

Re-location or Re-placement ? Using Grade-skipping to achieve a more appropriate placement.

By Helen Dudeney

The pathway children take through the school system will be partly dictated by their unique needs and partly by how the parents and teachers in their lives choose to respond to these needs. While for the bulk of the student population this pathway looks very similar, for those students with atypical needs, such as children with gifts and talents, it is likely to be different. This article will highlight some of the issues or questions that must be considered in designing the most suitable pathway for a gifted child.

There is a wealth of research and anecdotal literature detailing the many programming provisions for gifted learners (Dudeney, 2005; M. Gross & Sleaf, 2000; Lloyd & Bailey, 1998; Rogers, 2002). However, this article will look specifically at the issue of appropriate placement. Once such appropriate placement has been made, the various programming and instructional strategies recommended for gifted students, including differentiated curriculum and pacing strategies such as curriculum compacting and telescoping, are still vital for a successful journey through the students' school education (M. Gross & Sleaf, 2000; Rogers, 2002).

Appropriate placement means **finding the most suitable school, class or grade for a students' identified needs and abilities.** Two key times when decisions about this may occur are at entry to a school and then when considering grade advancement or grade skipping.

Starting School and Talent Development

There is much discussion in both educational literature and popular press regarding the ages at which children should start formal schooling (Crosser, 1998; Dockett & Perry, 2001; Katz, 2000). Over the recent decade particularly, there has been a growing trend to 'hold children back', especially boys, either in response to their levels of development or in some cases to 'give them an advantage'. Parents often perceive that being the eldest in the class will automatically give their child an advantage and help them perform at the top of the class. Principals have been reported to advise that boys should be held back so they will not have the dilemma of being too small or physically immature for sporting activities. However, it is important to understand that age alone is unlikely to lead to this desired advantage. The child's cognitive, social, motor and emotional development levels are far more likely

to influence performance and success. In the area of cognitive ability, a student with advanced ability being matched with younger classmates of average ability may in fact lead to the opposite outcome.

Effective teaching should target a level that slightly exceeds that understanding is already mastered. **Work that is too easy is likely to produce boredom, and work that is too difficult cannot be understood.** 'Vygotsky calls this 'target area' the 'zone of proximal development' "(M. U. M. Gross, 1995) Being at the top of the class without needing to expend any effort or actually complete any challenging work may give some short term satisfaction but in the long term it is 'short changing' the child. Clearly, this is because they are not being given the opportunity to develop important learning skills, such as perseverance, academic risk taking, and even the most basic understanding that learning and work are actually linked.

Without these experiences and skills it is unlikely that talent will be developed (Gagne, 1997,2004). Likewise, just being older is unlikely to be the answer for a child who has a weakness (such as a specific learning difficulty) that will impact on their school performance. The nature of such weaknesses would need to be identified, understood and catered for.

However, despite knowing that their child is academically ready for formal schooling parents of bright children often make the decision about when to start school based more on the emotional and social maturity of their child (Bailey, 1993). If the child is currently in a *prior to school environment*, be this a formal pre school or within the home, that can well cater for their needs and understands their high sensitivities, personality traits and cognitive abilities then it makes a lot of sense to continue with it. Smaller environments with a higher ratio of adults to children should be able to provide greater flexibility to respond to individual needs. In saying this I would also suggest that for those bright children who show the level of development similar to others their own age starting on time is suitable. But for **some children with more advanced development, starting school early, under the Board of Studies Early Entry Guidelines, can be the most suitable placement.** As both rates of development (eg., general intelligence) and the acquisition of specific skills (eg., maths) can vary greatly amongst individuals at any given age (M. U. M. Gross, 1995), it is important to review each child's situation.

Placement Evaluation

Because each child is unique, as are the particular learning environments they enter, each case needs to be considered in an informed way. Whatever choice is made, **it is important for parents to continue evaluating how well the placement matches their child's changing needs.** This evaluation may lead to a continuation of current placement, a change in class placement, or even a change in school. The last two options should not be undertaken lightly. Much research and discussion should determine an informed decision.

Of these three options (that is, entering early, grade skipping, age placement) the idea of changing grade placement, that is grade acceleration (grade-skipping) is the one that creates the greatest debate. This provision for a gifted learner is one of the most widely researched worldwide, and it is also a provision that the research shows to be the most beneficial and, yet, it is probably the least implemented (Bailey, 1993; Proctor, Black, & Feldhusen, 1995; Rogers, 2002)

In my experience the resistance or refusal to consider this strategy is most often based on the parent's or teacher's emotional reaction to the idea. That is, a belief that it can't possibly be 'right' to have students grouped with others of a different age, a year or so older. Interestingly this doesn't seem to come up when a child is 'held back' and so may be up to 1 ½ years older than the youngest child in the grade, whose birthday is 31st July and who started at the age of 4 ½.

