
Introduction to Grouping and Acceleration Practices in Gifted Education

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The question of how to group students optimally for instructional purposes has stimulated debate within the educational community ever since the primary responsibility for educating children moved from the home to the community, and schools were formed. While most schools today group students into grades on the basis of age, educators keep moving birthday cut-offs, contemplating exceptions to those cut-offs, and worrying about students whose needs may not be met by age-in-grade instruction. Of particular concern is the degree to which the typical instructional program can meet the needs of gifted students—those students with advanced cognitive abilities and achievement who may already have mastered the curriculum designed for their age peers.

In order to provide access to more challenging coursework, grouping gifted students with age peers who are also academically advanced (ability or instructional grouping), or placing them with older students or otherwise providing access to advanced content (acceleration), are among the options that have been widely implemented. These intervention strategies have generated considerable controversy, however.

While the development of special programs for gifted students sometimes pits educators of the gifted against those more concerned about other groups of students, the debates over grouping and acceleration have also taken place within the gifted education community. Acceleration versus enrichment became highly debated in the 70s and 80s, while ability grouping versus cooperative learning was an issue during the late 80s and much of the 90s. The good

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news about these debates is that they spurred a great deal of research as advocates sought support for their positions. They also stimulated compromise, creative solutions, and the development of a variety of new program models. Today, the field is stronger because of the questions that were asked and answered about grouping and acceleration. We have come to expect research-based validation of new program models and curricula, and there are many more options available to serve gifted students.

Because so much of the discussion and research on acceleration and grouping took place within the gifted education community, publications over the years in the *Gifted Child Quarterly* are highly representative of the concerns, research findings, and programmatic initiatives that resulted. The articles that follow, all of which were published in the *Gifted Child Quarterly*, represent some of the most important and widely cited works on these topics. Several of them were included in a special Spring 1992 issue on Grouping and Acceleration.

The articles on acceleration dispel many common misconceptions about the practice and make a strong case for utilizing acceleration as a strategy for serving gifted students who need more challenge than the typical age-in-grade curriculum can provide. In particular, a number of the authors counter the belief that acceleration equates with skipping grades by describing a wide variety of ways to accelerate students. Several of these articles also offer strong research evidence that refutes the prevailing concern that students who are accelerated will experience social and emotional maladjustment.

The articles on ability or instructional grouping describe the issues that have made the practice controversial. In particular, the effectiveness and fairness of grouping students have been questioned. Research findings in support of grouping students for instructional purposes are presented, along with suggestions for utilizing grouping in a fair and flexible way.

The common theme that emerges from all of these articles, whether on acceleration or grouping, is that curricula designed for average students needs to be modified to address the needs of academically advanced students. Evidence is presented that acceleration and grouping are effective strategies for achieving this goal. A summary of the major points in these articles follows, along with references to selected other publications on these topics.

ACCELERATION

In spite of continuing concern by educators about the social and emotional adjustment of accelerated students, allowing advanced students to skip grades has been a fairly common practice in American education (Daurio, 1979). When seeking to identify the brightest students for his study, Terman (1925) found that they were frequently the youngest in a class because they had been accelerated in grade placement. In past generations, the solution for challenging an exceptionally bright child was often to place him or her in the next grade.

When Julian Stanley established the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) at Johns Hopkins University in 1971, he turned to acceleration as a vehicle for serving students with exceptionally advanced academic abilities. Although a variety of accelerative strategies were used, including subject acceleration and academic summer programs, SMPY's work with the radical accelerants who entered Johns Hopkins University several years early gained the greatest attention (Stanley, Keating, & Fox, 1974). Fear of possible social and emotional maladjustment among these radical accelerants helped fuel the controversy and debate over acceleration as a mechanism for serving gifted learners. The proceedings of a 1977 symposium on acceleration and enrichment provide a glimpse into the issues in this debate (George, Cohn, & Stanley, 1979).

