Andrew Kalashnikov

Mrs. Small

Humanities

10 October 2024

Soaring High or Falling Down: The Case for Academic Acceleration

Imagine sitting down in a class every day and learning things you've seen before again and again. At some point you would zone out, as no one wants to listen to the same information on repeat, no matter how studious or dedicated the student is. After many years of sitting in these kinds of classes, you may develop a habit of zoning out and still doing well, harming you when the level finally becomes appropriately challenging. The students that come out of this system have learned less than they could have, representing an enormous waste of potential. The presence of accelerated programs varies widely across the United States, with Massachusetts having extraordinarily few such programs, while nearly all schools in Texas have them. This stems more from the important observation that accelerated programs are often viewed as being more supportive of the goals of social efficiency and mobility rather than democratic equality. Although academically accelerated students may sometimes face difficulties and acceleration may not be perfectly equal, acceleration should be more widely implemented as it allows gifted students to be appropriately challenged and has a positive effect on the success of the country.

A frequent critique of academic acceleration has been the social and academic issues of accelerated students; however, many opinions and studies argue that acceleration has been shown to provide academic benefits without negative social implications for the vast majority of participating students. There is a wide variety of critiques and fears from parents, teachers, and administrators about the issues that accelerated students may face. Some of the critiques that are often brought up include fears from an article by educational professionals that "children who are accelerated will not adjust well socially to the new class … teachers see non-acceleration as the safer option" (Colangelo). The article also discusses other downsides such as the idea that students are being pushed forward, and potential issues with an incomplete grasp on the material before being accelerated. To counter this idea, a longitudinal study by Vanderbilt was conducted, which found that "participants did not suffer from a decline in psychological well-being at age 50 due to educational acceleration at an earlier age" (Brasher), and this result demonstrates that there was no psychological damage due to acceleration which is reasonable when considering that stand-out individuals can struggle at times. The argument of a teacher's desire for a safer choice is vanquished in Colangelo's article: "Choosing not to accelerate is itself an intervention. The evidence indicates that when children's academic and social needs are not met, the result is boredom and disengagement from school" (Colangelo). The argument about missed material is also flimsy when it is noted that these accelerated students usually learn at a faster pace and thus should not have issues catching up if there is in fact any gaps in their knowledge. We

can clearly see that all the commonly mentioned downsides of acceleration are extremely flimsy at best and completely nonsensical at worst. As demonstrated by the evidence, the downsides associated with accelerated programs are superficial, while the benefits for students shine through clearly.

Another critique by many commentators has been that gifted education is often inequitable and favors privileged student; however, evidence suggests that such programs provide as much if not more benefit to underprivileged students as they give access to more advanced learning within the public education system. The fundamental issues at the heart of this argument against accelerated programs are the high percentage of white and Asian students in such programs relative to that of other groups. For example, the New York Civil Liberties Union stated in one of its pieces on the NYC gifted program that "more than 75 percent of students in G&T programs are white or Asian, and it's obvious the status quo is unacceptable" (Miller). This represents a very legitimate concern with accelerated programs, as more privileged students are more likely to learn the required materials to enter accelerated programs. However, it is important to note that the cause of these differences is far deeper than the presence of accelerated study programs and is a consequence of larger issues within a massive and diverse city. Removing accelerated programs may in fact worsen this divide, as according to work done by the Pioneer Institute, a public policy thinktank: "wealthier parents responded to the new math curriculum by transferring their children to private schools or enrolling them in after-school tutoring programs like Russian Math and Kumon, both moves likely to increase income-

based educational gaps rather than depress them" (Iredell). This clearly demonstrates the logical conclusion that removing opportunities for students to advance in public education most directly affects those who are unable to afford private education, the very people who it was meant to help. Similarly, a broadening of accelerated programs in a school district in Texas demonstrated similar levels of benefit across various groups, demonstrating the all-around effectiveness of acceleration. Together, these reasons provide unmistakable evidence contrary to the accusations of inequality and show the benefits of such programs for underprivileged individuals.

