



# Releasing the Brakes for High-Ability Learners: Administrator, Teacher and Parent Attitudes and Beliefs That Block or Assist the Implementation of School Policies on Academic Acceleration

Never Stand Still

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

School of Education



SUMMARY JUNE 2011

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Gifted Education Research, Resource  
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Overview  
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The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation or the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC).

The overview report is intended for a broad audience and technical information is not included except where it is essential to the reader. More detailed analysis will be available from the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC), School of Education, the University of New South Wales. For details contact Professor Miraca Gross, Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) on [m.gross@unsw.edu.au](mailto:m.gross@unsw.edu.au).

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## Purpose of the study

The study investigated whether or not perceptions held by Australian educators and community members regarding the academic acceleration of gifted students are congruent with: (1) research findings regarding the academic and socio-affective outcomes of acceleration, and (2) Australian school practice of the various modes of acceleration.

## Major activities of the study

The researchers completed 104 interviews with principals, gifted & talented coordinators in schools, teachers, parents, and some older high-ability students (who could make an independently mature judgement of their experience) across 49 school sites nationally in government, Independent and Catholic systemic schools. Both primary (elementary) and secondary (junior school and high school) were sampled. Additionally, a short Likert-item attitudinal survey with 211 responses was administered and analysed. School, region and acceleration policies were also analysed.

## Key findings

Overall the study's quantitative findings indicate a general pattern of enthusiasm for acceleration tempered by key reservations on some issues. The qualitative findings confirm this and indicate that teachers continue to have concerns about social-emotional outcomes of acceleration and that social-emotional maturity tends to be defined subjectively based on teacher perceptions (e.g. physical size, uniform strength across all subject areas and emotional robustness).

Specifically the study found that:

- In Australia, implementation of academic acceleration is largely dependent upon local educational practices. Overall there is considerable variation between education sectors, systems and individual schools. The lack of clarity surrounding social and emotional factors in acceleration policies is a significant impediment to acceleration.
- Respondents (1) disagree about whether acceleration has adverse effects on a child's social and emotional development, but (2) are largely in agreement about the need to assist the cognitively talented learner, the lack of any harm done to the accelerand's fellow students, and the importance of involving the student and his/her parents in the decision-making regarding acceleration.
- Many participants identified level of social and emotional maturity of a young person as a crucial factor in decision-making. However, the notion of maturity tends to be individual and subjective, raising broad questions about appropriate definitions and ways of assessing levels of maturity.
- Parents are confused about advocacy strategies; they face the dilemma of their child being denied acceleration if they are considered too "pushy" but having requests for acceleration disregarded if they are not sufficiently forceful in their advocacy. Parents who are well-informed on issues relating to talented students and their education and access independent professional advice in preparing a proposal for acceleration, are more likely to develop a collaborative relationship with school personnel and be effective advocates for their child.
- Students are supportive of acceleration because of the increased stimulation, engagement, challenge and academic achievement they experience. They feel socially connected, develop deep, long-lasting friendships, and feel positive about themselves and their school experiences. However, accelerated students have cautioned against teachers believing that acceleration alone is sufficient by highlighting the need for schools to be more aware of issues that can arise following acceleration, including the need for further acceleration, specific skill development and the need to address any incidents of bullying.



## Possible futures – research and policy implications

When children differ from their age-peers in their intellectual or emotional maturity it is likely that their responses to intellectual and emotional stimuli will be different. When emotional and intellectual sensitivity appear early in a young person they can herald a maturity that indicates that the child may be a candidate for one or another form of acceleration. Policy and research implications indicated by the key findings include:

- Young gifted students would benefit from well-targeted affective programs (making them more equipped for acceleration).
- Providing inservice training with an expert in social and emotional maturity and high-ability learners would assist teachers in decisions regarding acceleration.
- Further research is needed on objective assessment of social and emotional maturity for use in decision-making regarding acceleration.
- Advocacy training for parents would assist them in how to engage constructively with schools in acceleration planning and implementation.

## The tyranny of distance

Australia is a highly industrialised Western nation of only 22.6 million people contained within a landmass approximately the size of the United States. Much of the country is desert and virtually uninhabitable. In striking contrast to the image of Australia held by many people from other nations as “sunbronzed pioneer farmers”, the population is, in fact, highly urbanised and largely confined to a thin coastal fringe of towns and cities. Distances between settlements are vast compared to what is common in North America and Europe. This has had a significant effect on the development, implementation and evaluation of educational policy.

What Australians have come to call “the tyranny of distance” (Blainey, 1966) had a significant effect on communication before the age of easy and sustainable electronic access and, until the start of the 20th century, transfer of information between settlements was slow and very imperfect. This led to a staunch and sometimes fierce independence; if we could not have easy access to the fruits of other people’s knowledge and labour, we would make do with our own. Indeed, a certain pride developed in “making our own mistakes”. Competition, rather than cohesion, characterised relationships between different settlements and this pride in autonomy still, to a significant extent, characterises relationships between the six Australian states and two territories.

### 1.1 Education systems across Australia

Schooling in Australia is governed by three separate education systems each of which provides policy and guidance to the schools within its jurisdiction; (a) the State or Territorial Government education system, (b) the Catholic Church education system and (c) the Independent education system. The curriculum taught and the educational programs developed in any given system are dictated by a number of curriculum bodies, for example, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), Education Services Australia (ESA) and, in New South Wales, the Board of Studies NSW.

Within each state, the State education system is, as its name suggests, governed by the legislation of that particular state and administered by the “public” government service of that state. Australian state schools (often called “public schools”) are secular (having no religious affiliation) and non-fee-paying<sup>1</sup>. Approximately 66% of Australian children are educated in state schools but this percentage varies from state to state.

The Catholic Church has its own education system within each state. Schools are church-affiliated but (with the exception of a special program of religious instruction) undertake the same curriculum as state schools. Approximately 14% of students are educated within Catholic schools. Catholic Church schools charge moderate annual fees.

The Independent education system within each state constitutes a loosely linked group of schools which fall into two categories: (a) schools run by religious organisations other than the Catholic Church (for example, the Lutheran Church of Australia, the Anglican Church of Australia and the Presbyterian and Methodist churches), and (b) individual schools which have no religious affiliation and are self-funding and self-administrating.

Importantly, the Independent system has no central governing authority; as the name suggests, there is a significant degree of independence within these schools in terms of policy development and practice and also in terms of level of fees charged by schools. Some schools charge modest fees; fees charged by others (the more prestigious) can be extremely expensive. In general, the more prestigious schools offer a small number of part-fee or fee-exempt scholarships each year which are awarded on the basis of high scores on an entrance examination. These schools compete earnestly to enrol highly talented students. Approximately 20% of Australian students are educated within Independent schools but, as with the state school system, this varies from state to state.

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<sup>1</sup> This differs significantly from the British education system where the term “public school” refers specifically to private, fee-paying institutions.



## 1.2 Rationale for the study

In 2004 the John Templeton Foundation disseminated a national report on academic acceleration practices in the United States, entitled *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students* (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004). The authors of this groundbreaking report gathered together the leading researchers on acceleration and had each contribute their research to what became an extensive document on the outcomes of various forms of acceleration. The report found: (1) America's brightest students are more than ready for greater academic challenge; however, and (2) administrators, teachers and parents tend to make decision against accelerating bright children, not on thoughtfully considered educational grounds but because of personal and professional beliefs, including prevailing cultural beliefs, which claim that acceleration has strong detrimental academic, social and emotional outcomes for students.

Research on the various forms of acceleration is rich and consistent in its reporting of very positive academic effects, and positive, but moderate to low effects, for socialisation and self-esteem (Rogers, 1991; 2002a; 2004). The *Nation Deceived* report recounts research on the longer term effects of acceleration in the middle school and high school years (Lubinski, 2004), the validity of academic and sociological outcomes through Talent Search programs (Olzewski-Kubilius, 2004), process validation in making decisions about grade skipping (Colangelo, Assouline & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2004), the academic, social and emotional outcomes of many forms of early entrance to university or its alternatives (Brody, Muratori & Stanley, 2004), and the potential impact of acceleration upon twice exceptional students (Moon & Reis, 2004). What has become clear as a result of these studies is that when high-ability children are not given the opportunity to accelerate, a loss of talent is incurred. For more than 23 years Gross's longitudinal study of 60 exceptionally cognitively talented young people documented the beneficial short-term and long-term effects of acceleration, both academically and socially. Gross's study also found that those exceptionally cognitively talented individuals who had not been accelerated by at least one year were significantly less productive, held lower status occupational positions, had not completed as much postgraduate study, and reported lower levels of life satisfaction compared to students who

had been accelerated and, particularly, to students who had been accelerated by three or more years.

Attempts at creating and maintaining an acceleration policy have had a chequered history in Australia. With a strong cultural emphasis on "equity", where this is generally viewed as "sameness" rather than equality (Gross, 1993; 2004) and a tendency to "cut down the tall poppies", acceleration has been generally viewed as a socially unjust attempt to move some students ahead at the expense of others.

All Australian states now have policies on the education of gifted and talented students and some of these policies (e.g. those of the NSW education systems) acknowledge the practice of acceleration. However, the presence of gifted education policies, whether established by state governments, other educational organisations, or gifted children's associations, does not guarantee that these policies will be implemented in schools.

## 1.3 The study

This study builds on this rich knowledge base by empirically investigating Australian school stakeholders' knowledge, beliefs and behaviour regarding acceleration. In addition it also explores whether recommendations and requirements of gifted education policies are currently being implemented in schools.

The study consists of three components: (1) overview of policy documents, (2) a survey of teacher and school administrator attitudes towards acceleration, and (3) interviews with stakeholders, specifically, principals, teachers, parents of accelerated students and accelerated students themselves.

Firstly, gifted education policies from state, Catholic and Church-administered Independent education systems were examined. Next, a range of schools from each state and system was surveyed to identify (a) educators' actual knowledge about acceleration, (b) educators' beliefs about acceleration, and (c) the forms of acceleration the schools employ with high-ability students and the degree to which they employ them. A Likert-scale questionnaire was used in surveying these schools and was sent to a range of schools in State, Catholic and Independent systems. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted with a sample of principals, teachers, parents and students, which were designed to elicit their perceptions and understandings of acceleration.

## 1.4 Structure of the report

The remainder of this Section presents an overview of gifted and talented education policies in Australia and the placing of acceleration within these policies. Section 2 outlines the methodology employed, followed by Section 3 which presents an overview of the findings emerging from the qualitative data and from survey analysis. Section 4 discusses the findings and presents conclusions.

## 1.5 Acceleration policies

Most State (government) education systems have developed a specific policy on gifted education. The policies collected and examined are listed in Appendix A. While not a complete list of all gifted and talented education policies in Australia, it is nevertheless broad-ranging and comprehensive. Policies were examined with reference to the following characteristics:

- Date of document
- Review date
- Date ratified
- Purpose
- Definition
- Terminology for acceleration
- Mandatory element
- Types of acceleration
- Guidelines on acceleration
- Decision team
- Review time for acceleration
- Contact
- Comment

### **Content**

Examination of acceleration policies from the three education sectors indicate considerable policy variation between education sectors, systems and individual schools. Acceleration policy within public education systems is operable state-wide, whereas the policies of the Catholic system relate only to schools within the jurisdiction of the given diocese. The situation within the Independent School sector is different again with most

schools developing policies specific to their institution; although within a small number of Independent school systems (e.g. Lutheran schools) system-wide policy has been established.

