

# Acceleration

for Gifted Learners, K–5

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# Introduction

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*No bird flies too high if he soars with his own wings.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

**A**t one time or another, most adults have had the experience of sitting in a classroom only to discover that they already know most of the material to be covered. They try to attend to the teacher but soon drift off, doodling in the margins of their empty notebook, staring at the clock. When the meeting concludes, they reflect on their mistake in attending and make adjustments accordingly. If it's a one-time workshop, they simply go on to more interesting things, glad not to repeat the experience. If they've signed up for a series, they either withdraw or find a more appropriate class.

No one would consider it unnatural or risky for an adult to seek alternatives to an obvious mismatch between his or her level of mastery and the level of a class. Yet, children with similar challenges are expected to endure not just one or a series of mismatches, but often 12 long years of them. At some point, we have to ask, "Should children be forced to endure for years a situation that most adults would find intolerable even for a limited period of time?" If an adult with a gift for language and a basic understanding of French decided to try an advanced class, would any of us say, "Why are you in such a hurry?" or "You might feel out of sync with the students in Advanced French"?

These questions lead to a more important question: Doesn't the term "acceleration" reflect an outsider view—the perspective of an establishment that must defend standardized education as the norm? Those of us who've been listening to gifted children and what *they* say about acceleration know that any advancement in their learning situation makes them feel more normal and freer to be themselves. A central theme of this book is that acceleration restores gifted children to *their* normal state. As such, acceleration embraces all aspects of gifted students' lives—their intellect, creativity, idiosyncrasies, learning styles, social and emotional well-being, sensibilities, and moral and spiritual development. For example, a gifted child who joins a cluster group may be timid and withdrawn, may have a special interest in architecture, may worry about the fate of stray dogs and cats in her town, and may enjoy writing political satire in her spare time. What special needs will an accelerated learning option address for this child? How can her passion for architecture and writing be appropriately challenged? How can her love for animals be channeled through a study of the humane movement in America? How can an accelerated learning option help her to take risks and emerge out of her shell?

We have written *Acceleration for Gifted Learners, K–5* in response to a growing recognition in the field that the educational system in the United States has disastrously

shortchanged our schools' brightest students. In October of 2004, the publication of *The Templeton Report on Acceleration* (Colangelo et al., 2004) alerted the field to the urgent need for nationwide change. In partial response to the No Child Left Behind policy, this acclaimed compilation of research on the widely documented need for acceleration in our schools and the entrenched attitudes and policies that resist it has stirred a healthy debate, in both the gifted and general education communities. The findings of this report have laid a solid foundation for new thinking on accelerated learning and have opened the door to a wide variety of ways and means to accomplish its aims.

## HOW THIS BOOK APPROACHES ACCELERATION

*Acceleration for Gifted Learners, K-5* has two goals. First, it aims to broaden ideas about what acceleration is, what forms it can take, and how it can best serve the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of gifted students. As *A Nation Deceived* (Colangelo et al., 2004) makes clear, dispelling false assumptions about acceleration is critical to reversing the trend of neglect that has hindered the growth of thousands of gifted children in this country. A key misconception addressed by this book is the tendency to equate acceleration with grade-skipping. In practice, the form that acceleration takes depends on variables unique to each student. A young gifted child may read at an eighth-grade level and talk like a high schooler, but lack the skill to organize his thoughts on paper. An advanced bilingual student may be eligible to skip a grade academically, but may feel a deep cultural bond with her bilingual friends. Some gifted students are academically, emotionally, and socially ready (and eager) to skip a grade; others are not. But *all* require acceleration in some form.

By broadening the concept of acceleration, *Acceleration for Gifted Learners, K-5* casts a wider net over a larger population of gifted students, including underserved populations (e.g., multicultural, multiracial, young, highly gifted, highly creative). This book aims to show that (1) accelerated learning within classrooms should always be available to any student able to meet the challenge (grade-skipping is another matter); (2) accelerated learning options should always address the whole child—abilities, problem areas, culture, learning preferences, social-emotional life, and so forth. In practice, this means that a child who appears average on the basis of testing or some other criteria should not be excluded from acceleration in the class if he proves his ability and mastery in other ways. On the other end of the spectrum, a child who has already skipped a grade should likewise not be barred from acceleration in the new class if she shows by her performance that she is ready for a larger challenge.

Through examples of real classrooms, children, teachers, and parents, this book provides a rich journey through the larger landscape of acceleration. As authors and practitioners, we have focused our attention on the fundamental question of how our gifted students—*all* our gifted students in all their variety—can receive the benefits of acceleration in ways that meet their needs. This question has led us to a consideration of many topics, from the larger meanings and implications of acceleration to an in-depth focus on appropriate content; to learning standards, assessment, differentiation, creativity; and to the vast territory of the social-emotional world of the gifted. What readers gain in this journey is an understanding of the complexity of acceleration but also the potential for variety and flexibility in its design and application.

Second, *Acceleration for Gifted Learners, K-5* is meant to be a kind of guidebook on acceleration, offering a wealth of information and suggestions on what teachers, administrators, counselors, and families can do, in practical terms, to make accelerated learning a reality for gifted students. In its pages, readers will find children they recognize and scenarios they've encountered in their own homes and districts. We have made every effort to look at sound practices and principles using examples of different children so that readers can see how acceleration constantly shifts and adjusts from one circumstance to the next. In keeping with the book's emphasis on the whole child, we have attempted to explore acceleration from the *inside out*—that is, from an understanding of the child's nature (abilities, interests, personal qualities) and needs.