Stanley and his colleagues studied the progress of the students they worked with, finding support for acceleration as an appropriate strategy for gifted students. Stanley's article (1985) that is reprinted in this volume investigates the achievements of six exceptionally young college graduates. He finds that, at the time this study was conducted, five of them had earned Ph.D. degrees and were working in prestigious positions, while the sixth was an 18-year-old graduate student. Clearly, these students have done exceptionally well, and the study reports no ill-effects resulting from their radical acceleration.

In spite of consistent research findings that groups of early college entrants have done well academically and socially (Brody & Stanley, 1991), anecdotal reports of poor adjustment among individual accelerated students persist. The study by Brody, Assouline, and Stanley (1990) in this volume confirms the success of a group of young college entrants but also seeks to identify the factors that are most important for success within that group. Interestingly, the students with the highest level of academic success also had earned the greatest number of College Board Advanced Placement Program credits before entering college. Thus, though they entered college young, they were advanced in their mastery of subject matter. This study links subject acceleration to grade acceleration and supports the view that a variety of factors, including content knowledge, should be evaluated before students enroll in college at younger-than-typical ages.

The importance of considering students' individual needs and providing appropriate assessment and counseling before making decisions about acceleration is also affirmed in the articles by Gross (1992), and by Rimm and Lovance (1992), who present case studies of students who accelerated in subject and/or grade placement. Gross compares radically accelerated students with other extremely bright students who were given little opportunity to go beyond the regular curriculum. She finds that the accelerated students were academically superior, more motivated, and had healthier social relationships than the non-accelerants. The study by Rimm and Lovance (1992) also presents compelling case studies of students whose academic successes were enhanced by opportunities to accelerate in subject matter and/or grade placement. In fact, a reversal of underachievement was observed in some cases.

One response to concerns about early entrants' readiness for college has been the establishment of Early College Entrance Programs at a number of

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universities. These programs bring young students to college as a cohort and provide greater academic counseling and social and emotional support than is typically available for college students. The article by Lupkowski, Whitmore, and Ramsey (1992) evaluates students at the end of their first semester at the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science, a program at the University of North Texas. While some minor negative impact on self-esteem common to many college students was observed, the authors conclude that no serious adjustment difficulties were found among the students in this program. Studies of students enrolling in special Early Entrance Programs at other universities are also well represented in the gifted education literature (e.g., Gregory & March, 1985; Janos & Robinson, 1985; Sethna, Wickstrom, Boothe, & Stanley, 2001).

Proponents of acceleration never intended early college entrance to be the only, or even the primary, model for accelerating gifted students, and many ways to accelerate in subject matter without having to skip grades have been identified and/or developed in recent years and are described in the literature. These include such options as telescoped programs, compacted curricula, credit by examination, mentorships, distance education, part-time college enrollment, Advanced Placement courses, and academic summer programs (Rogers, 2001; Southern & Jones, 1991; Southern, Jones, & Stanley, 1993). Brody and Benbow's (1987) article in this volume investigates the academic success and social and emotional adjustment of students who used a variety of accelerative options. Regardless of the degree or type of acceleration the students pursued, positive academic effects are reported without concomitant social and emotional difficulties.

The article by VanTassel-Baska (1992) presents an overview of research and practice on acceleration. She makes a strong case for utilizing this strategy to provide content at a level and pace that is appropriate for gifted learners. Readers should also see the important research findings reported by Kulik and Kulik (1984), Rogers (1992), and Swiatek and Benbow (1991) that demonstrate the overall positive effects of acceleration.

GROUPING

While acceleration and ability grouping have often been treated as separate issues in much of the gifted education literature, they are actually very much related. Grouping students together who are ready for an advanced curriculum can provide a vehicle for accelerating their learning. On the other hand, when a lack of grouping results in no differentiation of content for advanced learners, these students may be more likely to turn to skipping grades as the only way to have their needs addressed. Unfortunately, a lack of any prior exposure to advanced content could impede their success in the higher grade.

