

Research paper: Current research examining the pros and cons of grouping and accelerating gifted learners Bronwyn MacLeod – Gateways Education

Introduction

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) stated that in order for there to be equity and excellence in schooling, all young Australians should become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. Goal One of the Declaration outlined that all Australian governments and all school sectors must promote a culture of excellence in all schools, by supporting schools to provide challenging, and stimulating learning experiences and opportunities to enable all students to explore and build on their gifts and talents and to also promote personalised learning that aims to fulfil the diverse capabilities of each young Australian and Goal Two of the Declaration added the reminder that successful learners are motivated to achieve their full potential. It is important then for teachers and schools to understand that these directives are underpinned by ongoing research in the fields of general and gifted education.

Research overview

Gifted education programs and strategies benefit gifted and talented students longitudinally, helping these students increase their aspirations for university and careers, determine their post-secondary and career plans, develop creativity and motivation that is applied to later work, and achieve more postgraduate degrees (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Taylor, 1992; Lubinski, et al, 2001). Overall, appropriately designed and research-based gifted programs are effective and gifted students in such programs perform better than their same ability peers who are not in any gifted programs. (Delcourt, Lloyd, Cornell and Goldberg, 1994).

The research supporting the grouping of gifted learners.

The research undertaken over the last three decades has repeatedly shown that it is important for gifted learners to have the opportunity to work with other students who think like them for at least part of their schooling experience (Benbow, 1991, 1998; Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 1991, 2007) and further that appropriate provisions for gifted students are as democratic and egalitarian as provisions for any student whose learning needs differs from the norm (Benbow, 1991, 1998; Silverman, 2000; Gross, 2000).

Gifted students often have a “reality check” when placed in a program for gifted students where they work and collaborate with real intellectual peers. For the first time some of these students experience meeting peers who will work at the same pace as them or even faster, and who may demonstrate abstract reasoning and problem solving skills more advanced than their own. Australian research (Gross, 2000), investigated the social and emotional development of gifted students entering a specialist secondary gifted program and found that the academic self-esteem of gifted students temporarily declined in response to this new environment, returning to its original level once the students had settled into the program.

The more recent research work by Rogers (2010) and VanTassel-Baska (2012) supports earlier findings indicating that when gifted students experience ability grouping, they experience substantial academic gains and improvements in attitude and motivation. It is important to allow gifted or talented students to spend the majority of their learning time in the academic core areas with others of like abilities and interests. Although self-contained grouping, such as a special school for the gifted or a full-time gifted program may not be the answer or even possible, Rogers (2012) found that educators should expect a third to a half a year’s additional achievement per year as a minimum standard of what gifted students should accomplish no matter what their management or grouping arrangement. In other words, for each year in school, gifted students should be given the chance to accomplish 15 – 18 months’ work in academic areas compared to the regular curriculum.

Clustering groups of gifted students within mixed ability classrooms may be a suitable substitute to full-time grouping as long as attention is focused on what will be taught to this group and to what depth. If the curriculum is not extended for the cluster group, the grouping is ineffective (VanTassel-Baska, 2012). Likewise, pull-out programs that extend the general classroom curriculum in specific academic areas result in greater achievement gains than those whose content is unrelated to the core. However, it is important to note that pull-out programs alone are not sufficient for gifted students as their needs are every day in every academic area (Rogers, 2012). Within class grouping, like-ability cooperative grouping and like-ability dyad peer tutoring should be used when no other forms of grouping are possible in a school setting. Even so, gifted students are often not sufficiently stretched in these situations and so however it can be managed, gifted learners must be provided with appropriately complex knowledge and skills through extension in their area or areas of demonstrated performance.

Finally, it is important to note the research, which has examined the impact of grouping practices for gifted learners on their average or lower ability same-age peers. Brush (1997) and Carter, Jones and Rira (2001) found that mixed ability peer tutored dyads have a null effect on either learner. Lower ability students do not choose higher ability students as role models (Bandura, 1977; Shunk, 1987) and more importantly low ability learners can be intimidated by higher ability learners, thus damaging their self-esteem (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Gifted students placed in an ‘assistant’ teacher role, do not learn new content and skills (Rogers, 2002).

