

Acceleration for Talent Development: Parents' and Teachers' Attitudes towards Supporting the Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Children

Selena Gallagher

International School Bangkok, Thailand

Susen R. Smith

University of New South Wales, Australia

Abstract

Acceleration is a theoretically supported intervention to support talent development of gifted students, but prolonged beliefs about its potentially damaging consequences for gifted students have inhibited its use in practice. This study formed part of a larger qualitative, multi-site case study, which examined intellectually gifted primary school students' educational provisions in Queensland and how the perspectives of primary school stakeholders were reflected in their school policies. The component of the study reported here used the results from interviews and discussion forums to compare the implications of the attitudes of teachers and parents towards the use of acceleration for academically gifted students and their socio-affective needs in Queensland primary schools. Overall, both teachers and parents expressed positive attitudes towards specific acceleration techniques, with subject acceleration receiving almost universal approval from the teachers in this study. The main finding was that the attitudes and opinions of the parents towards the range of accelerative practices strongly mirrored those of the teachers, with some concerns for associated social difficulties still paramount. However, the exception was that parents, who had accepted the need for acceleration for their own children, expressed more support for accelerative interventions. This research suggests that the overwhelmingly positive research evidence in support of acceleration for talent development may be starting to influence an attitudinal change from both parental and teacher perspectives.

Keywords: Acceleration; gifted; teachers; parents; social and emotional development.

Introduction

Acceleration is one of the most well-supported interventions for gifted students in the research literature (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Gross, 2006b; Kulik, 2004; Lubinski, 2004; Merrotsy, 2003; Rogers, 2004; van Tassel-Baska & Brown 2007), “though it remains a controversial and underutilized strategy” (Siegle, Wilson, & Little, 2013, p. 28). It appears that educators have traditionally been reluctant to use it because of prolonged beliefs about its potentially damaging consequences, particularly in regards to the social and emotional development of gifted students (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Brown, 2007; Hoogeveen, van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2005; Neihart, 2007; Siegle, Wilson & Little, 2013; Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989; Townsend & Patrick, 1993).

Historically, parents have been in the position of advocating for acceleration for their children and some have documented their battles with the education authorities (Kumekawa, 2008; Merlin, 1997; Rogers, 2002). Therefore, it could be assumed that while teachers may hold a negative attitude towards acceleration, parents may hold a more positive one. However, there is little in the empirical research literature that directly canvasses the views of parents about acceleration practices, as the

extant literature tends to focus more on parental advocacy than specific provisions (Gross, 2004a; Osborn, 2001).

Acceleration refers to the educational practice of moving through the prescribed curriculum at a faster pace or a younger age than is usual (Pressey, 1949; Siegle, Wilson, & Little, 2013). There are two main categories of acceleration: grade-based acceleration, which reduces the number of years spent in the school system and; subject-based acceleration in which the student studies advanced content in a specific area of ability, with varying types of acceleration approaches within these categories (Rogers, 2004). Grade-based acceleration can also be thought of as a full-time accelerative option, while subject-based acceleration is a part-time option (Merrotsy, 2003). For the purposes of this article, four types of acceleration were discussed: early entry, where a child enters school or university before the usual entry age; grade-skipping, where a child moves ahead by one or more years and ‘skips’ the intervening grade; subject acceleration, where a child may go to another year level for a specific subject; and in-class acceleration, where a student works on advanced content within the regular class.

These distinctions are necessary because opinions and attitudes of parents and educators can vary widely depending on the model of acceleration being discussed. For example, ‘grade skipping’ appears to be the most controversial accelerative approach that engenders the most concerns from teachers (Rambo & McCoach, 2012; Siegle, Wilson & Little, 2013). However, much of the literature treats the word ‘acceleration’ as synonymous with ‘grade-skipping’, and indeed much of the research has focused on grade-based accelerative practices (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Brown, 2007; Hooegeveen, van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2005; Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989), but to assume that one necessarily means the other can lead to generalisations which may be misleading.

Recent reviews by Rambo and McCoach (2012) and Siegle et al. (2013) identified four main parent and teacher perceived concerns regarding acceleration, these being: feasibility; achievement/academic impact; teacher efficacy and; socio-affective impacts, especially regarding early entry and grade acceleration, with socio-affective concerns apparently still the most influential (Rambo & McCoach, 2012).

Acceleration and the social and emotional needs of the gifted student

Sociocultural perspective supports acceleration for gifted students

Gifted students learn at a faster rate and more easily than other children and therefore, an appropriate response involves, “matching the

level and complexity of the curriculum with the readiness and motivation of the child” (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004, p. 1). It has been suggested that the field of gifted education has suffered through not having a clearly identified theoretical model behind it (Cohen, 1996; Margolin, 1994; McGlenn-Nelson, 2005). However, it would seem that much of the best practices advocated by gifted education proponents have been informed by Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory even if such links are not always made explicit. In particular, the Vygotskian notion of the zone of proximal development would seem to offer robust justification for the practice of acceleration for gifted learners (Gallagher, Smith & Merrotsy, 2010).