Policy contents varied considerably, ranging from those which made few references to acceleration as an appropriate intervention strategy for high-ability students through to gifted education policies which explicitly support acceleration via the provision of support documents and guidelines about the processes to be undertaken when implementing acceleration (see, for example, NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004a & 2006<sup>2</sup>). The latter types of policy are generally accompanied by a document detailing the process to be followed when considering students for acceleration.

Although the development of policies associated with identifying and providing for talented students has greatly increased in Australia, anecdotal evidence suggests considerable regional variation in the acceptance, application and implementation of acceleration policies. Moreover, gifted education policies tend to focus primarily on the description and identification of advanced or high-ability students. Policy documents outline a variety of provisions with emphasis upon enrichment, withdrawal, curriculum differentiation and acceleration, accompanied by supporting explanations about how these interventions might be structured; a situation similar to the United States as recently described by the National Work Group on Acceleration:

*Many schools have policies relating to gifted education that specify how to identify and serve gifted students and how to evaluate gifted education programs. However, gifted education policies don't necessarily specify how to identify and serve students for acceleration; in fact, some policies inadvertently endorse an enrichment approach to serving gifted students and thus acceleration is not presented as an option.*

(Institute for Research and Policy on Acceleration (IRPA), 2009, p. 1)

<sup>2</sup> Index of support documents available at <http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/gats/support/index.htm>

The terminology used to describe acceleration and accelerative options differs across and within policies – a situation which has the potential to confuse educators and parents alike. By way of example, the following terms and phrases were variously employed within policies:

- acceleration
- accelerated progress
- accelerated progression
- accelerative measure
- early entry
- early entry to kindergarten
- early admission
- flexible entry
- flexible ways
- flexible pathways
- flexible provision
- flexible pathways in progression
- subject acceleration
- year acceleration
- year level acceleration
- differentiation

The language employed in policy documents is critically important in determining both the tone and the prescriptive or mandatory nature of the policy. Examination of the language used within the various policies produced the following categories: commanding (*e.g. will include, will require, crucial, must, is critical, is essential, is vital, decisions have to be made*); positive and confident (*e.g. will need, is used, need to ensure, encourage, seeks, is important*); objective and explanatory (*e.g. extremely important*); clear and firm (*e.g. should, shows, should consider*); gentle (*e.g. desirable, need, foster, encourage*); and cautious (*e.g. may, advisable*) or guarded (*e.g. could be, might expect*).

By way of example, a commanding tone, such as: 'It is essential that accelerated progression is planned with clear guidelines that are understood by all concerned – the student, the teacher and the parent/caregivers.' (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2004b, p. 11) creates an imperative tone and requires that the direction will be implemented by schools within that sector. Within the same policy document, the

use of a clear, firm tone, such as (and citing Benbow, 1998): 'Acceleration should not be adopted in isolation, but should be a component in a strategy of curricular flexibility' (p. 9) or a positive and confident tone: 'What should be offered is not more work, but rather qualitatively different work that provides advanced conceptual opportunities and stimulates higher order thinking skills' (*ibid*) varies the level of mandatory requirement but encourages and guides schools to incorporate these practices. For example:

*Acceleration is designed to allow a student to progress through the core content of a school program at a natural rate, rather than being restricted by artificially imposed steps of progression. The interdependent practices of grouping strategies, enrichment, counselling interventions and acceleration are central to maximising learning outcomes for gifted students.*

(*ibid* p. 8)

A more guarded tone can be seen in an Independent school's brochure for parents which states: 'Where appropriate and after extensive consultation with parents and other relevant agencies, [the school] will at times apply subject acceleration...grade skipping...or...early entry to Kindergarten'. The school clearly has a policy that supports acceleration and is willing to implement various accelerative options, but there is a more cautious or guarded tone about how and when this might occur.

Three resources are frequently mentioned in policy statements. In no particular order, they are:

- The Commonwealth of Australia Senate Committee Report, *The Education of Gifted and Talented Children* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001)
- The International Guidelines for Accelerated Progression (adapted from Feldhusen, J. F., Proctor, T. B. & Black, K. N., 1986)
- The Gifted Education Professional Development Package (GERRIC, 2005).

The frequency with which these three resources are cited indicates the influence they have had in shaping policies and practice in Australia. The Senate Report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001), instigated and funded by the Australian Commonwealth Government, provided an impetus for educators to develop gifted education and acceleration policies through highlighting

the educational disadvantage experienced by Australia's high-ability students. This document focused the attention of all Australian education systems on the need to cater appropriately for their students' specific needs through the use of acceleration, with Recommendation 6 proposing the development of a consistent policy encouraging suitable acceleration for the gifted. The second resource listed provides a template and clear directions when implementing acceleration, while the third resource, the Gifted Education Professional Development Package, is frequently recommended as a training resource for teachers regarding the implementation of academic acceleration. As the package is available online and is free and easily accessible, it allows schools in regional and remote areas, as well as schools with limited financial resources, to provide professional development about acceleration and the needs of high-ability students to teachers across Australia.

Some policies also refer to specific modes of acceleration, such as whole class acceleration and early entry. For example, the NSW Support Package (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004b) provides a 'checklist for identifying students suitable for early entry to school (p. 15). The Tasmanian Department of Education (n.d.) provides guidelines for parents and teachers regarding the early entry into kindergarten for young children who are gifted. Victorian state policy also includes a section entitled *Key Elements in the Research Provided to Support Policies* (Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010). Overall, however, implementation of academic acceleration varies within states and regions and remains largely dependent upon local educational practices rather than stated policies or substantive research.

It is worth noting that some state-based educators who were interviewed as part of the qualitative component of this project said that they have found it difficult to access their state's acceleration policy and recommendations on the process to be followed when considering a student for acceleration. In some cases the policy had been removed from the relevant section on an education department's website. By contrast, other state education systems have clear, accessible policies and support material designed to assist teachers and parents in decision-making, backed up by detailed procedures to be followed when implementing acceleration. Even when a comprehensive acceleration policy has been developed at state level,

practices of individual schools differ significantly in implementing this policy.

Policies relating to acceleration in Independent schools vary considerably. Some schools have informal and undocumented policies, and employ flexible acceleration practices which are adapted and modified to suit individual students' circumstances and needs<sup>3</sup>. In other cases, schools have developed brochures about provisions for gifted students, including a statement about implementing acceleration. These brochures are often used to promote or market a school's provision for high-ability students. Generally, they do not contain a detailed policy but briefly state the school's willingness to consider academic acceleration and serve to clarify the school's approach or policy for both parents and teachers.

By contrast, some Independent schools do indeed have a clearly stated acceleration policy that details research supporting acceleration and outlines processes the school will use to determine whether a student meets the criteria for acceleration. Such policies are often published on the school's website and are freely available to teachers and parents to ensure that the acceleration process is transparent and accessible.

Church school systems tend to emphasise, within their policies, a moral basis for appropriate educational provision for high-ability students. For example:

*'All people of whatever race, condition or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to education. This education should be suitable to the particular destiny of the individuals adapted to their ability, sex and national cultural traditions...'*

Gravissimum Educationis, 1965 Declaration on Christian Education, Pope Paul VI.

*Catholic schools have a responsibility then to educate all students to their full potential, academically, emotionally and socially.*

(Catholic Education Office Diocese of Wollongong, 2005, p. 1)

<sup>3</sup> Informality of this kind can have significant drawbacks. Consultations with key informants suggest that even where accelerative practices have been implemented for some time in independent schools, they risk being discontinued when supportive administrators and key decision-makers leave the school.

### **Advocacy groups**

The role of state gifted associations in advocacy, and the possibility of positive collaboration with education systems, can be witnessed through, for example, the development of *Strategies and Indicators of Achievement* by the Queensland Association for Gifted and Talented Children (QAGTC, 2008). This project was funded by Education Queensland as part of the Action Plan (Education Queensland, 2008), designed to assist implementation of various support frameworks and guidelines. *The Strategies and Indicators of Achievement* checklist was designed to assist schools to map their progress in achieving the aims set out by Education Queensland and includes advice on the implementation of various forms of acceleration. The Independent Schools of Queensland Association has already adapted it for use in Independent schools and the Queensland Catholic Education Commission is developing *Strategies and Indicators of Achievement* to suit the context of Catholic schools, thus contributing to greater parity across school systems in at least one state.

### **Rural and remote areas**

Acceleration for special needs populations is mentioned in several policies, notably provision for indigenous students and for students in remote areas (see for example Western Australia Department of Education website<sup>3</sup>). Despite documenting these needs, in a largely urbanised country, a significant gulf continues to exist between metropolitan, regional and rural educational experiences. This applies especially to the implementation of academic acceleration (see Merrotsy, Wood, Anderssen & Vasilevska, 2010).

Although academic acceleration is well suited to provide for students in small rural schools and regional schools that may lack opportunities to access staff training and funds to provide specialist resources, Merrotsy *et al.* found some inflexibility of school and system organisation and lower levels of acceleration implemented beyond urban coastal areas. There are indications from rural and remote areas, however, that a few high-ability students have been able to enrol, via distance education, in accelerated school subjects and tertiary units of study.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/curriculumsupport/giftedandtalented/detcms/navigation/for-teachers/inclusivity/>

### **Social and emotional maturity**

Social and emotional maturity is frequently listed in acceleration policies as a factor to consider in determining a student's suitability for acceleration. This applies especially to different forms of year-level acceleration (such as early entry and grade-advancement), where social and emotional maturity is believed to be of much greater importance than in subject acceleration. Students who experience subject acceleration generally maintain social contact with their chronological peers and tend to have limited class time with older students. By contrast, whole-year acceleration is often believed to have greater implications for the student's level of maturity when a student transitions to secondary and tertiary study.

Frequent mention of social and emotional maturity in acceleration policies indicates the degree of concern that exists around this issue, with maturity of the child or young person seen as a significant factor in determining the appropriateness of acceleration. Anecdotal evidence, as well as data collected from our in-depth interviews, indicates that often the decision to accelerate can rest upon this factor alone and that a considerable degree of misinformation hampers teachers' understanding of this issue. Ironically, social and emotional factors are perceived as both an impediment to acceleration and a possible negative outcome of it! In order to be considered for acceleration, a child must be perceived as socially and emotionally mature in order to cope with being among older students. Simultaneously, teachers may express concern that other students may not accept the accelerated child and that this will have a detrimental impact on his or her social and emotional wellbeing.

Research-based information suggests that teachers' misapprehensions regarding negative social-emotional outcomes are not strongly warranted.