The emotional, social, and spiritual life of gifted children assumes a critical role in this volume, with an entire third Part devoted to the subject. The reason for this is simple. Acceleration, when applied appropriately and sensitively, accomplishes far more than a change in the pace and level at which a child learns. It is a restoration to wholeness, an ability not just to do but to *thrive*. Without emotional and spiritual well-being, accelerated learning is an empty shell of meaningless work.

## HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Divided into three Parts, the book addresses the practical concerns of teachers, administrators, counselors, and families and explores such questions as “Can I provide advanced instruction for a gifted bilingual child who doesn't meet the criteria for grade advancement this year? How do I know whether my gifted child is working at the right level when he tends to overachieve and pressure himself? How will acceleration affect a gifted child struggling against perfectionism and low self-esteem? What kind of acceleration works for a very young child whose development is uneven and unpredictable? How do I ensure that the kind of acceleration I provide for my gifted students is working for each one of them?”

Part I (Acceleration: Issues and Applications for Gifted Learners by Joan Franklin Smutny) sets the stage for the book by introducing the subject in broad, conceptual terms. Eschewing the popular, rather narrow view of acceleration as a process of hurrying bright children, the first section considers a more fundamental, more human sense of the word as simply referring to the freedom children need to grow, learn, and be themselves. The purpose of this section is to expand readers' ideas on how acceleration can be applied to the classroom and to a wide variety of gifted learners. It is a departure from the lock-step idea of acceleration, where a child advances at a faster pace and higher level but still remains in a linear mode of learning. To be effective, acceleration needs to be “differentiated,” needs to incorporate creativity in essential ways, and needs to allow teachers the freedom to discover the strategies that work best for their particular students. The section concludes with the critical role that assessment plays in determining how gifted learners are benefiting from acceleration and what changes are needed for the future.

Part II (Appropriate Academic-Classroom Acceleration by Sally Y. Walker) is an in-depth focus on the “meat” of learning. The section creates a clear picture of what a fully implemented acceleration program might look like, in which all the key elements (curriculum content, thinking processes, student products, learning standards, and district policies) cohere in such a way as to continually reinforce learning

goals. The chapters describe in detail how to build higher levels of complexity and a faster pace into units of study, how to identify and incorporate essential concepts and questions that ignite the imaginations of gifted children, and how to stimulate discovery and creative invention. Through examples, this section clearly demonstrates how teachers can plan activities and assigned work that conforms to the goals of accelerated learning. The concluding chapter takes up the subject of district learning standards and policies that seem to run counter to the objectives of accelerated instruction. It provides practical guidance on how teachers can integrate these standards into their accelerated programs and also discusses the urgent need for advocacy as the only way that districts will support a strong policy in support of acceleration for gifted children.

Part III (Social and Emotional Aspects of Effective Acceleration by Elizabeth A. Meckstroth) clearly shows that once placed in an accelerated program, gifted students require specific kinds of support in the emotional, social, and even spiritual realms. Cut loose from the restrictions that used to keep them down in the regular classroom, gifted students in an accelerated program are sometimes at a loss about how to set reasonable goals for themselves; cope with anxiety and sensitivity to evaluation (their own as well as others'); address perfectionism, over-achievement, and low self-esteem; and manage the pressure or tension they may feel in a more challenging academic setting. The chapters are full of penetrating insights into the vast internal landscape of gifted students and how accelerated learning affects and is affected by perfectionism, intensity, difficulties with peers and friends, acute sensitivities, profound intuitive awareness, and complex moral and spiritual sensibilities.

The Part's (and book's) concluding focus on parent and teacher advocacy is particularly apt, given that accelerating gifted children often involves chipping away at the internal and external barriers to their freedom. This demands becoming more acutely aware of biases about giftedness and acceleration and taking a more active role in creating viable alternatives for high-ability learners. It is in advocating for a child that the child herself learns to take up the work and seek, as she must do later in life, the freedom to grow and learn in her own way. Perhaps the most critical aspect of advocacy is nurturing and honoring a child's moral and spiritual development, for in that domain lies the possibility of strength and resiliency in the face of disappointment as well as kindness and compassion toward one's fellow beings.

It is our hope that *Acceleration for Gifted Learners, K-5* will raise the bar on accelerated learning and inspire action that goes beyond minimum proficiency to the joy of discovery and an awakening to new possibilities. The three Parts of this book demonstrate the necessity for acceleration in all areas of a gifted child's life. The aim of the book is to offer a richer definition of accelerated learning and address how children process and apply new concepts when they're engaged and inspired. It is our hope that it has succeeded in offering the guidance that teachers, administrators, and families need to find workable solutions for the gifted children before them.

By sharing the lives of so many gifted children, readers cannot help but be struck by the fact that perhaps the most compelling reason for acceleration is that it is simply the most humane thing to do. And being humane surely must rank among the most important qualities of any educational system. Without acceleration, gifted children live like caged birds, imprisoned by attitudes, policies, and practices that won't allow them to be themselves. Emerson's statement, "No bird flies too high if he soars with his own wings," captures the spirit and substance of this book and its cherished desire to release the potential within every child.