For Vygotsky, learning which is oriented at a child’s existing level of cognitive development is ineffective, as the mental processes at that level have already been mastered. Instead, learning should target that area of development that is just out of reach of the child independently, but which they can master with assistance. Students should be put into the position where they have to reach to understand and in this way, real learning is possible.

In fact, Vygotsky suggested that, “the only ‘good learning’ is that which is in advance of development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87). These ideas have clear implications for gifted learners, many of whom spend the majority of their time in the classroom firmly entrenched in a different zone – their comfort zone.

In adopting a sociocultural perspective of education, acceleration becomes a natural response to the learning needs of gifted students. Instead of grouping students according to their chronological age, students should be placed within their zones of proximal development (McGlenn-Nelson, 2005). If we accept, as Vygotsky suggested, that the only good learning is that which is in advance of development, then it is imperative that gifted students be allowed to move out of their comfort zone and into their zone of proximal development through accelerative educational contexts.

Teacher attitudes towards acceleration options for gifted students

Despite the sociocultural perspective, and the overwhelmingly positive research evidence in support of acceleration for talent development, it appears that among teachers and educators it is still not a popular option for gifted students (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Brown, 2007; Neihart, 2007; Plunkett, 2000; Siegle, Wilson & Little, 2013; Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989). When educators express a negative attitude towards acceleration, their most frequently cited concern is that it will result in social and emotional damage for the students concerned (Gross, 1997; Neihart, 2007; Rambo & McCoach, 2012; Siegle, Wilson & Little, 2013; Townsend & Patrick, 1993). Swiatek and Benbow (1991) found that teachers and principals often believed that grade-skipping would lead to academic burnout, gaps in knowledge, poor social skills, isolation within peer groups, poor self-concept and arrogance. In a study of teacher education undergraduates, Bain et al. (2007) found that 82% of their respondents believed that skipping a grade would have a negative effect on gifted students' social skills.

A New Zealand survey of 152 experienced teachers and 140 teacher trainees revealed that both groups held generally negative attitudes towards acceleration (Townsend & Patrick, 1993). Most participants expressed more negative views about the social and emotional effects of acceleration than about the academic effects and more than 60% did not agree that there might be potentially harmful effects from keeping a gifted child with their age peers (Townsend & Patrick, 1993). The pre-service

teachers surveyed by Harris and Hemmings (2008) nominated grade-skipping as their least preferred educational strategy for use with gifted students. Southern, Jones and Fiscus (1989) reported that instead of relying on research literature, teachers tended to rely on information from the popular press, their colleagues, or even from their experiences with other children who were not gifted and who were not accelerated. Teachers are also more likely to blame any observed difficulties in accelerated students on the acceleration rather than on normal behavioural patterns (Colangelo, Assouline, & Lupkowski-Shoplak, 2004).

A common concern expressed by teachers in relation to acceleration is how students will cope when they are in the position of having to go to university at an earlier age than normal (Vialle et al. 2001). This is even a concern for kindergarten teachers, as evidenced by this comment from a teacher in Gallagher's (2006, p. 53) study: "Unless there's a huge assessment done on their maturity, I don't agree with [acceleration], because I often look at the other end of the scale where I read about 15 and 16 year olds that are doing university, and that's fantastic but I think, how are they coping socially?"

In a study investigating teacher attitudes towards acceleration and accelerated students in secondary schools in the Netherlands, Hoogeveen, van Hell and Verhoeven (2005) found that Dutch teachers tended to hold more positive attitudes towards acceleration than has been reported in other countries. When teachers did express concerns about possible negative effects of acceleration, those concerns were focused around the students' social and emotional development. Teachers were most concerned about isolation and social adjustment and least concerned about the academic welfare of accelerated students (Hoogeveen, van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2005). After the teachers had attended an information session on acceleration, they expressed fewer concerns about the possible social or emotional problems of the practice. One of the teachers in the study commented that they only tended to notice the accelerated students with problems, rather than the ones who were coping well. Gagné and Gagnier (2004) echoed this sentiment in relation to early entrants, suggesting that while thriving early

entrants are overlooked, any case involving maladjustment is highlighted and seized on as evidence that acceleration causes social and emotional problems.

Parental perspectives of acceleration options for their children

When it comes to parental attitudes towards acceleration, there is little in the empirical research literature that directly addresses this, especially in relation to the socio-affective impact on their gifted children. Parents' views towards both ends of the acceleration spectrum have been examined by Noble, Childers and Vaughan (2008) and Sankar-DeLeeuw (2002), who surveyed parents regarding early entry to university and early entry to school respectively. In the case of early entry to university, a descriptive study surveyed 64 parents whose children were directly involved in one of two early entry programs targeting gifted students (Noble, Childers, & Vaughan, 2008).

One hundred percent of parents declared themselves satisfied or very satisfied with one of the programs, while 76% of parents were similarly satisfied with the second program. At the other end of the acceleration spectrum a small sample of Canadian parents and preschool and kindergarten teachers were surveyed by Sankar-DeLeeuw (2002) regarding their views towards early entry to school. While 76% of parents and 32% of teachers agreed that gifted preschool children required a differentiated curriculum, early entry was not a popular option for either group. However, it seems that in this case, the parents surveyed did not have any direct experience with the strategy. Parents were still more likely to be in favour of early entry than teachers were, with 37% of parents and just 7% of teachers supporting this strategy. Both parents and teachers agreed that a child's development in the socioemotional domain was the most important factor when considering early entry, while intellectual and physical development were ranked second and third respectively (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2002).