*Both grade-based and content-based acceleration are effective interventions in academic and social-emotional domains for high-ability students. Grade-accelerated students generally out-perform their chronologically older classmates academically, and both groups show approximately equal levels of social and emotional adjustment. To be clear, there is no evidence that acceleration has a negative effect on a student's social-emotional development.*

(IRPA, 2009, p. 4)



Policies rarely specify what is meant by the term “social and emotional maturity” or indicate how a student’s maturity should be assessed or measured. *The Acceleration Support Package* (NSW Department of Education, 2004b) that accompanies New South Wales departmental policy addresses this issue by stating that a student’s social and emotional readiness should be based upon observation of the student’s interactions with peers, evidence of the student’s maturity and social skills, a student’s participation in extracurricular activities and in activities beyond the school, self-esteem and motivation, adjustment to problems and decision making skills, as well as anecdotal evidence from teachers and parents.

Most policy recommendations rely upon teachers’ subjective judgements regarding a student’s social and emotional maturity without placing this within a context that explains the social and emotional characteristics that are common among students with advanced cognitive abilities. The lack of clarity surrounding social and emotional factors in acceleration policies remains a significant impediment to the implementation of acceleration. Education systems and schools that include a section in their policies referring to the (generally) heightened emotional maturity of intellectually talented students, and the tendency for high-ability students to be socially accepted by older students and relate well to them, might lessen schools’ wariness of acceleration.

## Conclusion

The degree to which acceleration is supported or endorsed by Australian gifted education policies varies considerably. A minority of policies, generally those of the more educationally progressive state education systems, openly commend the use of acceleration for gifted students (although some advise that its use be restricted to *highly* gifted students) and outline several forms of acceleration which schools might consider e.g. grade-advancement, early entry to school, telescoping two years of schooling into one, single subject acceleration, and so on. More recent policies are more likely to include acceleration as a possible educational response. Where acceleration is listed among possible interventions, most writers use language which seems to encourage caution.



## 2. Methodology

This Section presents a discussion of the methodology of the study, a description of the techniques used to collect the data, procedures for the fulfilment of ethical requirements and construction of the samples.

### 2.1 Research aims

Practitioner reluctance and hesitancy have long been the critical constraints to the employment of accelerative techniques for high-ability learners, despite the continuing accumulation of consistent and methodologically sound research evidence that acceleration is a harm-free intervention (Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011). As Southern, Jones and Fiscus (1989) noted, 'the issue of acceptability is, at this time, more important than the issue of efficacy' (p. 25). What has changed over the twenty years since their report? The present study aimed to provide policy makers and legislators with detailed information about how to overcome obstacles to policy implementation at the system, regional and local levels and how to provide information to facilitate the implementation of accelerative strategies for a larger population of high-ability learners in Australia, leading, hopefully, to higher levels of life satisfaction.

The principal research questions were:

- Are systemic gifted education policies supportive of acceleration?
- What are the differences between policies? How do they differ?
- What are teachers' knowledge of, and attitudes toward, accelerative practices?
- Do teachers who have undertaken professional development inservice or postgraduate study in gifted education display different degrees of knowledge, attitudes and practices with respect to acceleration than teachers who have not undertaken such inservice or study?
- What are the perceptions and understandings of key stakeholders (parents and accelerated students) of acceleration in school settings that practice acceleration in some form? Do parents' attitudes directly or indirectly impact a school's decision to accelerate students or not to do so?

### 2.2 Research design and methodology

The project is exploratory and used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Interviews were conducted with principals, gifted and talented co-ordinators, teachers, parents and high-ability students aged 16 years or older. A survey questionnaire was also administered (dropped off at schools participating in the qualitative research by the interviewer; or delivered and returned by mail, depending on the school's preference). The fieldwork was carried out in the first half of 2011.

### 2.3 Selecting the sample

Data on the implementation of acceleration are not held centrally in Australia's principal education systems. Interviews with key policy informants in each state and sector, and a survey of teachers who were either currently enrolled or had successfully completed postgraduate coursework in gifted education at the University of New South Wales in the last four years, were used to identify a purposive sample of school sites. The sample was drawn broadly proportional to the distribution of Australian students by State and system. The researcher's access to school systems for the purpose of the study is summarised in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1: Approvals to Conduct Research: State by System**

	New South Wales (NSW)	Australian Capital Territory (ACT)	Victoria (Vic)	Queensland (Qld)	Tasmania (Tas)	South Australia (SA)	Northern Territory (NT)	Western Australia (WA)
System								
Government	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	×	×	×
Catholic	✓	–	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Independent	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: ✓ = Access granted. Educational authority gave permission to approach schools in system (with participation at the discretion of principals), or Independent and Catholic independent schools which do not have a state- or system-wide human research ethics committee and where principals were approached individually and access granted; × = Access refused. Educational authority declined permission to approach schools for administrative reasons (e.g. inopportune time to conduct the research in schools; topic currently not a research priority); – = not approached in this phase of research (due to time constraints).

## 2.4 Data collection and analysis

The research addressed the sensitive ethical issues of educational research in school based settings (principals, co-ordinators and teachers) and in particular with gifted populations (students and their parents) by following the full sequence of protocols, from the use of consent forms to provision of information on the research (Moon, 2011). (See Appendix B for sample research protocols.)

All interviews were taped and transcribed for entry to the *NVivo* computer-based qualitative data analysis program. The accuracy of transcripts was checked by the researchers, with transcripts corrected as required (and provided to participants for checking where requested). The names of schools, and persons (principals, teachers, students and parents) have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the students whose programs of acceleration are described in Section 3 (Key Findings). Written protocols for use in the field by the interviewers were formulated to increase consistent coding.

The main topic areas for the interview guide with educators were (see Appendix B for list of questions to be asked by type of participant):

- Attitudes towards high-ability students
- Experiences of teaching high-ability student(s)
- Experiences of teaching accelerated student(s)
- Facilitators and constraints in planning and decision-making for acceleration

- Form(s) and type(s) of acceleration used
- Perceived outcomes from acceleration
- Preferences for accelerative options
- Level of training and inservice in gifted education and accelerative options.

A provisional coding approach (Dey, 1993; Layder, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994, Saldana, 2009) was used to establish an anticipated start-list of codes prior to the commencement of the fieldwork, based on the researcher's previous research findings, knowledge and experience of gifted education inservices in schools and parent and student workshops, and researcher-formulated hypotheses. The start-list was iterated and refined as the qualitative data was collected and analysed. The qualitative data sources (e.g. transcriptions, demographic attributes and field notes) were explored using language-based query tools and iterative text searching to investigate themes and linguistic expressions and check conclusions. Three cases of exemplary practice (two schools and an individual principal) were identified and analysed in depth to develop a deeper understanding of each case. Survey data was analysed using linear correlation techniques (Principal component analysis using *SPSS*.) (See Appendix B for a copy of the survey questionnaire.)

The following (Section 3.1) provides a general description of the interviewees and the survey sample characteristics.

## 3. Key Results

This Section presents an overview of the findings of the research. It begins with a description of the people who participated in the qualitative component and those who responded to the survey questionnaire. The remaining subsections present findings from the analysis of interview and survey data.

### 3.1 General description of the sample

The data for this study were collected through 104 live interviews and 211 self-administered survey questionnaires. Table 3.1 shows the distribution of interviewees by their roles in the educational process and their geographical location by Australian state or territory. It can be seen that interviews were conducted not only with 39 school principals, nine gifted and talented coordinators and 17 teachers, but also with 25 parents and 14 of the students themselves. Queensland and New South Wales were prominently represented in the sample, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the interviews between them. Queensland provided over half of the parents interviewed and almost half of the students, while 14 of the 25 NSW interviewees were principals or school administrators. With the inclusion of a gifted and talented coordinator from the

Northern Territory, the sample covers all six Australian states and the country's two mainland territories.

Table 3.2 shows the locations of the 49 interview sites, together with a breakdown by state/territory and also by type of school, i.e. primary or secondary, and government, Catholic or Independent. Despite the non-participation of Catholic schools outside the eastern states and the non-involvement of some state education departments, all three school systems and both primary and secondary levels are represented among those with whom we spoke.

The quantitative attitudinal questionnaires were completed by teachers and educational administrators from schools in six states and the ACT. At this date, 211 completed questionnaires have been returned. Some general characteristics of the survey respondents are presented in Table 3.3. Our survey sample is about three-quarters female, and aged over 40 in approximately 65% of cases. Approximately seventy per cent are classroom teachers, while the remainder divide fairly evenly between administrators and school personnel who have both teaching and administrative responsibilities.

**Table 3.1: Number of Interview Participants by State**

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Aust
Principal/School Administrator	14	1	13	4	1	4	0	2	39
G & T Coordinator	1	1	4	0	0	0	1	2	9
Teacher	2	3	4	6	2	0	0	0	17
Parent	5	0	13	2	2	2	0	1	25
Student	3	0	6	2	2	1	0	0	14
Total	25	5	40	14	7	7	1	5	104

Table 3.2: Number of Interview Sites by State

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Aust
<b>Primary</b>									
Government	4		3					1	8
Catholic	1		1						2
Independent	2	1	4	1					8
<b>Secondary (a) (b)</b>									
Government	5		7			2		1	15
Catholic	2	1							3
Independent	1	1	4	2	2	2	1		13
Total	15	3	19	3	2	4	1	2	49

Shaded areas indicates no participants

Notes

(a) Includes departmental administrators

(b) Includes P-12

Table 3.3 The Survey Sample (N = 211)

Characteristic	Categories	%	Characteristic	Categories	%
Gender	Female	74.3	Teaching experience	<5 years	7.4
	Male	25.7		5-9 years	16.3
Age	<30	10.2		10-19 years	32.5
	30-39	26.5		20+ years	43.8
	40-49	28.1	Administrative experience	Nil	75.2
	50-59	30.1		<5 years	7.4
	60+	5.1		5-9 years	6.9
		10-19 years		7.9	
State	New South Wales	31.6	20+ years	2.5	
	Victoria	4.4	Work with gifted learners	Nil	25.6
	Queensland	24.8		<5 years	30.0
	Tasmania	15.0		5-9 years	18.9
	South Australia	7.8		10-19 years	14.4
	Western Australia	12.6	20+ years	11.1	
	ACT	3.9	Credentials	Teaching Certificate	20.4
Role	Teacher	69.9		Bachelors Degree	90.5
	Administrator/Coordinator	15.3		Dip. Ed.	49.3
	Teacher with additional coordination role	14.8		Specialty Cert.	14.7
				Masters Coursework	18.5
Current school system	State	35.6	Masters Research	4.7	
	Independent	52.9	EdD	0.9	
	Catholic	11.5	PhD	1.4	

**Table 3.4 Gifted Education Practices in the Respondent's Current School (%)**

Enrichment, extension of content in regular mixed ability classes	84.6
Provision of beyond grade level curriculum in specific talent area	68.6
Flexible performance grouping within the classroom for differentiated tasks	66.7
Placement in advanced class of high performers in a specific subject area	53.2
Withdrawal program (meet with other gifted learners 1-2 times per week) for content extension	50.5
Student conducts independent study in lieu of regular classroom work	41.8
Gifted resource teacher in school develops services and curriculum as teachers request them	41.8
Grade skipping	38.8
Child placed in older classroom for specific subject area	36.7
Child is pre-assessed and then allowed to skip elements of work already achieved	28.3
Mentorships for gifted learners with content experts	25.4
Placement in mixed ability class with 5-6 other gifted children as "cluster"	24.3
Students can take elements of their courses at higher grade level	23.8
International Baccalaureate program	21.8
Gifted students can enrol in advanced subject via an online or distance learning course	21.3
Early entrance to kindergarten or Year 1	20.7
Placement in a self-contained, all-gifted class for all academic learning	19.7
Placement in an Opportunity Class or Selective High School (i.e. full time ability grouping)	19.0
Multi-age or composite classroom, in which the gifted child is in the younger group	15.0
Child is credited with work already mastered based on prior learning experiences	11.2
A group of gifted children progress rapidly through the curriculum completing three years of work in two years (vertical grouping)	6.9

Regionally, both NSW and Queensland are again strongly represented, while Tasmania has more, and Victoria less, of the national total than might be anticipated from their relative population sizes. More than half of the educators surveyed are based in Independent schools, while most of the others are from State school systems and only 11.5 per cent from Catholic institutions.

