

“There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long-range risks of comfortable inaction.”

JOHN F. KENNEDY

The Disconnects

Imagine, if you can, a football coach putting his arm around his starting tailback and telling him the players on the other team are going to feel bad if the tailback runs past them. “So when you get the ball,” the coach tells his player, “ease up.”

No coach would ever say that. And yet, in our classrooms, we tell our smart kids, in subtle ways, “Be careful about how you show your smarts. Don’t be too showy?”

Such “disconnects” hold back America’s brightest students, says Dr. Nicholas Colangelo, founder and director emeritus of the Belin-Blank Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development at the University of Iowa.

Those disconnects between perception and reality, he adds, are probably greater in gifted education than in any other area of education.

Why?

One reason is academic. Some people believe if students learn something too quickly, they don’t really learn it—that the understanding is superficial and temporary. Research studies, however, show that when adolescents learn something in an accelerated setting they retain that knowledge at least into graduate school. “It doesn’t go away,” Dr. Colangelo says.

Another reason behind the disconnect is social-emotional. We all want our kids to be happy and well-adjusted. Some people believe students will pay a social price if accelerated. But, again, research studies

show that acceleration is almost always a plus in the social-emotional sense because students are more engaged—happier—when they’re learning at a rate and in an environment that’s right for them. They enjoy being with like-minded students.

To be fair, the research suggests some gifted children may experience a hiccup when they’re first accelerated and, all of a sudden, aren’t automatically the smartest ones in the room. But the research shows this dip is slight and almost always temporary. In the long run, the “reality check” pays off. Dr. Colangelo tells parents, because a bright child develops realistic self-esteem rather than an inflated sense of self. That common-sense observation is supported by researchers who track down adults who were accelerated as children. The only regret most of those adults have is that they weren’t accelerated earlier.

The politics of education also can create another disconnect. Some people, even some educators, don’t want anything to do with gifted education. They see it as elitist, unfair, and a misuse of resources. Identifying some students as gifted, they believe, somehow makes other students feel bad—even though, again, researchers find that isn’t true. It’s a dilemma, though, because we all develop at different rates; some children, for example, need to learn at a faster pace than others.

Taken together, these disconnects are powerful and continue to hold back gifted students.

“It’s absolutely incorrect to say that America has a problem with exceptional talent,” Dr. Colangelo notes. “America loves exceptional athletic talent. The better you are, the more you’re going to be loved. Also, we have no problem with exceptional talent in the arts.

“The area we have trouble with is intellectual talent. There is an ambiguity about being smart. Among teenagers, the idea of intellectual ability is typically not adored. It’s much easier, in terms of popularity, to be seen as good-looking, as having interpersonal savvy, certainly athleticism, than to be seen as intellectually gifted.”

It is precisely because of that paradox that gifted education programs and acceleration of bright students can be so valuable and affirming. Put a gifted child in accelerated classes, in Advanced Placement courses, in summer programs with other gifted kids, and watch that child unfold and flourish. You’ll see a child who is no longer embarrassed about how much he or she knows. You’ll see a child free to learn even more.

Gifted children, properly supported, grow into adults who invent and create, who solve problems, who see what others don’t. They accomplish more, faster. Years later, researchers find them—almost without exception—to be well-adjusted, satisfied with their work, and happy with their lives.

Acceleration is good for almost all highly able children. It’s good for society. Those are the facts, based on long-term research studies.

“The most compelling argument we have for acceleration is the success of the outcomes,” says Dr. Nancy Hertzog, Director of the Robinson Center for Young Scholars at the University of Washington.

Given such overwhelming factual support for acceleration, why do the disconnects persist?

The Evidence

- “The Impact of Acceleration on Careers,” Volume 2, page 171
- “Long-Term Effects of Educational Acceleration,” Volume 2, page 73



Breanna Kramer stands in the University of Iowa Main Library. She entered college a year early and “loves university classes.” (Photo: Mark Tade)

Dr. Jonathan Wai, a researcher at Duke University’s Talent Identification Program, sees three reasons.

1. Simple numbers. By definition most students are not gifted. Parents care about their children, so why should they care about other people’s gifted children?
2. “Gifted” implies an advantage. If you’re gifted, it means you have a head start in life. Gifted children can have problems, of course, but the majority of Americans see giftedness as an advantage. So, when it comes time to help anyone, the natural inclination is to help those who don’t have a head start and natural advantage.
3. Americans care more about equity than they do about excellence.

“I think that’s the natural climate today,” Dr. Wai adds. “If we can’t persuade people based on that climate, then there’s little we can do.”

Given those realities, acceleration makes even more sense as the most practical and cost-effective way to help gifted children. Why not challenge our brightest children? Why not move them ahead to where they are learning something new every day?

“We have this ambiguity about intellectual talent that’s holding us back,” Dr. Colangelo says. “It’s time—it’s past time—to move on.”