In a personal account of her own experiences with acceleration, Chapman (2005) expressed no regrets about her own educational choices. Similarly, several parents have also published their own retrospective accounts of

their experiences with acceleration (Kumekawa, 2008; Merlin, 1997). Although acknowledging the difficulties and frustrations along the way, most notably with the educational system, these accounts tend to be overwhelmingly positive in their consideration of the benefits of acceleration for their gifted children. While a few studies have found some inhibitive socio-affective ramifications for selected accelerants (Gagné & Gagnier, 2004; Neihart, 2007), overall, the research suggests that acceleration, in its various forms and especially early entry and grade-skipping, inordinately supports the social and emotional needs of gifted students (Gross, 2006b; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2010; Vialle et al. 2001).

Purpose of the study

The irony is that there is such strong research support for acceleration as the most appropriate provision to meet both the socio-affective and intellectual needs of many gifted students, yet the most significant concern teachers express about acceleration is based on the impact of the socio-affective development of gifted children (Rambo & McCoach, 2012; van Tassel-Baska & Brown 2007)! As teachers' and parents' perspectives are most influential on their students' and children's interrelated academic, social and emotional development, the purpose of this study was to explore teachers' and parents' views of different forms of acceleration, so this study specifically sought to address the research question: *What is the relationship between parents' and teachers' perspectives of acceleration and the social and emotional needs of gifted primary school students?*

By understanding views of parents, as advocates, in relation to teachers - who will be identifying the students most eligible for acceleration and providing acceleration programmes - there may be a way of influencing more positive teacher reactions to acceleration in the future and more appropriate accelerative provisions for gifted students. Assisting participating parents and teachers to understand the interrelationship between the well-being of gifted students and accelerative techniques was another aim of this study. Additionally, identifying common perspectives may help to dispel some misconceptions that each group might have about the views of the other.

Method and context

The data reported in this article form part of a larger qualitative, multi-site case study, which examined intellectually gifted primary school students' educational provisions in Queensland and how the perspectives of primary school stakeholders were reflected in their school policies. Other aspects of this study have been reported elsewhere (Gallagher, Smith & Merrotsy, 2010; 2011; 2012). This component of the study includes interviews and group discussion fora from which were used to collect data from both teachers and parents.

Participants

Of the four schools that participated in this study, three were public primary schools serving students from Kindergarten to 7th Grade and one was an Independent school that served students from Kindergarten to 12th Grade, all within a single educational district of Queensland, Australia.

While there were 163 staff across all four schools and only thirty teachers altogether volunteered to participate, the response rate cannot be verified, as the Coordinator of Gifted Education at each school disseminated the information about the research project within the school and sought expressions of interest from teachers and administrators who were willing to be interviewed. Hence, it cannot be certain which staff were approached in each school. However, of the thirty participants, there were three principals, three deputy principals and four gifted education teachers, with a gender distribution of twelve male and eighteen female respondents, ranging from 23 to 57 years of age. There was a wide range of experience among the participants, from a beginning teacher in her second year of teaching, to teachers with more than 30 years of experience. Additional demographic data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Teacher participant demographic data.

Pseudonym	Age (approx. in some cases)	Length of Teaching Experience	Current position	Additional Notes
Pelican Point State School				
Amanda	50	30+ years	Grade 1	
Barbara	51	3 years	Grade 3	Mature age grad.
Charlotte	40	20+ years	Kindergarten	
Debra	53	10 years	Grade 2	
Emily	39	18+ years	Grade 5	
Frances	39	18+ years	Grade 7	
Gail	Late 40s	20+ years	Head of Curriculum	GEM (Gifted Ed Mentor)
Henry	50s	30 years	Dep. Principal	
Black Swan State School				
Ingrid	50+	4 years	Kindergarten	Mature age grad.
Julie	28	7 years	Grade 7	GEM
Kevin	39	20 years	P.E. teacher	On gifted ed. Committee
Linda	52	31 years	Learning Support	
Mike	50s	35+ years	Principal	
Nancy	47	26 years	Head of Special Ed.	
Kingfisher Independent School				
Oliver	49	26 years	Extension & Enrichment Coordinator	1 st year in role
Philip	Late 40s	20+ years	Principal	
Rachel	35	3 years	Grade 2	
Scott	37	14 years	Grade 3	
Timothy	32	10 years	Deputy head: primary curriculum	
Ursula	46	23 years	Grade 3	Deputy Head
Veronica	46	16 years	Learning support	

Heron Haven State School				
William	57	20 years	Grade 5	
Xavier	39	5 years	Grade 5/6	
Yvette	54	12 years	Grade 6/7	
Zachary	Mid 50s	33 years	Grade 7	
Anna	23	2 nd year out	Grade 1	
Byron	Mid 40s	20+ years	Principal	
Cherry	45	20 years	Grade 3	GEM – 1 day/week
Declan	55	33 years	Grade 3	
Estelle	48	20 years	Grade 5	

Parent participants were recruited via academic extension workshops targeting intellectually gifted upper primary students, which were held in each of the participating schools. The schools were asked to distribute letters to the parents of the gifted students selected for the workshop, inviting them to attend a group discussion forum following the workshop, or to participate in a confidential one-on-one interview. Of the 55 parents whose children participated in the extension workshop, thirty-three participated in the study, indicating a response rate of 60%. Of this group, mothers were more likely to participate than fathers, with 27 of the participating parents being female and six being male. As the data was collected from groups, no other parental demographics were collected.