The research supporting the acceleration of gifted learners.

“Educational acceleration is one of the cornerstones of exemplary gifted education practices, with more research supporting this intervention than any other in the literature on gifted individuals.” (NAGC, 2014)

The research supporting the acceleration of gifted learners is substantial and may be found in the following formats:

- Case studies and Evaluations (Gross 1993, 2004; Lipscomb, 2003)
- Meta-Analysis and meta-syntheses (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 2004, 2012; Steenberg-Hu, et.al, 2010)
- Retrospective and longitudinal studies (Subotnik & Arnold, 1993, 1995; Swiatek & Benbow, 1991)
- Talent Search Studies (Lubinski et.al. 2001 and 2006)
- Research reviews (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Rogers, Young, & Lonergan, 2008)
- Longitudinal research (Neihart, 2007, Rogers, 2002).

The landmark publication “A Nation Deceived” (2004) and the later companion to this “A Nation Empowered” (2013) provided clear insights as to the use of this intervention for gifted students and the expected results to be achieved by students who have experienced acceleration in their schooling. A number of these findings are summarised in the following key points:

- Acceleration is the most effective curriculum intervention for gifted children. Acceleration does not mean that gifted students are being made to speed up and learn faster than they are already willing to, but rather that schools are allowing students to progress at something closer to their natural or preferred rate of learning.
- The types of acceleration available to gifted students fall into two broad categories: grade-based acceleration which shortens the number of years the student spends in the K-12 system, and subject-based acceleration which allows for advanced content earlier than customary.
- For bright students, acceleration has long-term beneficial effects both academically and socially, as it significantly increases the gifted student’s friendship opportunities and raises gifted students’ levels of social and emotional self-esteem. Acceleration gives the gifted student access to mental age peers who are at similar levels of social and emotional development. In fact, Gross’ research (1993, 2005, 2006) found exceptionally gifted students who were radical accelerants displayed significantly higher levels of achievement motivation and a wider range of friendships than exceptionally gifted students who were not accelerated.
- Entering school early is an excellent option for some gifted students both academically and socially. Gifted young children who enrol early generally settle in smoothly with their older classmates. Rogers (2007, 2014) found gifted early entrants to school were found to be on average six months ahead in their achievement. Equally, gifted students entering university early experience both short-term and long-term academic success, leading to long-term occupational success and personal satisfaction.
- When gifted students are presented with curriculum developed for age-peers, they may become bored and lose interest in the learning process. Acceleration increases student motivation and enjoyment of learning as well as leading to a significant drop in underachievement particularly underachievement for peer acceptance.
- Research indicates that acceleration does not have a negative effect on most students’ emotional well-being, despite many educator concerns (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Townsend & Patrick, 1993). Accelerated adults recall their middle and high school experience more positively than their intellectual peers who were not accelerated. Some report wishing they had been further accelerated (Lubinski, 2004)
- The few problems that have been experienced with acceleration have stemmed primarily from incomplete or poor planning and so the key question for educators, is not *whether* to accelerate a gifted learner, but rather *how*.
- Acceleration is an ongoing process, not just a placement decision: it requires careful planning and implementation. It is one facet of a holistic intervention for a gifted student.

Conclusion

There is clear evidence (Rogers, 2007) that powerful academic effects and small to moderate affective effects are produced when gifted children are grouped with like-ability or like-performing peers and exposed to differentiated learning tasks and expectations. It is also clear that the grouping has positive effects whether full-time or part-time, although logically the more time this occurs for gifted children, the more positive the effects on them, socially and emotionally (p. 389). Equally, the research on the positive outcomes experienced by gifted students when accelerated in any format, provide undeniable evidence that this option should be part of any well-planned gifted program. Well designed and well monitored acceleration programs are essential (Benbow, 1991, Borland, 1997, Southern and Jones, 1991). Educational equity does not mean educational sameness. Equity respects individual differences in readiness to learn, pace of learning, environment for learning and recognises the value of each student right to access the educational options they require to be life-long learners.

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