Grouping students into classes on the basis of age was largely a response to mandatory education laws and the consequent dramatic increase in school enrollment. To accommodate the academic needs of the diverse student populations that enrolled, "tracking" became a common practice, i.e., students were

organized into groups for instructional purposes, usually on the basis of IQ scores. Critics of tracking questioned the fairness of the tests used to assign students and the relative lack of mobility between the “tracks” over time. School reform efforts intensified the battle cry over what was seen as poor instruction in the groups consisting of lower scoring students, and many schools responded by abandoning any grouping of students within grades in favor of inclusive classes composed of students of all ability and achievement levels. The articles by Feldhusen and Moon (1992), Mills and Durden (1992), and VanTassel-Baska (1992) summarize these concerns, but they also describe the difficulties inherent in trying to meet the educational needs of advanced students if ability grouping is eliminated.

With ability grouping under attack, the challenge of serving students with different backgrounds and abilities has led educators to seek other ways to group students within classes. One strategy that was developed was cooperative learning (Slavin, 1988). Instead of putting students into instructional groups based on similar levels of ability or achievement, cooperative learning encourages the formation of small heterogeneous groups of students who work together. The expectation is that the brighter, more advanced students might contribute to the learning of students who are having more difficulty in mastering skills and knowledge. As cooperative learning gained in popularity, many gifted education advocates became concerned that the method often results in limiting the access of gifted students to advanced content. Eventually, an ongoing debate ensued, pitting advocates of ability grouping against supporters of cooperative learning (Robinson, 1990). Many viewed these two strategies as mutually exclusive and incompatible with each other. The articles by Feldhusen and Moon (1992), and by Mills and Durden (1992), provide insight into the issues behind the debate over ability grouping versus cooperative learning.

While strong opinions surfaced early in this debate, the research results on the effects of ability grouping were less clear because there appeared to be contradictory findings. Kulik and Kulik’s (1992) meta-analysis of studies of research on ability grouping, the results of which are summarized in their article in this volume, proved to be very important in shedding light on this issue. Their results show that grouping can be very positive for high-ability students, *as long as an appropriate adjustment is made in the curriculum*. While their research suggests that grouping by itself will not impact on achievement if the curriculum is not changed in any way, they conclude that grouping facilitates making the curricular adjustments that will serve students in an optimal way. In their study, accelerated classes made the greatest gains of the groups investigated, an important finding. In a more recent paper, Kulik (2003) evaluates current research and practice with regard to ability grouping.

But if grouping is effective when done well, is it also fair, particularly to low achievers who were often left unchallenged in low tracks in the past? This was the concern of many critics of ability grouping. The article by Mills and Durden (1992) describes how grouping can facilitate achieving an optimal match

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between students' educational needs and their educational programs for students of all levels of abilities, and VanTassel-Baska's article (1992) comments on the benefits of utilizing grouping and acceleration to serve high-ability minority students. In their article, Feldhusen and Moon (1992) demonstrate how grouping, unlike tracking, can be sensible, flexible, and based on students' achievement as well as ability. In fact, the term "ability grouping" is probably an unfortunate one, since achievement as well as ability should always be considered when assigning students to instructional groups.

A variation of flexible grouping is "cluster grouping," a strategy that was developed as a way to offer differentiated learning opportunities to high achievers within a heterogeneous classroom. This practice assigns small groups of students with similar educational needs together in classes to meet these needs. For example, if students across a grade are identified as reading on any of six levels, students representing no more than two or three of these levels might be assigned to one classroom teacher. Most importantly, all of the very top readers would be assigned to one class so that they could be taught as a group. In their article, Gentry and Owens (1999) describe the beneficial effects on achievement they observed for students of all skill levels when cluster grouping was used in a school during a three-year period. As with any method of grouping students, the effectiveness of cluster grouping is dependent on adjusting the curriculum to meet the needs of the students in the groups.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The articles in this section strongly support the use of a variety of forms of acceleration, when appropriate for individual students, and ability grouping, when implemented with flexibility and accompanied by appropriate adjustment to the curriculum, as effective strategies for meeting the needs of gifted students. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, drawing on theory as well as practice, and offering new ideas for implementing these practices more effectively, the body of literature represented here is compelling in its arguments. For those seeking research evidence to validate grouping and acceleration as practices to serve gifted students, the debates should be over, and within much of the gifted community they are.