Data gathering processes

Teachers who volunteered to participate in the study took part in an individual semi-structured interview. Interviews were held in a quiet room on school grounds with teachers being advised of the interview protocols, that the interviews would be audio-recorded and that they could stop the interview at any time. Following the interviews, they were shown a copy of the transcripts to make amendments if needed. During the interviews, an overview of the definitions of the four main types of acceleration considered by this study was provided. Examples of teacher interview questions included:

- How are gifted children catered for in your school?
- How do you feel about acceleration of gifted students?
- What experiences have you had with acceleration?

Teacher interview questions emulated the examples of parent questions that were used to prompt discussion during parental forums:

- What educational provisions have been made by this school for your child?
- What do you think about acceleration of gifted children?

Data analysis

The interviews and forum group discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 295 pages of raw data across the two data sources. A two-stage data analysis process was then undertaken, involving a descriptive level of analysis, followed by a typological analysis (Hatch, 2002). Data analysis was conducted manually by reviewing the interview transcripts and coding each statement according to initially broad, and then more refined, categories. Co-coding and the constant comparative method maintained the facility for contextual interpretation and supported reliability. Analytical statements were generated in response to the research question and tested against the data (Basse, 1999).

In the reporting of results, pseudonyms are used throughout for individual participants and schools – Heron Haven, Black Swan and Pelican Point for the three public schools and Kingfisher for the independent school.

Findings

Teachers' attitudes

Overall, the teachers in the study were quite positive about the use of acceleration for talent development for intellectually gifted students, although their attitudes and opinions were very dependent on the type of acceleration strategy being discussed (see Figure 1 for results).

	Grade-skipping	Subject Acceleration	In-class Acceleration	Early Entry
Pelican Point State School				
Gail*	-	+	-	
Amanda	+/-	+	+	+/-
Barbara	+/-	+	-	-
Emily	+/-	+		
Charlotte				+
Debra	+	+	+	
Frances	-	-	+	
Henry†	+/-	+		+
Parents	-	+	+	
Black Swan State School				
Nancy	-	+		-
Linda	-	+	+	
Ingrid	+	+	+	+
Julie*	+	+	+	
Kevin				
Mike†	+			+
Parents	+/-	+	+	+/-
Heron Haven State School				
Estelle	+	+	+	
Yvette	+	+	+	
Xavier	+	+		+
Anna	-	+	+	
Byron†	+	+	+	-
Zachary	+/-	+		
Declan	+/-	+	+	+/-
Cherry*	-	+		-
Parents	-	+	+/-	
Kingfisher Independent School				
Rachel	+/-	+/-		+
Veronica	+		-	-
Ursula†	+/-	+		+
William	-	+	-	
Scott	+	+	+	+
Timothy†	-	+	+	-
Oliver*	+	+	+	+
Philip†	+	+		-
Parents	+	+	+	+

Figure 1: Parent and teacher views of acceleration.

Key:

† Principal or Deputy Principal

* GEM or person responsible for implementing gifted education programs in the school

Positive	+	Negative	-	Undecided	+/-	No data	
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Note: As the data were gathered via qualitative interviews, not all teachers gave opinions about all forms of acceleration. The parent data represented here is the majority view of the parents in each discussion forum.

Part-time models of acceleration, such as subject acceleration and working on accelerated content within the regular class, received a more positive response than full-time models, such as grade-skipping and early entry. In fact, subject acceleration received almost universal approval from the teachers in this study, with only one teacher objecting to this strategy. Her objection stemmed from the fact that she taught students in the final year of primary school, so subject acceleration would necessarily involve working with a local high school, an option this teacher felt would single the child out as different and be potentially harmful.

I think it would be more appropriate to maybe accelerate in just one or two subjects rather than skip a whole grade. Because you're keeping them with their peers then which is so important. (Rachel, Individual interview, October 30, 2008)

Amongst the teachers in this study, the next most favoured accelerative strategy was working on accelerated content within the students' own class.