Our survey respondents are qualified and experienced educators. The vast majority have degrees, rather than teaching diplomas, with more than 20% of participants holding a Master's degree or higher. Approximately 75% have at least ten years of teaching experience, while nearly 44% have 20 or more years inservice. About a quarter are, or have been, employed in school administration. In regard to gifted education in particular, almost 75% say they have worked with gifted learners, almost 25% for a decade or more, and more than 10% for two decades or more.

Table 3.4 lists the relative frequency of various gifted education practices in the current schools of our survey respondents. The use of enrichment is reported by 84.6 per cent of our educators, but acceleration by only 38.8.

The remainder of this Section provides an overview of four of the five themes which emerged from analysis of the qualitative data: 1) social and emotional maturity; 2) parental advocacy; 3) students who have been accelerated; and, 4) perceived difficulties and constraints. The Section concludes with a discussion of the survey findings. As noted earlier, names of schools and persons (principals, teachers, students and parents) have been changed to preserve anonymity.

### 3.2 Theme I: Social and emotional maturity

Participants felt that it was important when deciding whether to accelerate a student, and also when assessing the progress of a student who had already been accelerated, to consider the student's social and emotional maturity. Exploration of participants' accounts showed, however, that the way in which maturity of a young person was conceptualised varied significantly. This theme focuses on those conceptualisations, the importance that conceptions of maturity held for participants, and the place of social-emotional maturity in the decision-making process.

#### *Perceptions of Maturity*

Broad categories of the notion of maturity as perceived by participants (parents, teachers and principals) emerged from the accounts. Participants quite often spoke of academic maturity. Not surprisingly, Sharon, the principal of a primary school, for example, spoke of the problems caused when very young children who were academically mature and operating at an 8 or 9 year-old level were forced into play-based and beginner reading programs. While academic maturity is clearly important, the discussion at this point is restricted to social and emotional maturity.

The social and emotional maturity of a student being considered for acceleration were of concern to parent and educator alike. Its central place in the decision-making process was captured by Tania, parent of two talented young students, who remarked 'We faced the *classic hesitation* of, "Yes, but what about the social and emotional?"' (*authors' emphasis*). In this relatively simple statement Tania summarised one of the primary questions raised by educators when acceleration is being considered. Importantly, how this question is posed and the answers it produces can take a variety of forms. This Section presents some of the different ways in which participants approached the issue of a student's social and emotional maturity and the relationship between this and their suitability to be accelerated.

The overall importance placed on level of social-emotional maturity is demonstrated in the following interview extract. This example concerns two siblings, Sam and Daniel, both of whom were being considered for acceleration. Although regarded as equally talented, Daniel was not accelerated. Their principal, Roger, explained

*...I just felt that [Daniel] was better off with his peers. He didn't have, for want of a better term, social acceleration; whereas Sam was already mature beyond his Grade 7 years. And so for him going to Grade 9 was not an issue. [For] Daniel, if we'd moved him anywhere, he would have struggled to adapt socially.*

On the whole, level of maturity tended to be equated with the student's personal ability to handle the acceleration experience and to indicate the likelihood of successful acceleration. One teacher, when discussing the academic trajectory of one of her female students, commented that she had not viewed the girl as a candidate for acceleration until it was drawn to her attention by someone else. However, she felt that this young person's maturity was critical when considered for acceleration. As she explained it, '...her level of maturity does stand out and so I did think she would cope. And she does. And she has.' Later, this same teacher generalised this relationship between maturity and ability to cope to near-causal status saying that although this young person was not the brightest in her class, what differentiated her from her classmates was her maturity, adding 'I think kids who are very, very mature in whatever would cope'.

Well-developed maturity was also seen by some as a necessary element within a package of requirements for acceleration. Prue, a principal, when asked what was important to consider when making a decision to accelerate, said the very first issue was the maturity of the child; as she volunteered 'Whether they could cope, their maturity and their attitude and, also, just monitoring it'. Sara, too, spoke of the relationship between engagement in schoolwork, interest, and subject matter; all of which encouraged the development of a higher level of maturity.

#### *Aspects/dimensions of maturity*

In some accounts participants did not employ the word 'maturity', preferring to use synonyms. For instance, Nola, a principal, spoke of a 'work ethic' and 'self-belief' on the part of the student; components which she felt to be equally important as academic ability and support from teachers and parents. Without all these elements and mechanisms in place she believed the school was 'setting them up to fail'.

Other participants referred to the importance of social and emotional maturity by describing what it was *not!* Participants provided numerous examples of young



people whom they felt *lacked* maturity, describing what they perceived to be immature behaviour on the part of a young person and the difficulties that they felt flowed from such behaviour. However, at least one participant indicated how easy it could be to incorrectly view a young person as immature. Yvonne, mother of a talented 16-year-old, was aware that highly-cognitively talented young people are often perceived to be socially immature; an incorrect perception in her view. Drawing on personal experience she said she had found talented young people to be more socially mature than their age peers and that the younger ones had a more sophisticated sense of what friendship ought to be, knew how relationships ought to function and what the 'rules of engagement' were. In short, she believed them to be 'much more advanced' overall. Importantly, she also felt that they could be seen (mistakenly) as socially immature because quite often they did not have a great deal in common with their age peers and therefore did not engage with them. Other participants supported this perception by relating experiences of high-ability students successfully engaging with and establishing friendships with older students. Walt, for instance, spoke of his daughter as not relating to her age peers, but being 'able to connect with' and develop friendships with older students.

High-ability young people were sometimes perceived as having distinctive qualities which could set them apart. When asked what characteristics in a child prompted a decision about accelerating, Sharon, a primary school teacher, said such children were 'sensitive', as did Trish, the parent of a cognitively advanced student. Although sensitivity in itself does not necessarily signify maturity, in these cases it was implied. Trish, for instance, felt that rather than chronological age forming the basis of emotional maturity, it was emotional sensitivity which promoted heightened maturity. Importantly, she also echoed Yvonne's sentiments (above) when she said she thought people did not recognise or understand this, with teachers often saying a young person was 'not socially mature', when in fact they gravitated towards older children.

The perception of talented young people thinking in a 'slightly different way' was a theme to be found in various accounts. One teacher, for instance, felt that they looked at things from 'a slightly different angle' and not 'in a normal way'. Earlier in the interview this teacher had

said that, on the whole, talented students work 'beyond their years' and had a 'knowledge of things beyond their years'. Similarly, Tory, also an educator, saw talented students as having an 'intensity about them' and 'a passion for what they were doing'. This sort of emotional intensity could make them appear 'volatile' as they could easily become 'extremely high and extremely low'.

As participants articulated their understanding of social and emotional maturity, additional dimensions were sometimes included by participants which they felt helped guide the decision-making process. One example of these more complex understandings was that not only was social and emotional maturity required, but it was required at a level beyond age peers. By way of example, Paul, the principal of an Independent primary school, spoke of a student who had been successfully accelerated saying that she had 'a deeper level of thinking and a maturity that their [sic] peers didn't have'.

A related aspect was that of anticipated maturity; that is, situations where a young person was regarded as sufficiently mature at their current stage of development to accelerate, but questions and concerns remained about their emotional and social suitability in the future. Fran, mother of Elly, spoke of her past concerns for her daughter when she imagined her entering high school, or as her father expressed it 'ramifications down the track'. Fran felt that while acceleration within the context of primary school posed neither academic nor social problems, both parents were focused on her future high school experience; again as her father asked, 'what would happen when she was [16]...all her friends were 18 and she was 16?' In the end they chose to accelerate her, and they had now arrived at the anticipated point in time – Elly was 16 with 18-year-old friends. Happily, the problems and concerns had not materialised.

Another example of the multi-dimensional nature of the notion of maturity and "fitting in" was the importance some participants placed on physical appearance. Allison, a secondary school teacher, when describing a particular student successfully accelerated by two and a half years, attributed much of his success to his physical maturity. Although she described this student as 'strong in all academic domains', possessing good social skills and being 'good at sport' she nevertheless added that because 'he was very tall for his age, very mature looking...[he] did not suffer any of the negatives

associated with acceleration.' Allison's comments suggest that she believed physical appearance to be as important as other characteristics. Elsewhere in her interview she commented that this young student was 'very lucky... he was a very mature looking boy so you could not actually tell that he had been accelerated by two and a half years'. Her comments indicate the importance of visually blending in; of not "standing out" amongst ones "older" peers. Implied in Allison's comments is that it was not entirely acceptable to accelerate a student if they appeared physically different in size and that it would result in drawing attention to the young student. The undesirability of "drawing attention" to individual students was also expressed by another teacher as she commented, 'We don't like singling kids out'.

This is not to say that there are no consequences (physical and emotional) for those with a younger physical build. One parent, for instance, spoke of her son feeling somewhat isolated and wanting to participate to a greater extent with his older classmates. Although he was part of the soccer team he did not play much because it was thought, by the school, to be too dangerous. She felt that, as a result, he 'lost ground' socially and became a little introverted. Clearly this was of special importance for both this young student and his mother. However, rather than viewing his acceleration, per se, as the source of such problems, situations such as these require individual management, and in this case perhaps establishing alternative occasions and activities enabling interaction. The more general issue of physical maturity, however, requires detailed investigation that would help provide well-considered responses which would not prevent a young person from being accelerated or discontinue an otherwise successful accelerative experience.

### ***Misinterpreting level of maturity***

One educator, Elizabeth, made the point that because talented young students quite often 'live inside their heads' and are quiet in class, teachers and administrators may fail to recognise social and emotional maturity; as she put it, they 'actually do have the social and emotional maturity - we just can't see it'. With few outward signs to provide guidance to educators it is easy to see how determining levels of maturity can become increasingly challenging, thus raising the issue of how level of maturity may be identified in such cases.

The sorts of difficulties encountered when assessing level of maturity were supported by Angela, parent of a talented young daughter. She explained that her daughter's behaviour would most likely be interpreted by teachers as immature. Her daughter, Emma, was fast approaching Year 1, and, although she was 'outstripping the work' in kindergarten and pre-primary, it was an open learning environment in which Emma could choose her daily activities. Angela could foresee problems for Emma in Year 1, however, where the learning environment would become one of 'Sit down and do what you're told'. She continued 'I could see it's just not going to work.' This was confirmed by the early childhood teacher who had felt that Emma's behaviour would be misinterpreted and regarded as immature. Importantly for this discussion, Angela knew that this young person's apparent wilfulness and refusal to obey, far from being a sign of immaturity, were the outcome of a talented, 'precocious, very strong, very self-centred and respectful' young person who was simply eager to learn, but would be frustrated by an education system which did not recognise her abilities and enthusiasm.

