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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed underachieving gifted students and their parents in order to: determine the extent and sources of positive and negative attitudes toward educational acceleration, compare the views of parents and students for congruence, and compare the perceptions of successful students and their parents with the views of identified underachieving students and their parents. Data from 15 students and their parents indicated few concerns that acceleration would have negative effects on leadership, academic achievement, or creativity. The overriding concern of parents and students was for the potentially negative effects that acceleration would have on social and emotional development. Eight of the parents indicated that they had considered acceleration for their children, seven of these decided to accelerate their children, and all but one of the seven stated that the decision to accelerate worked out well. Parents and students from the underachieving sample held generally similar perceptions of potential harm compared to a sample of successful students and their parents. (Includes 11 references) (JDD)

Attitudes of Gifted Underachievers Toward Accelerative Options

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A paper persented at the national meeting of the National Association for Gifted Children, Little Rock, AK. (October, 1990).

RUNNING HEAD: Gifted Underachievers

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Programs for gifted and talented students are proposed and justified on a variety of reasons. All of the rationales boil down to the notion that gifted and talented students need opportunities to develop to levels commensurate with expectations of their capabilities. Some programs set goals of developing specific talents. Other programs address the challenge of teaching new skills and knowledge to students that they do not already have. The general objective of gifted education is that capable students will learn more than they would be likely to learn without special educational considerations. Learning more has been interpreted as going further within a curriculum to learn higher level skills than would be addressed in the general education programs. Such acquisitions of higher level skills and greater knowledge are possible, if the student can learn more in less time than less capable -- start sooner and move faster. An alternative interpretation of what learning more should entail is evident in descriptions of enrichment programs. Students in enrichment programs will bore deeper into specific topics and explore issues and problems more broadly than would be possible in the regular education programs.

Not providing instruction to afford capable students the opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge invites problems. Very capable students are considered to be at substantial risk for languishing in academic programs that offer them little challenge and much frustration and boredom. Without academic programs that recognize their achievements and capabilities highly capable students may complacently accept facile, but mediocre

accomplishments (Sisk, 1988, VanTassel-Baska, 1986). More disastrous is that not offering appropriate educational programs may result in the academic failure of capable students.

It is not possible to either progress through skill hierarchies to a higher levels, or to acquire a broader knowledge of issues and topics than would be afforded to the general student population, unless learning proceeds at an accelerated pace there is great hesitation to offer acceleration options to capable students. Perhaps the problem is reflected in the labels for the options. The term enrichment connotes fine things -- the acquisitions of wisdom, culture, and wealth. The term acceleration conjures up images such as racing, passing on curves, and risking a crash. Expressions of concerns that acceleration pushes or hurries children and their development are popular. Unfortunately they are also inaccurate. There are many acceleration options and all amount to administrative recognitions of either prior achievement or prior demonstration of rapid acquisition of increasingly complex skills and knowledge (Southern & Jones, in press).

Indeed there is an abundant concern about the potentially harmful effects of acceleration. Southern, Jones, and Fiscus (1989b) observed that the hesitations of educators are characterized almost exclusively by concerns of the potential harm of acceleration to social and emotional development. Their concerns are not, however, founded from either empirical research or experience. In interviews, none of the educators could cite empirical studies of the effect of acceleration on the adjustment of academically precocious students. Few of the educators in that study had any direct experience with a gifted student who were either admitted to school early or skipped in grade. They based their common sense conjectures of effects of acceleration on their experiences with unselected young-in-grade children, and to a lesser extent on

their readings of school-readiness literature. For critiques of the school-readiness literature and the problems of generalizing from samples of unselected children see Jones and Southern (1987), Jones and Southern (in press) and Robinson and Weimer (in press).

Educators play influential roles in determining whether or not to offer grade skipping or early entrance to academically precocious children. However, it is generally the parents of the child who initiate the referral for acceleration. Compared to educators, parents have fewer opportunities observe the effects of acceleration. Thus, it is likely that compared to educators, parents' expectations for the benefits of acceleration are, at least initially more positive. Students, whom are the ones being accelerated, may also have concerns about the effects of acceleration.

Southern et al. (1989a) surveyed the attitudes of a group of parents and their precocious young adolescents toward acceleration. Neither the parents nor the students expressed concerns that acceleration would present a risk for academic development. Both groups, however, expressed concern with the effects of acceleration on social and emotional development. Even those who strongly advocated acceleration as an option, expressed the opinion that acceleration is only justified in those cases in which the school can not provide adequate instruction. Parents and students who expressed few reservations about acceleration in the abstract were quite hesitant about acceleration applied in their specific cases. Unlike educators, parents of gifted students were inclined to base their estimate of the value of acceleration on their knowledge of their own children. Neither personal acquaintances with acceleration, nor the professional literature of school readiness, nor gifted education influenced their decisions.