I think that would be great. I wouldn't have a problem with that either. You're not making the child look any different. Yes, the other kids are aware they're doing different work but we do different work in the classroom anyway.
(Frances, Individual interview, August 5 2008)

While, most teachers who supported this strategy thought that it would be an effective way of providing for a gifted student's needs without highlighting differences from peers, many supporters also recognised that it would create extra work for the teacher. Objections to this strategy could be categorised into two different philosophical positions. Two teachers shared the view that such a strategy would not be fair on the gifted child, as he or she would often be left to work alone without the benefit of quality teacher time or peers to work with, while the second objection was based on a preference for 'horizontal' enrichment, rather than 'vertical' acceleration. For example,

Just because they can do maths well doesn't mean that they shouldn't be taught and given quality time. I still think they need to be taught and given the time that any child . . . needs. So I just think that for me, it would be tricky, to feel that I was doing them justice. (Barbara, Individual interview, August 19, 2008)

I think . . . you're going to create problems if you're continually sneaking in on next year's work. Just because they've covered . . . curriculum issues, doesn't mean that there's not sideways ways that they can go . . . There are lots of other skills that would consolidate and use the skills they learn . . . in ways that would not encroach on the curriculum of the following year. (Veronica, Individual interview, November 11, 2008)

Grade-skipping proved to be a divisive topic, with many teachers 'on the fence' on this issue. Overall, the balance of opinions was positive, but all of the teachers who expressed a positive attitude towards grade-skipping were careful to stress that it would be very much an individual decision based on what would be in the best interests of that particular child and that it would not necessarily be suitable for every gifted student.

I definitely believe in it. (Ingrid, Individual interview, September 18, 2008)

If they're going to be accelerated we would have a plan - to make sure we don't lose track of that child - where we would have a review, and in every case so far the review has been good.
(Philip, Individual interview, October 30, 2008)

Maturity and socialisation skills were frequently mentioned as being an important barometer of readiness for acceleration, in addition to academic ability. Social concerns were also of paramount importance for those teachers who rejected the strategy. These teachers tended to have more rigid views, believing that any departure from a child's age cohort was a bad thing.

But, I think it's generally better to stay in your own year level but then do higher-level work. (Gail, Individual interview, August 5, 2008)

I guess from my teaching experience some children can be very gifted academically, but socially and emotionally they're still within that year level (Linda, Individual interview, September 18, 2008).

Although these were primary school teachers, there was a tendency among some of them to adopt a future-based orientation, focusing on the belief that a child would be disadvantaged by finishing school too early. Teachers who expressed these sorts of beliefs often seemed to be basing their opinion on some sort of personal experience or association.

And I have a friend whose daughter was accelerated but then it's been a big disaster for her. (Amanda, Individual interview, August 5, 2008)

I think it can be a good thing for some students, especially in their early years of schooling, but I can see it as being a real, real thorn in their side in their later years of schooling. (Timothy, Individual interview, November 11, 2008)

Attitudes towards early entry were similar to those for grade-skipping. Opinions were divided, with just over half of the teachers supporting the strategy. Of the principals, two of the State School principals held positive opinions of early entry while the other State School principal, and the Independent school principal, opposed the strategy, suggesting that a child starting school was too much of an 'unknown quantity' to risk acceleration with, or that children were simply not ready for school before the usual starting age. In contrast, the other two principals accepted that there may be a need for more flexibility where gifted students are concerned.

What's in the best interests of the child ... If we're being realistic about providing an education that's suited the needs of the child then we've got to start looking at them a bit differentially. (Mike, Individual interview, September 18, 2008)

There would be a case for it. Genuine gifted kids may be able to start early, have early entry. (Henry, Individual interview, August 5, 2008)

Most applications for early entry come from students who are within a few months of the usual school starting age, and in many cases, within a few weeks of it. However, as with grade-skipping, teachers with a negative attitude towards early entry tended to present extreme examples of very young children coming to school or raised concerns about whether they would place an unfair burden on the teacher. In general, those teachers who expressed reservations about early entry had concerns about the effect on students' social development:

They are a whole person and just because ... there are fields that you're advanced in doesn't mean that you should be missing out on your whole social and emotional thing with other children. (Barbara, Individual interview, August 5 2008)

Some teachers were also inclined to consider the implications of starting university early when articulating their opinion on early entry to Kindergarten, but at Black Swan State School, Nancy presented a unique argument, suggesting that school would be the worst place for young, gifted children.

If a child is that bright, coming into grade one ... the only thing grade one does really, is institutionalise them ... So if you're getting a child who's right into the academics you're still only looking at them learning the institutionalised things, the unwritten rules, the boundaries. You will eat at this time, you will go to the toilet here, you will sit here, you will stand here. So if you've got a gifted and talented child who is very bright for their age and they're reading and writing, I honestly believe that there is a better place for them than school. I don't think any child should come to school until they have to. (Nancy, Individual interview, September 25, 2008)

However, just over half of the teachers expressed positive views towards early entry, generally favouring a more flexible approach. On the whole, teachers would prefer to see gifted students allowed early entry to Kindergarten, rather than skipping Kindergarten altogether in favour of early entry to 1st Grade. Several teachers across different schools called for a more flexible system that could see gifted students complete half a year of Kindergarten before moving on to 1st Grade, or being allowed to start part-way through the year.

