



1:ACCELERATION

What do we mean by acceleration?

When considering the possible use of acceleration in your school, first ensure that colleagues are agreed on common definitions.

This launch pad includes sections on:-

- ◆ Definitions
- ◆ Enrichment
- ◆ Accelerated learning
- ◆ Why acceleration is an important focus in the context of the education of gifted and talented pupils
- ◆ The key issues to consider
- ◆ What you might do at school level
- ◆ Recommended reading.

You may wish to read the text selectively.

ACCELERATION

Acceleration is a system of allowing pupils an express route through the usual pace of schooling. It is also known as fast tracking, and, in the USA, as grade skipping. It can take two forms:

- Acceleration of cohorts. For example, pupils may be allowed to take one or more GCSEs early and thus to move on, in advance of their peers, to A-level work and university modules. When this involves obtaining an early qualification, it is known as fast tracking.
- Acceleration of individuals, frequently known as accelerated learning. For example, they may be allowed to work with older pupils for some sections of the timetable or in some subjects.

The process of acceleration, depending on its design, can thus be one form of enrichment.

ENRICHMENT

Enrichment, as Teare (1997) points out, has been variously described as

- 'A higher quality of work than the norm for the age group;
- Work covered in more depth;
- A broadening of the learning experience;
- Promoting a higher level of thinking;
- The inclusion of additional subject areas and/or activities;
- The use of supplementary materials beyond the normal range of resources.'

Two of these descriptions in particular, 'A higher quality of work...' and 'Promoting a higher level of thinking', may be said to overlap with the concept of acceleration.

The Education and Employment Committee (1999) defines the term **extension** as 'the pursuit of greater depth, either within each subject or *through faster than average progression through a subject to reach a higher level*'. To this extent, acceleration could also be said to overlap with the term 'extension'.

Acceleration should not be confused with the other use of the term, **accelerated learning**.

ACCELERATED LEARNING

Accelerated learning (see Smith ,1996 and 1998) refers to a methodology, and is term used for a number of practical approaches to learning. These draw on the latest research about the functions of the brain, the importance of motivation and self-esteem, different kinds of intelligence, and the retention of information. The process places the needs of learners at the centre of all learning and aims to allow them to fulfil their full potential. As such, it is argued, accelerated learning should be applied to all pupils, not just the more able.

WHY IS ACCELERATION AN IMPORTANT FOCUS IN THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS?

- The Government White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (1997) says: that 'Accelerated learning, based on the latest understanding of how people learn, [has] enabled groups of pupils to progress at greater speed and with deeper understanding.'
- The Employment and Education Committee (1999) agreed that acceleration, properly managed, could work, and that, indeed, it could be 'the best solution for particular individuals'. Some witnesses to the Committee strongly advocated acceleration as a general policy in school, as long as it was administered flexibly. Some schools, including several in the independent sector, argued to the Committee (1999) that a greater challenge for able pupils was fast tracking, in the sense of allowing pupils to take GCSE and A level early. They felt that the GCSE, in its current form, was not challenging enough.
- By definition, some gifted and talented pupils at least are characterised by a tendency to develop and learn at a faster rate than their peers, Some would argue

that this applies to all such pupils. Acceleration is thus suited to the needs of these pupils.

- It is also argued that at least some highly able pupils become bored, impatient and even disaffected if they are obliged to undertake lessons at the same rate or level as their peers.
- Schools may feel under pressure, for example from parents or from high-profile cases in the media, to consider acceleration programmes.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

- Before the school makes a decision to initiate or revise systems of acceleration, it should canvass pupils and parents and take their wishes into account. Some may choose, for legitimate reasons, not to be involved.
- Highly able pupils are a disparate group, and it is unlikely that any one solution, i.e. acceleration, or a particular system of acceleration, will suit all their needs. The school should carefully consider their aptitude for an accelerated learning programme. There is also the question of whether or not they are actively engaged and motivated in their current settings. If they are, acceleration may not be necessary; other forms of differentiation, including enrichment and **extension** activities, may be more appropriate.
- In many subjects, for example English, the development of children's ability is not totally or even largely linear. In such subjects, there are other ways of achieving pupils' potential than through accelerated pace or 'vertical' challenge. Examples of these are 'depth', 'breadth', and the use of additional resources.
- The majority of 'able' pupils are able only in a single subject, in a small number of subjects, or even in some aspects of one subject, e.g. dance within P.E. Planning and timetabling for models of acceleration which are still flexible enough for individual pupils can therefore be complex.
- Pupils may develop late, their abilities may 'plateau', or they may progress at variable rates throughout their school lives. Any system of acceleration must thus be 'modular' if possible, and must be regularly reviewed. It needs to be evaluated to see whether it is suitable and effective, so that pupils might join or leave the programme as appropriate.
- Unless acceleration programmes are expertly designed, there is a danger that pupils involved in them may miss out on some key concepts, knowledge or skills specified within the National Curriculum. On the other hand, the 'access statement' in the National Curriculum Orders allows pupils the chance to work in a Key Stage beyond that expected for their peers. In the case of individuals, a detailed programme will be needed for each pupil.
- If individuals work with older pupils some of the time they may miss class lessons in other subjects, which will need to be made up elsewhere. Timetabling constraints are likely to make it hard to accommodate large numbers of individuals in this way.
- It is vital to take account of pupils' personal, physical, social and emotional development. Children's learning needs may be satisfied by moving them to work with older pupils, but their need for support in other ways could increase. They may be in a more challenging social setting, or surrounded by pupils who are more physically or emotionally mature. This need is likely to be particularly acute at points

of transition from one institution to another. Ideally, the value placed on personal and academic factors should be balanced when any decisions are taken.