The participants in the Southern et al (1989a) study were not seeking or considering acceleration. The students were young adolescents who had already demonstrated considerable success in school. They had been nominated for summer enrichment based upon the achievement and stature in their schools. Different perspectives might be obtained from parents of students, and the students themselves, who were regarded as capable, but who were also having serious academic difficulties.

The purposes of this study were to survey students who were capable, but having academic difficulties, and their parents, to (a) determine the extent and sources of positive and negative attitudes toward acceleration, (b) compare the views of parents and students for congruence, and (c) compare the perceptions of successful students and their parents with the views of identified underachieving students and their parents.

Methods

Sample

Letters were sent to coordinators of gifted education programs and school psychologists in Ohio requesting their assistance in locating underachieving gifted students for participation in a survey of attitudes toward acceleration. Thirty seven coordinators, seven school psychologists and one guidance counselor responded that they would be willing to assist in the selection of students for the study. Packets containing five letters to be mailed to parents of capable low achieving students were sent to each of the educators who indicated that they would help. The parents letter contained a general letter of introduction and a return consent form. Fifteen parents and students agreed to participate in a phone survey.

Procedures

Parents and students were contacted by phone and separately interviewed for approximately fifteen minutes. The parent was interviewed first and the student interview followed. A request was made that students not be present in the room when parents were being interviewed. All interviews were conducted by the same individual, a licensed psychologist and assistant professor in the area of school psychology.

An introduction pertaining to the purpose of the interview and selection for inclusion in the study was provided for each participant. Each person was reminded that participation in the study was strictly voluntary and the results would be kept confidential.Parents and students were also asked if they would volunteer for follow-up contact.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was one which was previously utilized in two studies by Southern et. (1989a, 1989b) which addressed attitudes of school personnel, parents and students toward acceleration and one on attitudes of gifted children and their parents toward acceleration. Acceleration was defined as either early entrance to school or grade skipping Items on the questionnaire sought information that would indicate: (a) the degree to which respondents considered that acceleration presented risks to the academic, creativity, emotional, social. leadership and physical development of gifted students., (b) the basis for the stated opinions was addressed.

Part I of the scale addressed the question if the student had been a candidate for early entrance or grade acceleration . If acceleration had been sought parents were asked for their assessment of the effect of that decision in relation to particular developmental areas: academic growth, creativity,

social adjustment, emotional adjustment, athletics, and leadership. Parents and students were also asked whether there was potential harm from acceleration and from remaining in grade with age level peers, and when harmful effects of acceleration were likely to become manifest.

Part II consisted of a 20 item Likert scale on which the respondents rated the extent to which they agreed with posited effects of acceleration. The stems of the items were derived from assertions claimed in the research literature about presumed harm from the process for gifted and talented students. All items were phrased so that agreement reflected negative concerns. In previous studies the scale had obtained a Cronbach reliability coefficient between .90 and .95.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study indicate that there is a strong expectation that students should remain with same age peers, if they are to enjoy the greatest probability of normal social and emotional development. The students who participated in this survey were all experiencing difficulties in school and some were failing to make adequate progress.

Expectations of Harm

The overriding concern of parents and students was for the potentially negative effects that acceleration would have on social and emotional development. Analysis of variance did not reveal a difference in the levels of apprehension between parents and students. Across both groups there were few concerns expressed that acceleration would have negative effects on either leadership, academic achievement, or creativity.

Parents were almost evenly split in their opinions of the risks for harm for both early entrance and grade skipping. A relatively high percentage of

students of parents considered that there was little risk in remaining in grade with age level peers (see Table 1).

Table 1 expectations of harm and acceleration options

expect harm	early ent.	grade skip	remain in grade
yes	46.15%	38.462%	25%
no	53.84%	46.14%	58.33%
DK	0%	15.38%	16.66%

Experience with Acceleration

Eight of the 14 parents indicated that they had considered acceleration for their children. Seven parents decided to accelerate their children. Of those parents all but one indicated that the decision to accelerate worked out well. One indicated that the results had been poor. In the interviews both the mother and daughter attributed the problems to being young and not fitting in with others in junior high school years. The failures of both parents and students to attribute the achievement difficulties to acceleration were surprising. Parents have relatively little influence on the instruction that their children receive, but they sometimes can affect placements. It is tempting to consider that if parents make only a few major decisions about their children's programs, then they may regard those decisions as pivotal. Reports of negative results of early school entrance have causally attributed a host of problems to being young in grade. The problems range from under achievement, to grade retention (DiPasquale, Moule, & Flewelling, 1980;

Orbzut, Nelson, & Orbzut, 1984), to classification as learning disabled (Maddux, 1983) to suicide (Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986). Parents appear to have been less casual in their attributions.

