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The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

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## Information Sheet

### ACCELERATION

Acceleration refers to the promotion of a student through the school curriculum, either across all subjects by making jumps of a year or more, or by promotion in those particular subjects in which s/he is gifted. What has been accelerated is the child's progress through the school curriculum so that there is a better fit between the child's level of intellectual development and the curriculum offered by the school.

Studies, mostly from the US, have demonstrated that the acceleration of intellectually gifted students can be beneficial. Young people who have been academically accelerated are intellectually challenged, complete high school and college early, and in many cases go on to successful careers. This factsheet, though, issues a few cautionary comments that should be considered by parents and teachers before any gifted child is accelerated.

Acceleration can be a useful tool in the education armory when used in the right place at the right time with the right child. Many gifted students benefit greatly from some form of acceleration but there are several implications for the young person and the schools.

**Considering the Social & Emotional Needs of the Child**– the social and emotional needs of gifted students are probably one of the most important areas that need to be considered. High ability children struggle with friendships and social integration on many levels and, due to their asynchronous development, many are often very misunderstood by their peers and so feel very isolated and lonely.

Before deciding to accelerate a child one needs to consider the maturity of the child and how they will settle into the year (or even two years) above. How will the accelerated child deal with loss of friendships from the class they are leaving and will they easily make new friendships within the class they joining especially if they are moved during an academic year when friendships have already been formed? It is worth considering having a **buddy system** where a suitable pupil or group of pupils take the responsibility for helping to integrate the accelerated student into the class and year group.

Gifted students can be the victims of bullying – we all know children can be cruel and high ability students can have problems with social integration because of their perceived differences. If not handled sensitively, the children in the class they are leaving may see this as preferential treatment and refer to the accelerated pupil with pejorative terms such as geek, boffin or nerd. The class the high ability student is joining may see him or her as the “baby” of the class and ostracise the new pupil. Discussions during Personal Social Health Education (PSHE) classes should cover subject areas such as bullying, diversity, inclusion, feelings and emotions to engender a positive culture towards giftedness across the school.

At some point in the decision process, dependent on the child's age and the family's wishes, the student should be asked how he or she feels about acceleration; the student's feelings should be considered in the decision-making process. It is not helpful to presume that the student wants this decision too; he or she may not want to leave his or her peer group and friends. There's a big

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difference between being top of the year in your chronological age group and struggling in the year above; this alone can make a child very unhappy.

**Educational Psychologist (EP) Assessment** – it may be helpful to have an EP assessment carried out on your child prior to deciding whether to accelerate or not as this will not only confirm your first thoughts but may highlight other areas of difficulty that you had not thought about and the EP will make recommendations both in and out of school. You may also wish to discuss the pros and cons of acceleration for your particular child with the EP.

**Level of work** – high ability students should be stretched to just beyond their comfort zone so that the work is of a difficulty that challenges them and they have something to strive for. The subject areas should offer stimulating resources that fire the student's mind and tasks should be as open-ended as possible to allow for the creative thought processes to develop and expand without the strictures of boundaries. Requiring a gifted student to repeat processes they have already mastered sounds the death knell for learning.

The work given to high ability students should make allowances for the individual to take some responsibility for their own learning and teach them a certain amount of life skills, e.g. leadership, assertiveness, research, business, communication. High ability student prefer their work to be made real and like to see it in the context of the real world, eg journalistic reports, writing for a website.

**Types of Acceleration** – there are several different ways in which a gifted student can be accelerated:

- A student can be promoted a year or two ahead and join a class permanently a year or two above
- The work that classes a year or two ahead are doing can be brought to the student in his or her chronological year group.
- Some schools move a student to a year above just for the subject/s in which the student is gifted
- Others timetable a one-to-one session for the pupil that requires more advanced work in the areas of high ability, though this can be an expensive option for a school.

It doesn't matter how the school does it as long as it suits the student's needs, the family have agreed it and the school have the resources to maintain their decision. Whatever way acceleration is achieved it must be handled sensitively and with the student's needs at the forefront of all decisions.

**Transition** – transition refers to those times in a student's career when they move to the next stage of their education, the most common of which is the move from primary to secondary school, though there may also be other transition points. Having made the decision to accelerate a gifted student through the primary phase to then find that the Principal of the secondary school will not take an accelerated child spells disaster for the confidence of that student. In most cases, entry to secondary school is at the discretion of the secondary Principal. Some schools are very open-minded to this practice but others are not and this needs to be discussed with the next Principal well ahead of time.

**Adolescence** – Understandably, parents dealing with the gifted issues of a five-year old can be forgiven for not considering the implications of acceleration once the child reaches adolescence since this will seem to be many years away. An accelerated student may study and socialize with

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peers who are at least a year older so when the time comes to spread their wings with driving tests, going out at weekends and clubbing the younger student may feel unprepared for this, or out of his/her depth socially and unable to cope.

Parents and teachers also need to be aware that discussions, reading material and relationships may prove to be difficult issues for the accelerated student as they may be socially and emotionally less mature at key stages of their lives and consequently have developmental stages where they do not fit in or feel comfortable around older boys and girls. Some high ability students have enormous issues socially and emotionally at the best of times and this can be exacerbated for the accelerated child.

**Learning Mentors** – high ability students benefit greatly from either having an older learning mentor or mentoring a younger child themselves. An older mentor with whom there are no emotional ties can be a useful guide through the maze of new experiences and situations and a point of stability for advice for an accelerated student. Mentoring reinforces a student's own learning and teaches them a variety of skills such as communication, patience, social & emotional skills and listening.

#### Further Guidance

##### Books

Nicholas Colangelo. *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*  
Susan G. Assouline & Miraca U. M. Gross. *A seminal report into acceleration in the USA*

*Saving the Smart Kids* by John Cloud, Time Magazine, September 2004. See also  
<http://www.advantagepress.com/2007/newsletters/Oct04news.html>

##### Websites

Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Educational\\_acceleration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Educational_acceleration)  
Kidsource: [http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content/Should\\_Gifted\\_Students.html](http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content/Should_Gifted_Students.html)  
Hoagies: <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/acceleration.htm>

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