Accelerated education also has an incredible benefit for the country as a whole, as it significantly increases the number of highly qualified individuals entering the workforce, boosting the competitiveness of the United States on the world stage, and potentially counteracting the degradation in the standard of education over the past couple of decades. The existence of acute issues with STEM education is well documented and, "the latest national tests show students' math performance declining across the country, even as foundational knowledge in the STEM fields becomes ever more important" (Wright). Even compared to other countries, the United States' once vaunted education system is falling behind: "PISA paints an even worse picture for high-achieving high school students in the U.S. … total of forty jurisdictions. The United States comes in thirty-fourth, behind all participants in Asia and every participant in Europe except Spain, Turkey, and Greece" (Wright). Furthermore, the scores on this test meant to detect above average students, have a strong correlation with economic output, "'10 percentage point increase in the

share of top-performing students' within a country 'is associated with 1.3 percentage points higher annual growth' of that country's economy" (Wright). The link between higher more acceleration and stronger gifted students is also well supported by a number of studies, such as the following quote from the Pioneer Institute about Cambridge Public Schools, "Since the reduced math curriculum's introduction … Those from public middle schools are nearly one-third less likely to join the advanced math track" (Iredell). The converse is also true, as when the accelerated program in a large Texas school district was expanded, the results were "substantial increases in the number of students taking Algebra 1 before high school, from 20 percent to 60 percent" (Iredell). These statistics force policymakers to confront a fact that seems trivial; programs that accelerate students do in fact improve their performance and learning. Altogether, this argument establishes a strong link between a nation's economic success and the opportunities for acceleration of gifted students, giving anyone an obvious reason to push for expanding acceleration.

This paper demonstrates that even though academically accelerated students may sometimes face difficulties, and acceleration may not be perfectly equal, it should be more widely implemented as it allows gifted students to be appropriately challenged and has a positive effect on the success of the country. Next time, when you hear about a district phasing out an accelerated program, think about its ramifications and hopefully act. Or if you see that schools do not provide an opportunity for children to accelerate, be the person to take the first step towards encouraging the enormous bureaucratic behemoth to shift its stance.

Bibliography:

Brasher, Joan. “Academic Acceleration Has No Negative Long-Term Effects on the Psychological Well-Being of Gifted Youth.” *Vanderbilt University*, 3 Aug. 2020, news.vanderbilt.edu/2020/08/03/academic-acceleration-has-no-negative-long-term-effects-on-the-psychological-well-being-of-gifted-youth/.

Colangelo, Nicholas. “12 Reasons Why Acceleration Isn’t Accepted in America.” *Davidson Institute*, 28 Apr. 2004, www.davidsongifted.org/gifted-blog/12-reasons-why-acceleration-isnt-accepted-in-america/.

Iredell, Jude. “The War on Math in Boston-Area School Boards | News Latest News.” *Pioneer Institute*, 25 July 2023, pioneerinstitute.org/news/the-war-on-math-in-boston-area-school-boards/. Accessed 26 Sept. 2024.

Miller, Johanna. “How NYC’s Gifted Programs Make Segregation Worse.” *NYCLU*, 2 Aug. 2024, www.nyclu.org/commentary/how-nycs-gifted-programs-make-segregation-worse

Robinson, Ann, and Sidney M. Moon. “A National Study of Local and State Advocacy in Gifted Education.” *Gifted Child Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 1, Jan. 2003, pp. 8–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/001698620304700103.

Wright, Brandon. “Attacking Gifted Education Is Bad Policy and Bad Politics.” *The Thomas B. Fordham Institute*, fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/attacking-gifted-education-bad policy-and-bad-politics.

Wright, Brandon. “The Case for Gifted Education.” *The Thomas B. Fordham Institute*, 6 Dec. 2022, fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/case gifted-education.