Acceleration and enrichment are both widely accepted as appropriate options for gifted learners, rather than being viewed as mutually exclusive, and a wide variety of program models have been developed that fall under both categories. With regard to grouping, the gifted community is focusing more on *how* to group students, rather than whether to group them at all. It is understood that grouping gifted students together is effective and defensible only when the curriculum is also adjusted to meet their academic needs.

But the larger educational community remains less supportive and still suspicious of these practices. In their articles, Feldhusen and Moon (1992), Mills

and Durden (1992), and VanTassel-Baska (1992) describe the social-political climate that has influenced school systems' decisions about grouping and acceleration. It appears that equity/excellence issues are still impacting decisions about these practices for gifted students (Gallagher, 2003). Although school reform initiatives have tried to address the importance of both excellence and equity in American education, concern about the lowest-performing students has received the most attention. Consequently, ability grouping, which separates high from low achievers and therefore can call more attention to the low achievers, and acceleration, which allows high achievers to go faster and could create an even larger gap between high and low achievers, have received relatively little support from the larger educational community.

Of course, not all schools have abandoned these strategies. In their article in this volume, Jones and Southern (1992) report that both accelerative and grouping practices were in operation in the schools they studied, though these practices were more prevalent in urban than rural districts. The dramatic rise of the Advanced Placement Program in high schools suggests that advanced work is available in many schools. Other practices have emerged, such as cluster grouping and enrichment in the regular classroom. A number of very rigorous magnet schools have been also established, including several state-funded residential high schools for academically talented students (Koloff, 2003; Stanley, 1991). It is ironic, however, that a school system that lacks support for an accelerated reading group in a first grade class due to its concern about equity may send students to a magnet high school that groups advanced students together on a full-time residential basis.

Universities and a number of private organizations have also established a wide variety of opportunities and programs for advanced students who want to accelerate their educational progress, including summer programs, Saturday programs, distance education, mentorships, internships, and Early College Entrance programs. The work by Stanley and others in identifying many different ways to accelerate, along with demand by parents and students for services, has generated much programmatic development. Similarly, proponents of enrichment responded to the debate over the value of enrichment by creating more and better opportunities for students to broaden their knowledge through extracurricular activities, special programs, and other opportunities. There are more educational options available for gifted students than ever before, many of them created in response to having to seek alternatives to traditional grouping and school-based acceleration.

Many of these programs exist outside of school, however, and limited financial resources may impede some students' participation. In addition, students returning to school from these programs need opportunities to continue to learn at a pace and level appropriate for their abilities and achievement levels. Schools need to be made aware of the strong and persuasive research evidence that supports ability grouping and various forms of acceleration as effective pedagogical practices to further the educational achievement of gifted learners.

CONCLUSION

Providing an appropriate educational program for all students is a goal that is universally agreed upon; what is less clear is how to achieve it. Students with advanced academic abilities and achievement need an educational program that matches their instructional needs, and often this requires some form of acceleration. While grouping is not an essential component of acceleration, bringing together students with similar instructional needs facilitates delivery of more advanced curricula in an efficient way.

In reviewing the articles included herein, what is emphasized throughout is the importance of responding to the learning needs of individual students with curricular flexibility. Educators need to be flexible when assigning students to instructional groups and must modify those groups when necessary. They need to be flexible in determining the age at which a student is ready to learn something or the pace at which it should be taught. They must also be willing to look beyond the school offerings to consider other program options to meet students' needs and give them credit for these learning experiences when warranted.

Acceleration and grouping are tools that allow us to differentiate content for students with different learning needs. When utilized as a way to offer a more advanced educational program to students with advanced cognitive abilities and achievement levels, these practices can help achieve the goal of an appropriate education for all students.

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