### ***Maturity – multiple meanings and interpretations***

Clearly participants felt that social and emotional maturity was a primary consideration when making decisions regarding acceleration. However, noteworthy in this study are the numerous ways in which participants perceived social and emotional maturity. Various aspects of maturity have been presented and discussed here, some of which were expected, others less so. That participants perceived maturity in terms of a belief in oneself, for instance, or that there were concerns expressed around a young person's future personal development, are not altogether surprising. Nor is the perception that suitability to accelerate also included a level of personal maturity beyond their years. However, teachers' expectations that a talented student should also physically resemble his or her "older" peers, and the perception that being smaller and looking younger have a direct and perhaps causal relationship with unsuccessful acceleration, are of concern.

Overall, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that many of these perceived problems would be less likely, or even cease altogether, in an educational environment in which the presence of accelerative practices and the opportunity to accelerate one's learning (where

appropriate) were the norm. An approach designed to reduce difficulties and skill students is outlined by Peterson and Lorimer (2011), who found high-ability students benefited from participating in affective curriculum. Regular, small groups were designed to target a range of social and emotional issues relevant to the needs of high-ability students. Affective, preventative groups provided an environment where students could share common concerns and learn how to develop specific skills (such as self-reflection and expressive language skills) to manage the issues high-ability students encountered. Students valued the opportunity to share concerns with an adult and regarded the development of social and emotional skills equally important with their academic skills (Peterson and Lorimer, 2011, p. 172).

In response to social concerns, one teacher commented, if a young person was experiencing social difficulties following acceleration then structures could be put in place to help both students and teachers. She later observed that an important part of the accelerative process is preparation – if the young person is emotionally prepared than ‘all the rest just comes along with it’.

This overview has identified participants’ perceptions around such issues as the social and academic consequences of physical appearance, attributes and abilities in the context of acceleration. It has also drawn attention to the complex nature of the concept of social and emotional maturity and associated difficulties in establishing definitions and criteria on which stakeholders can draw during the decision-making process. Limitation of space prevents a more in-depth examination of these issues here; however they will certainly be the subject of further research.

### 3.3 Theme 2: Parental advocacy

Parents of children with any form of exceptionality encounter challenges in understanding their child’s changing needs. Early awareness of an infant’s advanced development as an indicator of heightened cognitive abilities prompts parents, during the child’s first few years, to acquire knowledge about how best to meet their child’s needs. Parents of high-ability children told how acquiring information while their children were very young helped them to familiarise with, and consider arranging, acceleration (early entry to school). The mother of five

children, Tessa was able to identify the differences exhibited by her two high-ability children almost from the start. She explained:

*I noticed it from a very early age; they just seemed to be different from other children. I have five children and the other three, I think they have some characteristics of high ability, but with the girls – it was much more noticeable from such an early age. Camilla spoke at nine months, and [it was] a sentence - , so just things like that that you don’t expect and you don’t read about and you don’t hear other mothers talking about as like a normal benchmark.*

Importantly, Tess notes, it is indeed something ‘you don’t read about’, and about which little is written outside of research-based publications.

Alternatively, parents may normalise their child’s early development and exceptional behaviour. They might have no other frame of reference (especially in the case of families living in remote areas) or they may compare the child’s behaviour to other children in the family and identify similarities in development. Jane’s observations contrast with Tessa’s (above) as she describes the difficulties she encountered in recognising the advanced cognitive abilities of her children:

*Well I didn’t know a lot about that sort of thing until I saw it in my children and I didn’t actually know I was seeing anything in my children because they were my normal children until other people, other parents, pointed out things to me, like “What are you going to do with your child when they go to school?” and I thought “Well probably the same as what you are going to do.” You know, it was my “normal.” (Authors’ emphases).*

This lack of early awareness of a child’s exceptionality defers parents’ acquisition of appropriate information. Delay in the identification of a child’s heightened abilities reduces parents’ preparedness when the child enters formal education and subsequently may diminish a child’s early access to academic acceleration. Delay of this kind is especially likely to occur in families where a child has dual exceptionalities (e.g. heightened abilities in one subject in conjunction with learning disabilities in another, physical disabilities or minority or low socio-economic status). In these situations talented children are less likely to be identified early because of the masking effect of the other exceptionality. The tendency, in schools, to focus

largely or exclusively on the area of deficit compounds a lack of appropriate academic challenge. Students with learning disabilities may be unable to consistently demonstrate their heightened cognitive abilities, with the result that they are less likely to be identified or nominated for acceleration, even though it has been suggested that it is 'particularly beneficial as a vehicle for students with learning disabilities to receive advanced course work in their areas of strength without having to be placed at the same level in their area of weakness' (Brody & Mills, 1997, p. 290). It is noteworthy that parents and teachers of twice exceptional students interviewed for this study shared stories of successful acceleration, including year-level acceleration. Karen discussed the issue in this way:

*There are some who believe that a child with learning disabilities is not a good candidate for acceleration because they assume that the work is going to be harder and therefore the child will have to try harder and if they have got disabilities they won't be able to do that. My experience is actually the contrary; that your disabilities prompt you to learn early on that you have to work harder to cancel out the effects of your disabilities and accordingly when you are "put up" [accelerated] and the work is more interesting, you are prepared to work harder. You like working harder because suddenly the work is more interesting and you actually want to know it, as opposed to learning it for the sake of getting through the exam and then forgetting it. I am not in agreement with people who say twice-exceptional children should not be allowed into acceleration programmes or ability grouped programmes; it really depends on the child.*

Some parents related stories of easy access and transition to accelerated provision. In one isolated case, acceleration occurred without any reference to the parents, with the child returning home one afternoon after school with a complete set of next-year's workbooks.

There were some instances of exemplary practice where a school, having identified a child's needs and suggested acceleration for the child, collaborated closely with parents. During this process parents were familiarised with the school's acceleration policy and provided with information about acceleration (with one school giving parents a school library copy of *A Nation Deceived* to read). In these situations parents felt well-supported as they were guided through a process exploring their child's suitability for acceleration. The decision to accelerate was

made carefully with the student's involvement, with his or her needs, thoughts and wishes being the central focus. The student, the receiving teacher and the receiving class were adequately prepared, and the accelerated child was monitored following acceleration. Any areas of concern raised prior to or following the decision to accelerate were able to be aired and discussed in a collaborative manner. In these situations parents were effusive in their praise for the school, the administrators and the teachers involved. In a few instances, parents had not been aware of acceleration as an intervention strategy and had been uncertain about this being suitable for their child. However, the clarity of the process, the provision of information and access to knowledgeable staff had involved the parents and reassured them when making a collaborative decision to accelerate.

For other parents of high-ability students, however, advocating for their child's educational needs was an extremely frustrating process. Where acceleration had not been initially suggested by the child's teacher, advocating for academic acceleration could be a very complicated issue. Indeed, simply knowing what approach to take when raising the possibility of acceleration with school administrators and teachers was an issue for some parents. While advocating for a child had the potential to be straightforward where a school had a formal acceleration policy accompanied by a transparent process within which to consider acceleration, difficulties arose for parents where the school lacked a well-documented policy. In these situations many parents felt that their child would not have been accelerated had it not been for their persistence and insistence in advocating for their child to be accelerated.

The main difficulty that parents encountered was that school administrators and teachers were often resistant to parental "pressure" and reluctant to accelerate a student if parents were perceived as "pushy". The position of parents was further complicated by the common perception that "pushiness" is often motivated by the desires of the parents and does not necessarily represent the wishes of the child. On the other hand, parents felt that their requests, and occasionally a teacher's recommendations, would be dismissed by school administrators if they were not expressed in a sufficiently forceful way. This created a difficult dilemma for parents who often struggled to find balance between force and effectiveness as advocates and at the same time maintaining credibility.



Parents may become very knowledgeable about their child's needs and many undertake extensive research prior to making a decision about a child's acceleration. As so few Australian teachers have undertaken studies in gifted education, parents sometimes find that they themselves are more knowledgeable and have a greater understanding of the needs of high-ability students than their child's classroom teacher. Parents spoke of accessing information through the internet; by reading extensively; by attending seminars provided by the local Gifted and Talented Association; registering for parent courses, including the Australian Federal Government sponsored parent workshops delivered by GERRIC throughout regional and remote areas of Australia and GERRIC Weekend Parent Courses.

Some parents also felt isolated and unable to discuss their talented child's needs with other parents whose children may be struggling at school. In these situations especially belonging to a talented children's association and having access to knowledgeable people to explore possibilities for their child was particularly important for parents. That said, the cost of travel within this vast and sparsely populated country to attend courses, lectures and programs in urban centres is often prohibitive for rural families living in remote areas as was noted by both parents and teachers. Internet usage, however, has enabled rural and urban families alike to access information about acceleration research and to use this as a springboard to advocate on behalf of their child.

A small group of parents who also had teaching qualifications and experience in schools, utilised professional channels and networks to access information and attend training workshops. Knowledge acquired in an educational context was used in their parenting role and vice-versa, making them powerful, informed and confident advocates for their own children and for the students they teach. Dual roles as parent and teacher along with a commitment to ensure appropriate educational interventions frequently prompted postgraduate study in this field as well as substantial involvement in state-wide associations that support high-ability students and their families.

Another aspect which emerged from the interviews with parents was their desire to prevent the occurrence in a younger child of an older sibling's frustration and underachievement, brought about by what the parents regarded as educational mismanagement and a lack of

academic challenge. Amelia, a parent, described such a situation:

*In the middle of Prep, a family friend who is an expert in children's development said to me that she thought Ella was going backwards and I should take her to be assessed. And I did that, and acceleration was recommended, which was lucky because the prep teacher [had] told me that she was backward developmentally and she probably should repeat prep... I wanted her to maintain whatever interest she could in school and I thought that if she wasn't accelerated she would suffer the same fate as her sister 14 years ago, who had been required to repeat Grade 2 because she was assessed as somehow backward... I think that detriment has carried over into that child's life; she is now 22 and only just doing well at university. She is only just starting to believe that she is academically able.*

Some parents indicated they would go to extraordinary lengths to ensure their child is able to access appropriate educational provision through acceleration. Interstate moves and several changes of school were considered the norm for families constantly searching for a school that would provide acceleration for their child. Parents provided transport from a primary school to a high school; waited through class and completed the return journey to enable an accelerated primary school student to access secondary classes several times a week. Families, especially those living in rural areas, relocated or travelled considerable distances to access student programs or schools that addressed a student's needs, even though these were located in other states.

There was also a tendency for parents to seek private independent professionals to advise and help them approach schools about acceleration. Whether seeking professional advice about the most effective advocacy strategies, recruiting an advocate to accompany them to meetings and speak on their behalf, or arranging for psychometric assessments to be conducted by private psychologists, parents are engaging a range of professional services to support them as they advocate for their child's needs. This practice may assist parents in the advocacy role, but it raises the issue of how parents without financial resources are able to negotiate their way through the process without similar assistance. Because of difficulties associated with accessing these private resources, as well as those of distance and lack

of financial resources, parents of children attending schools in rural or low socio-economic areas require schools to support, initiate and facilitate acceleration for academically advanced children.