A full discussion of acceleration is available in *A Nation Deceived* (www.nationdeceived.org) but at this point I'd like to introduce another placement option – re-location or re-placement. This is where a student is grade accelerated (grade-skipped), but only so that they are back in the grade they would have been in had they not started late, or been 'held back'. The reasons for choosing when the child started school were presumably made as a result of considering his needs and development levels at that time. I suggest that the same type of consideration needs to be applied as to whether a child re-locates to a higher grade.

Placement Review

The first aspect of such a review about placement would need to consider cognitive ability and demonstration of grade outcomes.

If a student is gifted and has already mastered all the material and met the outcomes of the grade they are currently in then to meet their needs in that classroom will require the teacher to differentiate every aspect of their curriculum.

This is an impractical request of already overworked teachers.

Such an issue is compounded by the fact that **the pace of learning for a gifted child is likely to be faster than that of the average learners.** Such children often require only 1 – 3 repetitions for understanding and mastery, compared to 6 – 8 for average learners and the difference in ability grows wider with age. For example, a child with an IQ of 130 is likely to be operating at an 8 year old level when they are 6. However, by the time the child is 10 they are operating at a 13+ year old level, (i.e. about 1/3 above).

Additionally, it means that the student wouldn't have an intellectual peer group with which to share the ideas and learning.

Cooperative enjoyment and sharing of learning and knowledge is what consolidates and challenges the student and makes life at school more enjoyable (Shannon, 1997). If aspects (such as motor skill development, social competence, or separation anxiety of the child's development) that led to the child starting school later than was possible have become of less importance, then meeting the child's cognitive needs can be given greater priority in deciding on the best grade placement. Perhaps it is useful to think of the process as not pushing the child forward, but rather **taking off the brakes** so the individual can proceed at their own speed.

Value of Peer Relationships

When looking at this I suggest that aspects of social behaviour and emotional responses need to be considered in light of, firstly, the social environment provided for the student and secondly, the emotional profile that is 'normal for gifted'. Too often, a child's difficulty in establishing social networks and developing social competence is cited as a reason for not considering advancing them through the school system, and yet the fact that a suitable peer group is not available to them (they then spend most of their time with chronological peers rather than true peers) is overlooked.

If one doesn't have people with whom one can share ideas, interests, or values it is difficult to establish friendships and to practise skills that lead to social competence. Additionally, within the gifted population there are many introverts, who will only need a few close friends and may be overwhelmed by too many people (Silverman, 1993; Sword, 2001, 2002; Vaughan, 2004).

The introverted personality type and the emotional intensity associated with giftedness is likely to mean that reactions and responses to different situations and ideas will be more extreme than would be expected of most children (Pierchowski, 2002; Sword, 2001). If we wait till this intensity of reaction and feeling goes away, some of these children will be in primary school for life.

Tools to Help Determine Suitability

To assist in deciding on whether re-location/ re-placement is suitable for your child or student, the *Iowa Acceleration Scale* (1998) could be used. This tool is designed to 'guide educators in making important decisions regarding whether or not particular students are good candidates for whole-grade acceleration (grade-skipping) (Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplik, & Lipscomb, 1998. p.vi) The *Scale* gives a level of object information based on an analysis of the major factors relating to the decision including prior ability & achievement test results, aptitude levels, current performance, developmental factors, interpersonal skills, attitude and support and school and academic factors to assist with the decision.

Also, the Board of Studies *Guidelines for Accelerated Progress* (www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/manuals/pdf_doc/accelerated_guide.pdf) give clear information against which to judge a decision for grade-skipping. Likewise the inventories/checklists in *Re-forming Gifted Education – Matching the Program to the Child* (Rogers, 2002) are very practical and useful tools. Each of these resources allow the parents, teachers, and school to work in partnership to consider what is the best option for the child at any particular time.

Forget Chronological Age

If re-location instead of acceleration (grade-skipping) is the option being considered, I suggest that **the issue of chronological age as part of the thinking process be avoided**. This is because the child will actually still be within the normal age range for the grade, not young for the grade as is the case with true grade acceleration or grade-skipping. In actual fact the child is just being moved to where they would have been had a particular set of needs not required accommodation when they started school.

At the end of the day if a gifted student spends one less year in the formal pre-tertiary school system it merely reflects the precocity of giftedness, that is they learn earlier, faster, or more easily (Winner, 2000). Such children should be given the opportunity to cover curriculum more quickly and in a shorter period of time, as occurs in curriculum compacting, telescoping and grade-skipping (Rogers, 2000).

Consider Wisely

As with all decisions regarding acceleration the parents, teachers and students need to be involved. If the school believes that a child's re-location is recommended – consider it wisely, just as the information provided by the research, or the school, or perhaps pre-school was undoubtedly part of informing your decision to start them late originally.

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