The relatively high proportion of accelerated students in this sample suggests that their having been accelerated was a factor in their selection by school representatives. It should not be considered to be an indication of the negative effects of acceleration having actually been played out.

Parents who considered early entrance for their children were less apprehensive about the general effects of acceleration compared to parents who did not consider the option (df 1,13 F 7.089, p=.01; see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

Table 2 consideration of early entrance and total score

group	n	x	SD
considered	5	39.4	14.467
not considered	10	56.9	10.723

They were less concerned about the potential for negative effects of early entrance on academic achievement (see Table 3) and social/emotional development (see Table 4) compared to parents who did not consider acceleration.

Table 3 consideration of early entrance and academic risk

group	n	x	SD	F	probability
considered	5	8.6	3.435	12.869	.0033
did not consider	10	14.7	2.946		

Table 4 consideration of early entrance and risk to social/emotional dev.

group	n	x	SD	F	probability
considered	5	20.4	11.78	7.094	.0195
did not consider	10	33.2	7,036		

There was no significant difference with regard to how parents of either group perceived the threat of early entrance to the development of leadership. They perceived the risk to be small.

Unlike the educators in the survey by Southern et al (1989b), personal experience with early entrance (self or other family member) was not related to perceptions of risk to their child. In that respect parents of underachieving students' responses shared the same perspective as parents of successful gifted and talented students. They based their perceptions on their knowledge of their own child.

When Would Harm Occur?

Parents and students tended to differ in their expectations of when harm would be most likely to occur, but the differences were not statistically significant (chi square with continuity correction = p = .0881).

Comparison with Successful Parents and Students

An analysis of variance failed to reveal significant differences for total scores on the questionnaires between parents and students from the summer governors program and underachieving students and their parents. A difference between the groups was not observed for items related to risks to academic achievement. Ratings of items related to academic risk indicated that respondents did not anticipate serious problems with academic achievement as a result of acceleration. Differences between groups on the effects of acceleration with emotional and social adaptation approached but failed to reach statistical significance (df 3,171, F = 2.373, p =.072 emotional adjustment; F = 2.393, p =.0702 social adjustment). In the analyses of perceived risks to both emotional and social adjustments the students tended to express greater apprehension about the value of acceleration than their parents. Underachieving students tended express greater reservation compared to more successful peers. A difference that reached statistical significance concerned presumed threat of acceleration to the development of leadership. Again parents were less concerned with the possibility for negative effects on leadership than students. Successful students were, however, considered the potential for leadership status to be threatened by acceleration compared to underachieving students.

Although the parents of both underachieving and successful gifted students tended to have a cautious regard for acceleration, a one factor ANOVA revealed that parents of underachieving students, however, were significantly more likely to recommend conservative acceleration policies than parents of high achieving gifted students (df 2,66, F = 4.887, p = .01). Responses of underachieving students did not differ significantly form their parents.

Table 5 parent attitudes toward conservative acceleration policies

group	n	x	SD
parents of successful gifted students.	41	3.341	1.334
parents of underachievers	10	14.7	2.946

A possible explanation for that difference is that while both groups suspect that the is a risk involved with acceleration, parents of successful gifted students also have an appreciation for the difficulties of matching their children's curricula with their children's demonstrated levels of achievement. Conservative acceleration policies are not seen as serving academically precocious students. Parents of underachieving gifted students are apt to be frustrated with educational offerings but they may not see acceleration as a solution for their problems.

The ratings on the questionnaires indicated that across the different domains of adjustment, parents and students from both the successful and underachieving samples held generally similar perceptions of potential harm. Some differences between groups were, however, observed and appeared to indicate that members in the different groups had somewhat different concerns about acceleration. Parents tended to have been less apprehensive than students about the potential for harm from acceleration. The successful and underachieving students tended to differ from each other in ways that reflected the differences in their statuses. While successful students saw both the risks and potential benefits from acceleration, they were not enthusiastic about its being chosen as an option for them personally. They were more sensitive to the notion that remaining with age level peers

could be harmful for gifted children than underachieving students. Successful students also saw greater potential for harm to leadership (df 3,174, F = 8.619, p = .0001) and athletics (df 1,78, F = 6.376, p = .0136) compared to underachievers. Perhaps, the students in the governor's school are probably not typical of the general population of gi ed students. They were generally well adjusted, and talented in: academics, leadership and frequently athletics. It appears, however, that the hesitations successful students have about accelerative options reflect the fact that they have been successful in school. They like school, and they are aware of and value their talents. Underachieving students tend to be generally conservative about the use of options that increase their risks, but they do not seem to base those sentiments do not appear to be rationally considered.

In summary there appears gifted students and their parents, whether they are high achieveres or low achievers, are apt to be generally apprehensive about the consequences of acceleration. An offering of the option is not apt to be enthusiastically embraced by the students or their parents.

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