I think there should be allowances made for early entry ... But there should even be a mid-year intake for Kindergarten, where they do half the year ... A half-year intake ... would be

a good idea for those kids who are a little bit young to hit it at the beginning of the year . . . (Charlotte, Individual interview, August 5, 2008)

I don't see any problem with that at all because they will still progress through the years, they're not going to be skipping out a year. They're just going to be doing it a little bit quicker than maybe others. (Rachel, Individual interview, October 30, 2008)

Parents' attitudes

Amongst the parent participants, there were similar attitudes towards acceleration as those expressed by teachers. In general, models of part-time acceleration met with a more positive reaction than the idea of grade-skipping, as many parents shared the concern of some teachers that children should remain with their age cohort wherever possible, although some differences of opinion emerged between schools. In contrast to the findings related to teachers, where supporters and opponents of whole-grade acceleration were fairly evenly spread across all four schools, clear differences emerged between schools when considering parental attitudes. Parents at Kingfisher Independent School and Black Swan State School were far more inclined to hold positive views about whole-grade accelerative strategies than parents at Heron Haven State School or Pelican Point State School. While grade-skipping was generally not a popular idea with these parents, most were more comfortable with the idea of their child working on accelerated content within their regular classroom.

I'd prefer there to be extra opportunities in class to work at an advanced level, rather than move them away from what they're used to and from their friends (Poppy, Parent group discussion forum, March 3 2009).

Objections to grade-skipping generally echoed those of the teachers, with parents being concerned about the social ramifications of their child mixing with older children, although no specific consequences were suggested. At Heron Haven State School, one parent suggested that between Kindergarten and 3rd Grade, some mixing of ages was acceptable, but once children reached 4th Grade they should stay with their age-peers. The majority of those present seemed to agree with this generalisation. Another parent reported a grade-skipping success story involving her younger cousin, but this was greeted with skepticism by the other parents and the expressed belief that children who were accelerated would miss out on the social side of school and be emotionally stunted. One parent also suggested that she would prefer her daughter to remain at the top of her current class, rather than be accelerated into a higher grade level and lose her position.

I don't think there's anything wrong with them doing a few exercises ahead in their books if they're finished and they're done. It's a fine line between being top of the class and going on to the next year and being mediocre, as well.

(Patsy, Parent group discussion forum, March 3, 2009)

By far the most positive views towards the various models of acceleration came from parents at Kingfisher Independent School. These parents were more likely to have consulted a gifted education support group and also had more personal experience of acceleration than parents at other schools. However, even some of these parents admitted that they had not been philosophically in favour of acceleration until it had proven to be a necessary intervention for their own child. Amongst these parents, one had applied for early entry for her youngest child, one had engineered a grade-skip after moving from another country, one was negotiating subject acceleration for their child in mathematics, while a fourth had a child who had skipped a year, was being radically subject accelerated in two subjects, and who was being considered for another grade-skip. Not surprisingly then, these parents had a lot to say on the subject of acceleration.

And it wasn't a decision that we made terribly easily, but I just felt, how many years was she expected to sit around and wait for somebody to give her something to do, other than paint or colour. Which is good, but if she wants to read, why not let her? (Phoebe, Parent group discussion forum, March 27, 2009)

He probably ... could miss another year. But that's going to be his decision.

(Penny, Parent group discussion forum, March 27, 2009)

I think acceleration can be a good way to go but I guess we haven't really had to . . . both of them have had programs at different schools in the past where they've done special cluster programs or they've done different things but really now is the first time that anyone's sort of starting saying perhaps we should be skipping some years in maths. (Pauline, Parent group discussion forum, March 27, 2009)

Discussion

Attitudes towards some forms of acceleration may be shifting

A substantial proportion of previous research has reported that acceleration is unpopular with teachers (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Brown, 2007; Lewis & Milton, 2005; Rambo & McCoach, 2012; Seigle et al. 2013; Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989; Swiatek & Benbow, 1991; Townsend & Patrick, 1993), but there have been some conflicting views (Hoogeveen, van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2005; Rambo & McCoach, 2012). Across the four schools involved in the study, part-time models of acceleration certainly elicited more positive responses than did full-time ones, but overall, attitudes and opinions towards acceleration in general, from both teachers and parents, tended to be fairly positive, as shown in Figure 1.

The contradictions between previous research outcomes and the findings in this current study suggest that the consistently positive research findings in support of acceleration (Gagné & Gagnier, 2004; Gross, 2006b; Kulik, 2004; Lubinski, 2004) may be having some impact on education practitioners and consequently attitudes may be shifting.

Academic and socio-affective needs for acceleration

Other similarities with previous research were also noted. While many teachers expressed positive attitudes towards grade-skipping, they still tended to accompany that with a statement about the potential social or emotional hazards of such a strategy if it were not used judiciously. The parents in this study also echoed these concerns. This phenomenon has previously been reported amongst American teachers by Southern, Jones and Fiscus (1989) as well as among teachers and teacher trainees in New Zealand (Townsend & Patrick, 1993). Neither teachers nor parents seemed overly concerned about the academic ramifications of skipping a grade.

Academically, maybe acceleration works, but . . . I've talked to gifted adults and they've said it wasn't a good thing . . . would the benefits outweigh the disadvantages, because I think socially . . . we're all social creatures and that's a big part we sometimes forget about. And an important one (Cherry, Individual interview, February 17, 2009).

