear sign that your child is not being adequately challenged. He is probably placed in the wrong grade level and is in need of acceleration.

But what exactly *is* acceleration? First, let's begin with what acceleration is NOT. Acceleration is *not* expecting a bored, rapid learner to "read quietly" while the class catches up, giving him yet another worksheet to do while he waits for the rest of the class to finish, or employing him to work as a teacher's assistant with struggling classmates. True acceleration requires the school to engage the child at the point of his or her actual ability and interest level, even if that means providing a customized accelerated curriculum for specific subject areas, or enabling the student to skip a grade.

Unfortunately, grade skipping, which is the most effective practice of acceleration, is frowned upon by the general education community and many parents, due to a few inaccurate, yet very persistent myths.

Myth # 1: Accelerated students are likely to struggle socially.

Educators and parents alike cling to this myth. No one wants their child to be a social pariah; this explains why many parents of gifted children tend to resist efforts to accelerate their child, even when the school is willing and able to do it, due to fears over social adjustment.

Reality check: No one can accurately predict the social difficulties *any student* may endure in the future. A certain number of students will have difficulty getting along with or feeling accepted by peers *whether they have been accelerated or not*. Nevertheless, in a longitudinal study conducted by the National Association of Gifted Children in which groups of gifted students were followed who had been allowed to skip a grade to see whether they experienced greater difficulty with socialization than their classmates, the researchers came to a compelling conclusion: Students who had participated in whole-grade acceleration "were not noticeably different in their perceived interpersonal competence" to their classmates.

Myth #2: Accelerated students are victimized by bullies.

School leaders and parents worry that students who are accelerated in school are typically smaller than their grade level peers, and therefore could be easy targets for school bullies.

Reality check: We all know that kids come in all shapes and sizes. It's more important that a student associate with a "like minded" peer group, over a physically homogenous peer group, if such a thing actually existed. As for concerns over teasing or bullying, bullies come in all sizes, as well; just ask any school principal!

Every school has a responsibility to create a safe environment for learning. All school employees, from the principal to support staff, must be actively engaged in teaching students to behave respectfully and to take responsibility for their actions. Despite reluctance to upset parents or suspend students, effective school leaders must confront and discipline student bullies. Is this a challenge? Definitely. Is it necessary? Absolutely. Every child has a right to feel safe at school.

Myth #3: Accelerated students have a disadvantage in sports.

Parents often worry that if their child is younger, and therefore typically smaller and less physically coordinated than the older classmates, their child will not be able to compete fairly in sports.

Reality check: It is true that larger, stronger kids usually have the advantage over smaller players in most competitive sports, but competitive teams in all sports typically group players on teams based on their *age group, not grade level*. Additionally, most competitive school sports teams select their first string players through tryouts, where a smaller, more agile and skilled player could outplay a larger contender. The only area where a younger student may be at a physical disadvantage is in Physical Education class, and then, only if the school places undue emphasis on “winning” and/or fails to integrate smaller class members of any age into the group.

Myth #4: The school/class benefits when gifted students remain at grade level.

The brightest children tend to be teacher and school favorites for many reasons. They are considered “easy” to teach, partly because the teacher does not need to spend time getting them to an acceptable level of grade-level skills and knowledge. They are held up as a “good example” to the peer group and are often paired with struggling peers as “teacher’s helpers.” Lower performing students tend to have more success when paired with high performers. This benefits the whole group, and recognizes the gifted child as a class leader.

Additionally, gifted students raise the class mean in high-stakes testing, which is important to the school.

Reality check: While we are all sympathetic to the challenges today’s teachers endure with eroding student behavior, underperforming students, unsupportive parents, overcrowded classrooms, and high-stakes testing, is it really fair to place this burden on the brightest children in the class? This may indeed be good for the teacher’s job security and the school’s bottom line, but keeping gifted and highly motivated children in an average classroom is *not* serving the best interests of the students who are in desperate need of a challenge.

Teachers tend to group students, especially in reading and mathematics, into skill levels within a class or grade. More diverse classes demand more groups or broader groups, which in turn cuts down on teaching time and the scope of learning possible in each of the groups. This does not benefit anyone.

If a student is performing far ahead of the peer group and consistently knows the answers to routine class questions, the student is probably not being adequately challenged. Bright kids who are forced to “sit and wait” for the rest of the class are like thoroughbred race horses left at the gate and never allowed to run; it’s frustrating, boring, and unjust. If the teacher is unable to provide these students with valuable accelerated activities within the classroom that allows them to extend their individual performance, the student needs skip to the next grade or subject level in order to remain an engaged learner.

Myth #5: Gifted students benefit socially when grouped with peers who are the same age. Gifted children need to develop understanding and empathy for children their own age. Separating them from their age-level peers develops unjust feelings of “difference” from and “superiority” over the peer group. Younger children should not be placed with older peers because they do not have the social maturity to be accepted as part of the group.

Reality check: Gifted children *are* different, and they come to sense this difference very early in life. Many are ostracized by their age-level peers because they tend to be more sensitive and have a more developed sense of justice and social maturity than other children. They also tend to have very different interests. Several studies support that all children are generally happier when they are placed with their intellectual peers, regardless of age. Grade level pull-out programs like GATE actually contribute more to a sense of entitlement and “difference” in a school population than true grade skipping, and because they involve such a limited number of hours, they are less effective.

What now?

If your gifted child’s current school is unable to meet your child’s needs, find another school that will accelerate your child at grade level, allow early entry into Kindergarten, or allow him to skip a grade. *These schools do exist!* You are your child’s best ally in defending his right to be an engaged learner. Don’t let him down; help him become a future leader in whatever path he may choose.

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