A psychometric assessment may be required by a school as part of the evaluation process prior to acceleration, with schools frequently placing considerable emphasis on the results of such an assessment. Parents too feel they can advocate more effectively when trying to influence school decision-makers if they approach the school with an objective, quantitative report detailing the child's abilities. However, confusion and frustration surround the optimum way to obtain independent assessments of the child. Who will conduct the assessment, the type and extent of the assessment, the validity of the instruments, the costs entailed and the role of assessments within the advocacy process are just some of the issues which must be considered. School administrators may reject reports considered out of date or because test instruments used are regarded as inappropriate or inadequate; schools with psychologists available on staff may prefer to administer any testing required within the school whereas other parents may be referred to a private psychologist. The emphasis is usually placed upon testing and reporting the child's cognitive abilities and academic skills. Despite widespread parent and teacher concerns about a child's social and emotional maturity level, this area is rarely formally and quantitatively assessed. On the important role of psychometric assessment Amelia explained:

*I think the only thing that influenced the school to accelerate her was the psychometric test...The characteristics that I described either weren't noticed by them or attributed to some other failing in Ella, really.. Oh, and [the gifted education consultant's] involvement in explaining to them why acceleration was important and indicated in this girl's case was also a help.*

Several parents mentioned that the child's placement in the lower grade of a composite (two-grade-level) class facilitated the implementation of subject or year-level acceleration. The gradual year-long transition to the higher class eased any concerns that parents or the child's teacher may have initially held about the child's suitability for acceleration. Students had exposure to work at the higher class level and could move easily between groups according to areas of strength without moving outside the classroom. The teacher in each case could see that placement with older students in the composite class was better "fit" for the child. The child developed

relationships with students in the class ahead and was able to make a smooth social transition between classes. As the year progressed, the child was able to work more consistently with the older students, gaining a sense of belonging with the proposed class group. With regular communication between parents, student and teacher confirming the appropriateness of acceleration, a formal arrangement about acceleration was decided. At the end of the year, the child simply progressed to the next year level with the older students.

Parents of a child whom they believe requires further acceleration (either additional subject acceleration or another year-level acceleration) have had mixed responses from schools. Responses range from a teacher or gifted education specialist who proposes further acceleration, through to resistance, disbelief and even horror that a parent is suggesting that the child's needs have not been adequately met by the initial acceleration. Parents may struggle themselves, trying to come to terms with what further acceleration means for their child now and in the years ahead. Schools that have acceleration policies and procedures in place are usually comfortable in applying these again to consider a further acceleration. Without a process in place, however, schools have difficulty considering further acceleration. In these situations parents experience frustration in advocating for additional acceleration and may abandon their attempt altogether to get the school to agree to a further acceleration for their child.

In this theme we have sought to describe some of the ways in which parents approached an advocacy role. Parent participants perceived the role as one requiring knowledge and understanding of how best to meet the needs of the child. This involved being able to identify personal characteristics indicating high ability, as well as developing strong collaborative relationships with educators. The importance of the advocacy role was best summarised by Amy who said:

*I think acceleration is really, really important for children like our son. I believe we would call him exceptionally gifted and the radical acceleration is what he has needed. It's hard to explain to people that that is what your child wants; [that] it's not what's been forced on him. It's not a danger to him; it's a danger to him to make him sit doing what would be quite mundane stuff... It would be like imprisonment for 12 years to have to go through it at the pace that it is planned for the majority of children to go through.*



### 3.4 Theme 3: Students who have been accelerated

One of the most significant findings emerging from the analysis of interview data is that students valued and were stimulated by the increased cognitive challenge and academic rigor encountered when accelerated. Without exception, students interviewed commented on the intellectual and academic advantages of acceleration. Even the few students who made negative comments (regarding how their acceleration was implemented, the response of other students or the lack of follow up once acceleration took place) were very clear about the academic benefits of acceleration itself. Students who were accelerated through early entry had no experience of school prior to being accelerated, and those accelerated when very young had little memory of their educational experience before acceleration. However, these students reflected upon their school experience and believed that they would have been bored and disengaged if they had progressed through school a year later.

Students achieved very well academically following acceleration. Accelerated students regularly achieved high marks in their class or year level, and scored extremely well in external tests and academic competitions. Some attained positions as school leaders and achieved the position of Dux (top of their year level) in their final year at school. Those currently attending university are enrolled in their preferred course, academically engaged, and achieving good results; importantly, claiming that they could not imagine still being at school and doing their final years of schooling.

In addition to one or more years of whole-grade acceleration, a number of students experienced further acceleration in one or more subjects. This included primary school students who were attending classes in high school and secondary students enrolled in university subjects. Again, the feedback from students was very positive about this arrangement. Most students felt that meeting their intellectual needs was paramount and spoke with intense feeling about the experience of being bored or disengaged from the work being done in class. Michael, the only student interviewed whose year-level acceleration was reversed at the time of an inter-country move, described his return to a class of age peers as ‘academically quite boring.’ He was subsequently subject accelerated and undertook a demanding academic program in his final two years of school, though he spoke longingly about

the intellectual and social benefits he had experienced participating in a cluster program for gifted primary school students in his country of origin.

Some students believed that the acceleration they experienced was insufficient for their needs. They described initial benefits when accelerated, but of soon wanting more. Students craved intellectual stimulation through rigorous academic work, faster pace of instruction, tasks that provided greater challenges and higher expectations from their teachers. Without further intellectual stimulation, students described lengthy periods of disengagement in class. Students sought stimulation through reading extensively in class, daydreaming or focusing on social interactions with classmates. This had a detrimental impact upon work habits, ability to maintain focus and the development of critical academic skills. One student, Emily, related how she came to ‘switch off’ in class:

*I do think early entry wasn't enough for me and I think it's important that parents and teachers are aware of the effects of acceleration and the problems with not being stimulated enough... I think it was just the fact that even having been accelerated the classes didn't move fast enough so once I got bored I learned to switch off by reading or by making up stories. I'd spend all day in a fantasy land...and I think because I learned to switch off I'm having a lot of trouble now switching back on and making sure that my work is up to the standards it needs to be. Once you've learned to switch your brain off it's very hard to kind of unlearn something you've done for ten years.*

Social and emotional maturity has been mentioned throughout this study by educators, parents and students. Although it is a major consideration in decisions to accelerate children it is yet to be clearly defined within the context of high-ability students. Students are expected to demonstrate good social skills with their existing classmates in order to be considered mature enough to be accelerated. Ironically, the lack of “fit” with existing classmates is one of the indicators that high-ability students may require acceleration. Teachers with knowledge about the social and emotional characteristics that align with cognitive advancement understand that emotional sensitivity does not preclude emotional maturity and that social integration with older students is more likely to occur when students are accelerated. Accelerated students participating in this study reported that by being

advanced to the class above, they were able to develop a greater number of friendships as well as deeper, more meaningful relationships with older students. In addition to the intellectual and personal benefits attained through appropriate levels of academic challenge, high-ability students report improved emotional well-being and the development of social relationships from participation in formal support structures within schools (Eddles-Hirsh, Vialle, Rogers and McCormick, 2010). Friendships based upon similar intellectual abilities, shared interests and an advanced sense of humour were more satisfying and increased the accelerands' social connectedness and personal well-being.

Although aware that parents and teachers are apprehensive about the social and emotional implications of accelerating a child, talented students were generally dismissive of such concerns. Talented students saw themselves as more comfortable and confident when relating with older students and adults. They perceived that following acceleration, they are less likely to be viewed as "weird"; they were better accepted by classmates and had an improved social 'fit' with older students.

*People always talk about the social implications of acceleration and every time people discuss that, that's the big thing that comes up. I've always interacted with the older students and even with adults now. I find them a lot easier to get on with than sometimes my peers, simply because they are more predictable, I suppose, but I don't think that the social factor is such a big issue. It's certainly not enough to ruin the intellectual side of things which is what holding people back does, I think.*

(Emily, Student)

A student's physical size and development emerges as another factor that is frequently considered in the decision to accelerate. Radically accelerated students mentioned (but did not dwell upon) differences in physical size and development because they were more pronounced at the time of further accelerations, yet there is no indication that this presented a social or emotional difficulty for them. Descriptions of primary school aged students, wearing distinctive uniforms, at ease and chatting with much older students in the high school playground following attendance at secondary school classes counter the concerns expressed by adults responsible for making these decisions.

Physical development and maturity have been expressed in various ways and related to sport, fitting in with play, fine motor development, physical skills and endurance. Fine motor skills that are not as advanced as those of children in the year ahead are seen by adults as a stumbling block to acceleration. This is especially so for young children considered for early entry to school or acceleration in the early years of schooling. Aspects of physical development that may be chronologically appropriate, but perceived as delayed in comparison with students in the class ahead, such as the child's inability to dress independently, write legibly or manipulate equipment were seen as problematic by some participants. Being unable to participate in age-based sporting competitions once accelerated is seen as a major concern for students of any age in a country that reveres sporting prowess. Perversely, this was seen as a problem whether or not the student exhibited any athletic talent or interest in sport. Only one student, who is a talented swimmer, mentioned the need (while a secondary student) to attend a primary school swimming carnival and compete against age peers in order to qualify for participation in a regional swimming competition.

The timing of acceleration was an issue raised during interviews, with preference generally given to accelerating as early as possible. Students who experienced early entry saw their acceleration as seamless and without difficulties. Having no other school experience to compare with being accelerated, these children perceived being accelerated as the norm. They established friendships early and moved through school without much sense of being different from classmates. Aware very early that they were younger than others in their class, students interpreted this as a badge of honour but thought little more about it. When asked about the timing of acceleration and a recommendation for other students being accelerated, one student, Sophie, responded:

*Definitely not later because [I think] the earlier you are accelerated...it would be...easier to integrate into that age group and adjust with those friends. The youngest age possible I would say. I think I was happy when I did. Definitely sooner rather than later.*

(Sophie, Student)

In situations where acceleration takes place after the first year of school, schools displaying exemplary practice place emphasis on, and allocate time to, adequately preparing the student, the receiving teacher and students in the class the accelerand will move into. Reflecting upon their experiences, accelerated students highlighted the need for educators to monitor progress and follow up with students *after* the acceleration takes place. Some students felt they had been moved to the new class but then left to fend for themselves without guidance following the acceleration. Students believed it was assumed that they would adjust academically and integrate with the other students (and most did so, after a while) but they maintain it would have been helpful to have someone to talk to on a regular basis as issues arose with academic work or with other students. Students were keen to give the impression that they adjusted well following acceleration. However, with the benefit of hindsight and a mature perspective, older students felt that a designated adult (not necessarily the new class teacher whom the child may wish to impress with how well she is coping) should be assigned to monitor the child's progress, identify any emerging issues and follow up to ensure the transition is successful and the child feels supported during and beyond the acceleration. Sophie spoke of her experience:

*I was just left to my own devices. Maybe they could check up on how you were going and just, if there is anything – make sure there are no problems and things. It is basic, but I just think that little things add up and little things help.*

The need for educators to be aware of issues that might arise and to monitor beyond the point of acceleration was again raised by a student who had participated in a self-contained accelerated class before being moved into mainstream classes. Although very positive about the academic and social experience gained by participating in the accelerated class, concerns were raised about other (non-accelerated) students' behaviour during the period of transition back into mainstream classes. This student felt that more could have been done by school personnel to monitor, mitigate and respond to other students' inappropriate comments and bullying behaviour.