There was no mention of other academic concerns highlighted in the research (Swiatek & Benbow, 1991), such as accelerated students being at risk of academic burnout or gaps in knowledge. In fact, many teachers in the present study who expressed a positive attitude towards acceleration highlighted the risks associated with not accelerating, such as disengaging from school, boredom, frustration and lack of talent development, which supports the findings in the wider research literature (Colangelo, Assouline, & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2010; Swiatek & Benbow, 1991).

Only two teachers suggested that students considered for a grade-skip should be equally advanced in both literacy and numeracy, while one parent expressed a concern that if a child were accelerated, they may lose their position at the top of the class. However, the majority of comments regarding acceleration focused on social ramifications and those teachers and parents who expressed a negative attitude towards acceleration invariably cited social concerns. The vast majority of these were not specific social or emotional concerns, but rather general statements about 'social issues,' 'maturity,' and 'getting on in social groups'.

On the whole then, the participants in the study were generally positive towards acceleration and, while grade-skipping generated the most divergence in responses among both teachers and parents, attitudes towards it were rated positively overall.

Concerns expressed in relation to acceleration, both by participants with positive and negative opinions towards it, ranged along the socialisation dimension. Social adjustment was frequently mentioned as being of concern when considering a grade-skip, with teachers who were opposed to the strategy most likely to focus on the implications of finishing school and starting university at an earlier age than usual. Parents were less likely to look ahead to university, but shared the concern of many teachers that children needed to remain with their same-age peers. It was unclear where this idea that children's social well-being depends on their constant exposure to same age children has come from. The research literature also reported that socialising is rated higher than scholarliness in describing the attributes of an ideal student (Geake & Gross, 2008), and those feelings were very much in evidence here.

So I think it would be nice to see acceleration but so that students could stay with their age level. (Linda, Individual interview, September 18, 2008)

Part-time acceleration regarded more favourably

Given this preoccupation with keeping children with their same-age peers, it can be seen why part-time acceleration strategies were regarded more favourably by the participants in the current study. Despite both teachers and parents seizing on single subject acceleration as a useful compromise which would cater for students' academic needs whilst keeping them with their age peers, many teachers also recognised the difficulty of implementation as it relied on whole-school cooperation in order to be effective. These findings mirror those of Siegle et al. (2013) who pointed out the irony that the least favoured strategies were actually the easiest to implement.

Parents less likely to express objections to early entry than teachers

Traditionally, parents have often been encouraged to delay their child's entry to school, especially for boys, in order to ensure their child had a head start on learning (Devine, 2009) although this is not supported in the research (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Martin, 2009; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2010). In the present study, attitudes towards early entry were similar to those expressed towards grade-skipping, with a preponderance of vague social concerns expressed, such as maturity, placing additional demands on teachers, or finishing school and being too young for university. However, parents were less likely to express an objection to the early entry strategy than teachers were. In line with previous case study research (Vialle et al. 2001) and with the findings relating to grade-skipping in this study, some teachers were also inclined to consider the implications of starting university early when articulating their opinion on early entry to Kindergarten. Conversely, several of the teachers who did not support early entry did believe that delaying entry to school should be considered in some cases.

One unique objection to early entry was articulated by Nancy, who suggested that school would be the very worst place for young, gifted children. Coming from a background in special education, which aims to place students with special needs in the 'least restrictive environment,' Nancy believed that for many gifted students, the regimented institution of school would be the most restrictive environment for them. This view is echoed in the literature with Robinson and Weimer (1990, cited in Diezmann, Watters & Fox, 2001) arguing that gifted children, who enter school with already advanced skills, may be the least well-served there. However, delaying entry is not likely to alleviate this situation and will only serve to widen the socio-emotional and learning gap.

Early entry has been promoted in the literature as being the least disruptive form of acceleration (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004), and Rachel highlighted this aspect in her response, suggesting that it would be an advantage for the gifted student to be able to continue through school with their cohort, rather than skipping a grade at some stage after starting school. Parents also recognised this advantage, as it would avoid difficult choices later on, once friendships had been established. Other teachers called for more flexibility within the Kindergarten year, with a mid-year entry possible for some gifted students who were considered too young at the beginning of the year, or a compacted Kindergarten and 1st Grade within a single year.

Need for greater communication between parents and teachers regarding acceleration

One unique feature of this research was the comparison between parental and teacher perspectives. While the teachers and parents in the study shared many similar views with regards to acceleration, neither group seemed aware of these commonalities, a similar phenomenon to that reported by Seigle et al. (2013) in relation to teachers and administrators. Parents expressed frustration about being kept ‘in the dark’ and not being informed about what provisions the schools were making for their child. They wanted to avoid being seen as ‘pushy’, but also wanted to be more involved with their children’s education. Conversely, the teachers expressed concerns that some gifted education strategies would not be well-received by the parent community, or that parents would prefer their child to be top of the class rather than accelerated to an appropriate level of challenge. Mike, the principal at Black Swan State School, thought that many teachers were threatened by the knowledge that parents had regarding gifted education and that was a reason why communication and collaboration was lacking. However, apart from the parents at Kingfisher, who had actively sought information and support from gifted associations, most parent participants seemed to have relatively low levels of knowledge regarding gifted education, and most tended to talk positively about the efforts the schools were making.