If acceleration is introduced or revised there will inevitably be repercussions for the peer cohort, other cohorts, and teachers. For example, if a fast track cohort is identified and placed in one class, the numbers in other classes of pupils of the same age may have to increase. If an accelerated group stays within an existing class, the rest of the class may struggle, finding the pace too swift. Teachers who feel expert in teaching to their usual syllabus may nonetheless feel ill equipped to teach it in a telescoped form, or to teach 'beyond the syllabus'.

- It is not an easy matter to evaluate the effectiveness of acceleration programmes, and there have been few, if any, with a claim to comprehensiveness and rigour. This is because there are so many variables and aspects to take into account. Obviously, programmes should be evaluated for their impact on pupils involved in them, though this in itself a complicated matter. The evaluation should include comparison of the pupils' learning progress, response to acceleration, and personal development with that of their non-accelerated peers. But such programmes should also be evaluated for their effects on every other aspect of school provision: their effects on pupils who are not accelerated; their cost-effectiveness; and whether the design of the programme is working as intended, in fulfilling short-term targets for pupils and long-term goals for the school.
- No acceleration programme should be put into practice without a clear 'whole-school' understanding of its targets and goals, and the inclusion of a regular cycle of review and evaluation.
- The Employment and Education Committee (1999) reported that 'there was a preference among the majority for forms of accelerated learning [in the sense of allowing individuals to work with older pupils in certain subjects, or for part of the school week] over acceleration. Many witnesses felt that extension and enrichment... were in most cases more appropriate.'
- Freeman (1998) offers a useful cautionary checklist of the essential criteria for acceleration:

'Only accelerate when:

- There is no pressure to accelerate.
- The pupil is in the top 2 per cent of intelligence.
- The receiving teacher feels positive about it.
- The parents feel positive about it.
- The pupil is advanced in the subject area.
- The pupil is emotionally stable.
- The pupil understands what is involved.
- The pupil wants to be accelerated.'

WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?

When acceleration is being considered, it is useful to take a real or hypothetical case study and use this as a focus for discussion. By this means you are able to unpick the advantages and disadvantages of acceleration rather than investigate large-scale change at once. For example:

- Consider the circumstances of an individual pupil, real or imagined. Establish whether you are thinking of someone who has 'all-round' ability or ability in a particular area of the curriculum. Follow through the repercussions of involving that pupil in acceleration, in terms of the effects on him/her, on similar individuals for whom one might argue a case, on peers and older cohorts, and on teachers, parents, and the whole school.
- Alternatively, undertake a similar exercise with a sample cohort which is perhaps 'able' in a subject that is often considered as particularly suitable for acceleration, e.g. mathematics, a modern language. Again, follow through all the likely consequences of accelerating such a cohort into an older cohort. These are likely to include the effect on class sizes and composition; the new kinds of planning required for teaching the accelerated cohort; the social and personal effects on the cohort, on their 'same-age' peers, and on older cohorts; and the potential long-term effects of early entry for tests examinations, where relevant.
- Above all, if you wish to 'trial' acceleration, follow Freeman's checklist (1998) above, whether you are involving individuals or small groups. Ensure that the exercise is publicised as a pilot, and allow plenty of flexibility. Build in regular opportunities for monitoring and review, and devise clear criteria by which to evaluate the programme's success. Relevant factors will be the allowance to be made for adapting the programme itself, e.g. 'speeding up' or 'slowing down' the pace; inserting or omitting units of work; and giving pupils chances to leave the programme altogether, or to undertake it in a modified form.

RECOMMENDED READING

Callahan, C.M. and Hunsaker, S.L., 1991. Evaluation of acceleration programmes.

In: W.T. Southern and E.D. Jones, ed. The Academic Acceleration of Gifted Children. New York: Teachers College.

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Eyre, D., 1997. *Able Children in Ordinary Schools.* London: David Fulton.

Freeman, J., 1998. *Educating the Very Able: Current International Research.* London: OFSTED.

Smith, A., 1996. *Accelerated Learning in the Classroom.* Stafford: Network Educational Press.

Smith, A., 1998. *Accelerated Learning in Practice.* Stafford: Network Educational Press.

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In: W.T. Southern and E.D. Jones, ed. The Academic Acceleration of Gifted Children.
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