In a country that values egalitarianism there are often strong negative reactions to any perceptions of elitism. The tendency in Australian culture to "put down" anyone seen as having heightened abilities, skills or talents is referred to as the "tall poppy syndrome". During interviews, a few students revealed that they had

experienced bullying at school. Research conducted by Peterson (2006) indicates a high prevalence of bullying among the gifted (67% of her sample of gifted students were bullied at some stage during their time at school). Although few accelerated students in this study mentioned bullying, this was not an issue specifically explored. Students attributed bullying to the likelihood that other students felt threatened by the presence of a younger, brighter student in their class. One student described 'just unbelievably extensive exclusion and bullying', but felt the school was largely responsible for not addressing this as they would normally do with other instances of bullying.

Students were also aware of the "tall poppy syndrome" when going through school as it applied to students with other abilities and talents who had not been accelerated. Admissions by accelerated students that they felt it was "cool" to be accelerated, regarded it as a "badge of honour" to be the youngest in the class and felt that, on occasions, they were a bit "show-offish" about their abilities suggest that the "tall poppy syndrome" was not a significant inhibitor in these students' experiences of acceleration.

Throughout Australia, adolescents are legally allowed to hold a driver's license at the age of 17 and to drink alcohol at the age of 18. There is a culture of adolescent drinking with binge drinking unfortunately common among teenagers, including some who are under the legal drinking age. Adolescents in Australia generally celebrate their 18th birthday as a rite of passage, with a social event that includes alcohol. When discussing acceleration, parents and educators inevitably raise, as a concern, the fact that students will not be able to drive or drink at the same time as their classmates or friends if they are accelerated. Adults view this as a serious issue: acceleration may result in students being left out of social gatherings and feeling that they are out of sync with their friends if they are unable to drive, drink or participate in social events where alcohol is served. This issue tends to be raised in discussion even when the child being considered for acceleration is in the earliest grades of primary school.

Students, however, indicate this issue is more of a concern for adults than it is for students. Students entering this stage of adolescence and discussing this issue at the time of being interviewed expressed frustration that they were not able to attend certain social events (at university, in particular) where alcohol would be served but actually expressed little desire to be able

to drive or to drink alcohol. Their tone indicated “this is an issue – just not a big issue”, suggesting temporary annoyance rather than distress or isolation from friends. A few students were opposed to the consumption of alcohol and others showed little interest in drinking alcohol. Most were not interested in driving, even well beyond the age of being able to do so, explaining that they were still students without the means to own a car and like most of their friends, they relied upon parents or public transport. Older students reflecting on that period of time felt the emphasis in deciding to accelerate a child should rest upon the need for intellectual stimulation and academic challenge and being unable to drive or drink at the same age as friends should not be a reason to restrict acceleration. Anne, a parent, discussed her daughter’s experience:

*My daughter has spoken very positively of her experience with acceleration and is keen to dispel myths such as that it’s not a good idea for when all their friends are 18 and they are only 17. That has proved to be a complete non-issue for her because her friends aren’t wild drinkers or mad drivers anyhow. But she would have held her own in any regard... she is a confident person and that was never going to be an issue. But it is not an issue, I personally feel; because it is much better that children spend ten years of their schooling at an appropriate level than having one year at inappropriate level when they are older. It is certainly more vital to be with their true peers earlier rather than later.*

Despite identifying academic and social benefits from having been accelerated and stating that he felt happy and successful, one student was ambivalent about whether he would repeat the experience, knowing now about the bullying he experienced from other students at the time of reintegrating into mainstream classes. He regards the acceleration experience positively but believes the school could have done more to address the issue of bullying through preventative measures and interventions. Another student who reversed year-level acceleration would have, in retrospect, chosen to stay with gifted age peers in a cluster group setting but, without access to such a program, undertook a subject acceleration in conjunction with a rigorous upper-secondary program.

Accelerated students interviewed for this study were overwhelmingly positive about acceleration whether they experienced subject acceleration, early entry, year-level (grade-skip), concurrent enrolment, access

to tertiary level subjects, radical acceleration or some combination of these or other forms of acceleration through doing advanced level work in their existing class, moving between grades, physically moving into a class in the year ahead, moving between institutions or undertaking acceleration through distance education. There were perceived benefits in being accelerated in conjunction with other students, whether that was with one other student, a small group or with a whole class of other students. From the students’ perspective, there were significant benefits intellectually, academically and socially from being academically accelerated.

### 3.5 Theme 4: Perceived difficulties and constraints

In our discussion of this theme we also draw on selected data compiled from our examination of selected gifted and talented education policies. Some school administrators felt that acceleration is not required in their school environments where, it is believed, sufficient challenge for high-ability students is provided through enrichment, extension, curriculum differentiation and extra-curricular activities. Acceleration in some contexts is considered an “added burden” for busy students in schools that offer numerous extracurricular activities, programs and opportunities for student involvement. Multitalented students may be involved in numerous activities and there is a concern, in some schools, that they will not be able to keep up with more advanced work because of their current commitments.

Despite these administrators believing that acceleration was not required for high-ability students in their schools, it was found that acceleration was, indeed, occasionally offered, albeit in exceptional circumstances. There was also found to be an accelerative component in certain subjects (especially Maths) and extension programs offered to high-ability students in these schools. Schools that did not generally implement acceleration did have students who had previously been accelerated (e.g. while at primary school, prior to enrolling at a secondary school) or accelerated at the point of entry to the school. At times this occurred without the receiving school being aware of the parents’ decision to effect acceleration in this manner.

Inflexibility of the timetable was frequently mentioned as a constraint to implementing subject acceleration, particularly in secondary schools. In primary schools, where each class has primarily one teacher, there was greater flexibility to manage the structure of the day.

It is possible for teachers at different year levels to collaborate so that certain subjects are aligned, allowing students to access the same subject at a different year level. With specialist subject teachers being allocated classes at specific times of the day in secondary school, administrators who have responsibility for the timetable sometimes regarded subject acceleration as too difficult to manage, as Merrotsy (2009) also found.

Schools that prioritise the needs of high-ability learners have demonstrated that it is possible, with knowledge of students' needs and careful planning, to ensure that students have access to classes at appropriate levels with minimal rearrangement of the timetable or disruption for the students concerned. With the use of technology to assist learning, greater opportunities are becoming available for students studying subjects at more advanced levels than other students in their cohort. Schools are increasingly using distance education modes to allow students to take subjects not offered at small schools and to enable high-ability students to take subjects at an advanced level.

Tertiary level subjects are now offered in certain schools, especially schools that have formed partnerships with a university. Some selective high schools have promoted their link with the local university as a way of attracting high-ability students who want to include tertiary subjects in their academic program while attending secondary school. Universities are increasingly making tertiary level subjects available for secondary students as a way of attracting high-ability students to enrol after they graduate from school.

Inconsistencies in policies and practices, within schools or education systems and between states, can create difficulties for parents searching for appropriate provision for their child. Policies that do not include acceleration, provide a process for considering a child's suitability for different forms of acceleration or outline best practice methods to prepare, implement, monitor and support a child's acceleration fail to address the needs of high-ability students. Even where policies at systemic or individual school levels are exemplary, implementation of the policy can be patchy and is still highly influenced by local educational practices. Although there has been greater utilisation of acceleration in recent years, further attitudinal change and acceptance of acceleration is still required. The practice of academic acceleration will be

implemented for high-ability students when Merrotsy's (2009) insight is widely accepted:

The issue may be placed in perspective by correctly noticing that a gifted student is *already accelerated* and that what is accelerated through academic acceleration is simply the student's progress through the formal school curriculum. The key point is that matching the curriculum to the student's abilities is not acceleration per se, but rather is developmentally appropriate teaching practice (Merrotsy, 2009, p. 71).

As noted in Section 1.5 changes in policy and practice can occur when there is a change of school principal or key decision-maker. This creates difficulties for parents who have selected a school for their children because of their provision for high-ability students and their willingness to consider acceleration. In such cases, some parents moved a high-ability child to a new school or between states in attempt to have their child's needs met. The tendency for such changes to occur also appeared to add to staff reluctance to implement acceleration for a child who may then have this provision withdrawn at a later date.

Education systems with state-wide policies that support acceleration allow teachers and parents to feel more confident when advocating for a child's long-term needs. The development of a written Individual Education Plans (IEP) or Individual Learning Plans (ILP) for students provides some degree of security in that it acts as an agreed contract between parents and the school to provide specific accommodations to meet the child's needs at each year level.

Accelerating a child may not, by itself, be sufficient. Students require monitoring to identify further needs and address any issues that arise including the possibility of further subject or year-level acceleration in some cases. Some difficulties with accelerations undertaken at the point of transition to high school have been reported by educators. While entry to a new stage of schooling with a new group of students may be seen as desirable, it is critical that students accelerated at these times are carefully prepared and do not miss out on activities planned to smooth the transition for all students. Decisions made immediately prior to the start of the new school year do not allow time for sufficient preparation and planning to take place. Likewise, decisions made by parents to implement an acceleration by enrolling



the child in a grade level higher as they move between schools may result in a poor educational match as this may not allow for adequate assessment of the child's abilities and academic skills in relation to students and provisions in the new school context.

Some students attending self-contained accelerated classes reported difficulties (from other students) when they were returned to mainstream classes. These students felt they were left to fend for themselves without follow-up or ongoing support by administrators. One student perceived that the school allowed a culture of bullying to occur without addressing the issue with offending students whereas they might normally address other forms of bullying. This raises the question of why teachers in a school with a strong anti-bullying policy might allow bullying to occur against accelerated students.

In another school, the benefits experienced by students in an accelerated class were maintained throughout the students' secondary experience by having a self-contained, accelerated class at every year level. Students were able to maintain friendships and have the academic benefits associated with the accelerated class while integrating with students in the broader cohort through a range of planned activities. A culture of acceptance was actively promoted by the administration and teaching staff and was helped by having this structure of accelerated classes.

Schools may inadvertently create further difficulties for students by selecting a name for a class or program that is designed to market the provision to prospective students and parents, but in doing so, may emphasise the different nature of the class. Names that suggest elitism may contribute to the development of a stigma against members of this class. A lack of integration with students from other classes for non-academic activities was also seen to contribute to isolation of the talented students. However, despite these factors, students who participated in self-contained accelerated classes were uniformly positive about experiences within the class. There are significant academic and social benefits for students placed together for acceleration and students who have participated in such programs evaluate the time in their accelerated class as their best experience at school. Difficulties seem to arise when students are removed from such a program and placed into a range of mainstream classes.

Teacher/professional development that is focused on acceleration and the social and emotional characteristics and needs of high-ability students is urgently required. Professional development sessions should be attended by senior administrators and all decision-makers responsible for meeting the needs of high-ability students. Professional development must be available to schools located in regional, remote, low socio-economic and disadvantaged areas. The GERRIC Gifted Education Professional Development Package, available online, provides opportunities for schools to increase staff awareness of the complex needs of high-ability students and acceleration as a way of meeting these needs.