She had a fabulous teacher in year one and she had a really lovely experience with her and I felt that she was nurtured there . . . and J has recognised that she has a gift for language and she’s given her extra responsibilities within the class and I think, just accommodated her abilities. (Pansy, Parent group discussion forum, March 3, 2009)

Limitations and recommendations for future research

It is important to note some restrictions and shortcomings of this investigation. Methodological limitations included context, participants and data collection. While this study only involved small cohorts from across four schools in one region, the response rates were high among parents and identifying the specific response rate of teachers will be needed in the next phases of the study. Almost equal numbers of parents as teachers participated, but there were fewer males than females and balancing this aspect in future studies may engender different outcomes.

The data collection protocol relied on attaining perceptions through interviews and forums to collect information relating to respondents’ experiences, feelings, attitudes and beliefs. Although recognising the importance of measuring perceptions, the cross-participant approach utilising a different data-gathering procedure for each cohort, must be considered a limiting factor of the study, as one-on-one interviews may have gleaned more in-depth data from the teacher group than the parent forum group. Nevertheless, it is still plausible to discuss inferences from the relationships found based on the previous theoretical research. Given the limitations of the sample and data-gathering process, it is acknowledged that relationships between the key concepts and variables could be further explored.

These limitations are recognised, along with some recommendations to guide future research. Future research needs to consider to what extent teacher perspectives in one-context transfers to other situations. It may also be prudent to explore parental perspectives using a larger cohort and across more regions and include student perspectives for triangulation of data. Additionally, the tracking of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs across a variety of educational contexts could help to inform future acceleration programs and techniques across a broader context. Examining effective and collaborative communications between parents of gifted children, gifted children and their teachers in multi-aged contexts would be efficacious in allaying misconceptions about the socio-affective concerns regarding acceleration, especially for grade skipping and early entry.

Conclusion

This study helped to provide data supporting assertions that often are made based on experience or hearsay. Overall, both teachers and parents expressed mainly positive perspectives towards part-time subject- and content-accelerative techniques. Except for those parents who had accepted the need for acceleration for their own children, the perceptions, attitudes and opinions of the parents towards

the range of accelerative practices strongly mirrored those of the teachers. This might suggest that most teachers' views about acceleration are borne out of 'common sense' notions, rather than being greatly influenced by their teacher training or professional practice, neither of which were mentioned in their interview responses. Despite this, the overwhelmingly positive research evidence in support of the academic benefits of acceleration may be starting to influence an attitudinal change, due to the wider acceptance of in-class accelerative approaches and subject acceleration in this study.

Teasing out the concerns that still exist about the possible social and emotional implications of grade-based acceleration suggests that future advocacy efforts would do well to focus on addressing those concerns specifically. Drawing on research which investigates multi-aged educational practices may also help to dispel some of the anxiety surrounding age-based thinking and so foster greater understanding of the benefits of acceleration regarding grade-skipping and early entry and engender improved attitudes towards the full range of acceleration options.

Fostering improved communication and collaboration between parents of gifted children and their teachers should be a priority. Building on the commonalities that already exist can be an effective way to increase acceleration advocacy efforts on behalf of gifted students, in order to translate research into practice and gifts into talents. It has been theorised that some reluctance to accelerate may be due to perceptions of what others believe, rather than the individuals' perceptions of acceleration itself (Seigle, Wilson, & Little, 2013). Therefore, disseminating research which compares the beliefs of different groups of stakeholders may help to give those with the power to change policy the confidence to do so.

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About the Authors

Dr. Selena Gallagher completed her Ph.D. in gifted education through the University of New England, Australia. She has experience of working with gifted students in Australia, the United Kingdom, China and Thailand, and is involved in working with international schools to develop and implement gifted education and talent development programs. Currently, she is the Challenge and Enrichment Specialist, at the International School Bangkok, Thailand. Her professional and research interests include acceleration and ability grouping as a response to advanced academic ability, the adoption of a talent development philosophy as a whole-school approach, the intersection of giftedness and growth mindset, and expanded conceptions of giftedness.

Dr. Susen Smith is GERRIC Senior Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Gifted & Special Education at the School of Education, University of NSW, Australia. Previously, she was a Lecturer in Learning, Teaching & Gifted Education at UNE and was an Associate Professor for a SpLD & Gifted Education project at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. She completed her PhD on *Differentiating literacy instruction for student engagement* at the University of Newcastle and has extensive experience as an educator, consultant and leader from early childhood to tertiary education, both in Australia and internationally. Her research interests include dynamically differentiating curriculum and pedagogy using cognitive and affective taxonomies for student diversity, including students with giftedness, underachievement and learning difficulties.

Addresses

Dr. Selena Gallagher
International School Bangkok,
39/7 Soi Nichada Thani,
Samakee Road,
Pakkret, Nonthaburi, 11120,
Thailand.

e-Mail: selenag@isb.ac.th

Dr. Susen Smith
GERRIC Senior Research Fellow,
Senior Lecturer in Gifted & Special Education,
School of Education, Faculty of the Arts and Social
Sciences, University of New South Wales,
Sydney NSW 2052 Australia.

e-Mail: susen.smith@unsw.edu.au