Parents reported confusion about the best ways to advocate for their high-ability child to be considered for acceleration. Parents, teachers and administrators in schools that do not have an established policy, process and embedded practice for accelerating students sometimes developed adversarial relationships. When there were firmly held but opposing views about the appropriateness of acceleration as a way of meeting a student's needs, conflicts could arise.

Education programs for parents to build knowledge about acceleration and identify strategies for effective advocacy will assist parents to collaborate with schools more effectively. Programs offered by state associations and by GERRIC will continue to build parent awareness, knowledge and skills in this area.

Parents and teachers share concerns about the social and emotional maturity and suitability of a child for academic acceleration but these concerns are frequently based upon subjective perceptions of emotional regulation and social integration. Cognitively advanced children experience heightened sensitivities and intensities which may be misinterpreted as social immaturity. Prior to acceleration, talented students may have been placed among classmates who share neither their abilities nor interests, leading to social isolation or withdrawal from chronological peers and contributing to a perception by adults that the talented student lacks social skills.

The issue of social and emotional maturity remains at the forefront of parents and educators' concerns about acceleration of high-ability students. Recommendations from professionals outside the school (psychologist, paediatrician, counsellor or gifted education specialist) who have a thorough knowledge of the characteristics of



high-ability students, can assess and attest to the child's maturity having in some cases mediated this concern and facilitated acceleration. Jean, a counsellor, had this to say:

*Often I find that teachers have concerns such as they won't be socially mature enough. The social concerns would often be the major thing that teachers would see as an issue that they would have to argue perhaps against a student being accelerated. When you're interviewing kids for acceleration one of the things that will come up will be that they don't fit in well with their peers. So often that's misinterpreted, I think, to mean that they're socially immature. Whereas if you really ask the right questions and you listen to what the kid's saying, generally you find that they just haven't found a peer group where they share similar interest or similar levels of interests and often when you talk to them they will have social relationships with a whole range of people where they have like interests... You also get some kids that...you could describe...as having very rich internal world, so their social life is not really important to them because they have such a rich internal world.*

Policies that include information about the emotional characteristics, personality patterns and psycho-social needs of high-ability students would help to clarify this issue for those considering acceleration for a child. Building greater awareness of these factors within schools and across various child-centred professional bodies would also contribute to increased skills in assessing high-ability students, as well as support the decision-making process regarding the student's suitability for acceleration.

The *Iowa Acceleration Scale (IAS)* is highly recommended and increasingly used in schools when considering a child for acceleration; however the list of test instruments suggested and some of the terms used with it are not familiar to Australian educators. Without sufficient knowledge of appropriate tests used in the Australian context that might be substituted for those listed in the *IAS*, educators interviewed were sometimes wary about utilizing the scale to help determine whether a child is suited for acceleration. The development of a brief paper to accompany the *IAS* to explain terms and suggest possible adaptations to the *IAS* suitable for the Australian context would go some way towards allowing educators to feel more confident using the *Iowa Acceleration Scale*.

Despite considerable variation in the physical development of students of similar chronological age, physical maturity and variance from that of classmates, have been mentioned in relation to concerns about development during the adolescent phase. Physical size and maturity were issues raised by adults and linked to concerns about girls being out of sync with classmates' breast development and menarche and also to fears of an increased risk of bullying among boys. Interestingly, in one of the few cases where an accelerated student did report being physically bullied following acceleration, the student was tall and physically mature, even when compared with older students at the time when bullying occurred.

Teachers generally require that students will have advanced social and physical skills before they will consider acceleration (Vialle, Ashton, Carlon, & Rankin, 2001; Robinson, 2004). In addition to these factors, students are sometimes expected to be uniformly capable and skilled, demonstrating high levels of achievement in all subject areas before being considered for a full grade advancement. There are indications that school administrators expected students placed in self-contained, accelerated classes to demonstrate high levels of ability and achievement across all subject areas. Students may be restricted to subject acceleration if they are seen to have an uneven profile or if they exhibit specific strength in a limited number of subject areas, even if their performance in their areas of relative weakness is still within the above average range.

Students indicated that they were not always consulted about their wishes regarding acceleration, especially if acceleration took place when students attended primary school. However, other students believed that, although they were not consulted, if they had objected at the time, their views would have been taken into consideration. Conflicting stories presented by parents and adolescents suggest the child may have been involved but may possibly have forgotten the details of events that took place years before. Some students said that the details of their acceleration were now quite vague or had been forgotten altogether. In one instance, parents provided detail to demonstrate that their daughter's acceleration (from grades one to three) was initiated, then actively and persistently pursued by the girl herself in the face of parental concern and the principal's opposition. However, their daughter, now aged 16 and interviewed for this research, has little memory of her part in arranging for the acceleration to take place and believes that although she was consulted, her parents arranged the acceleration for her.

### 3.6 Survey analysis

The self-completion survey of 211 teachers and administrators conducted as part of this project provides a statistical first glimpse of how far we can generalise the kinds of opinions expressed in the more in-depth interviews. While we have only the characteristics tabulated earlier in this Section to argue for the sample's representativeness, there is no obvious reason to doubt that it accounts for a wide range of situations and experiences among contemporary Australian educators. As described above, the survey instrument consists of six pages centred on some 30 five-point Likert items concerning attitudes to academic acceleration and those accelerated, together with details of the respondent's relevant circumstances and characteristics. The near-unanimity revealed by the survey data on some issues relating to the acceleration of the academically talented is as impressive as the extent of disagreement on others.

The first and foremost result to note is a general recognition that something must be done for the talented and bored student. Few, if any, of our respondents seem to feel that academically frustrated students should "grin and bear it", even if they do not always agree on the forms assistance should assume. As shown in Figure 3.1, nearly seventy per cent agree ('somewhat' or 'totally') with the idea that it is more detrimental for a child to have to sit in a class covering material already mastered than it is for them to skip a grade, while over eighty-five per cent endorse the view that the key educational question is 'not whether to accelerate a gifted learner but rather how to do so'. Similarly favourable reactions to talented students and the need to assist them recur in the written comments offered by some of the survey respondents:

*Gifted students tend to raise the bar as to your own teaching. Can be surprising!*  
(Teacher, Male 51, Tasmania)

*I felt I had done something to assist the children but wasn't sure if it was the 'best' course of action for the children concerned.*  
(Teacher, Female 44, Queensland)

*It is a precious thing to be able to help a student reach her potential.*  
(Administrator, Female 65, South Australia)

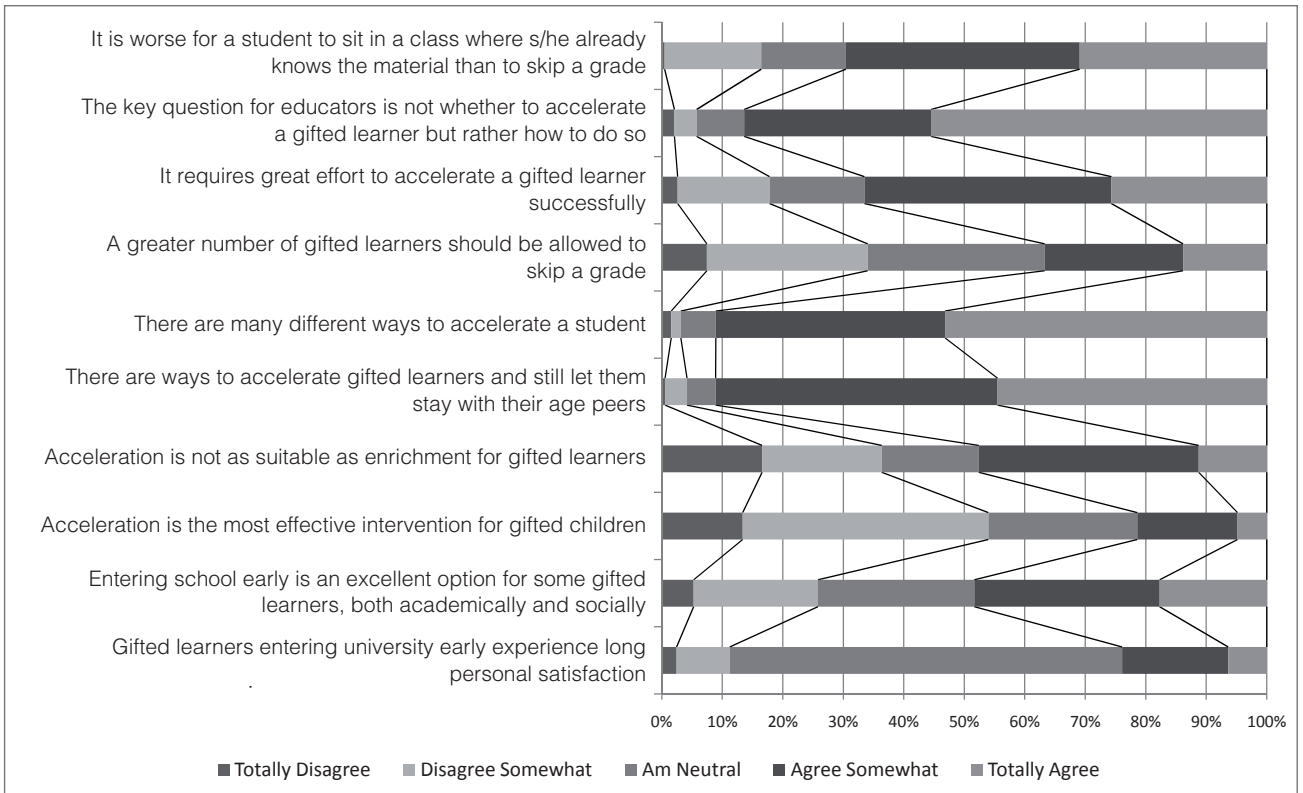
At the same time, there is greater ambivalence evident in attitudes to grade-level acceleration in the strict sense of the term. Roughly similar proportions of the sample agree and disagree with the suggestion that a greater

number of talented pupils should be allowed to skip a grade, with the remaining 29 per cent expressing neutrality on the question. Australian teachers' attitudes to acceleration are illustrated by Lassig's (2003) findings that teachers working in schools with a specific focus and provision for high-ability students expressed the most positive general attitudes towards acceleration, however teachers in mainstream schools had greater support for increased use of year-level acceleration. In our sample, two-thirds think that it 'requires great effort' to accelerate a student successfully. Moreover, more than half of those surveyed dispute the claim that acceleration is 'the most effective intervention for gifted children', with almost as many agreeing that it is not as suitable for such learners as enrichment would be. We can perhaps begin to get a sense of why this reluctance to accelerate should be the case from the fully 90 per cent of respondents in agreement with the propositions that there are many ways to accelerate a student and that this can be achieved while keeping them with their age peers. If we are seeking the wellsprings of concern among teachers and educational administrators about the potential downsides of accelerating, then what it implies for the non-academic development of the student and also what it means for those around them would be obvious places to begin. As earlier Sections of the report have indicated, issues of the emotional and personal maturity of the child figure at least as prominently in this area as do purely academic considerations.

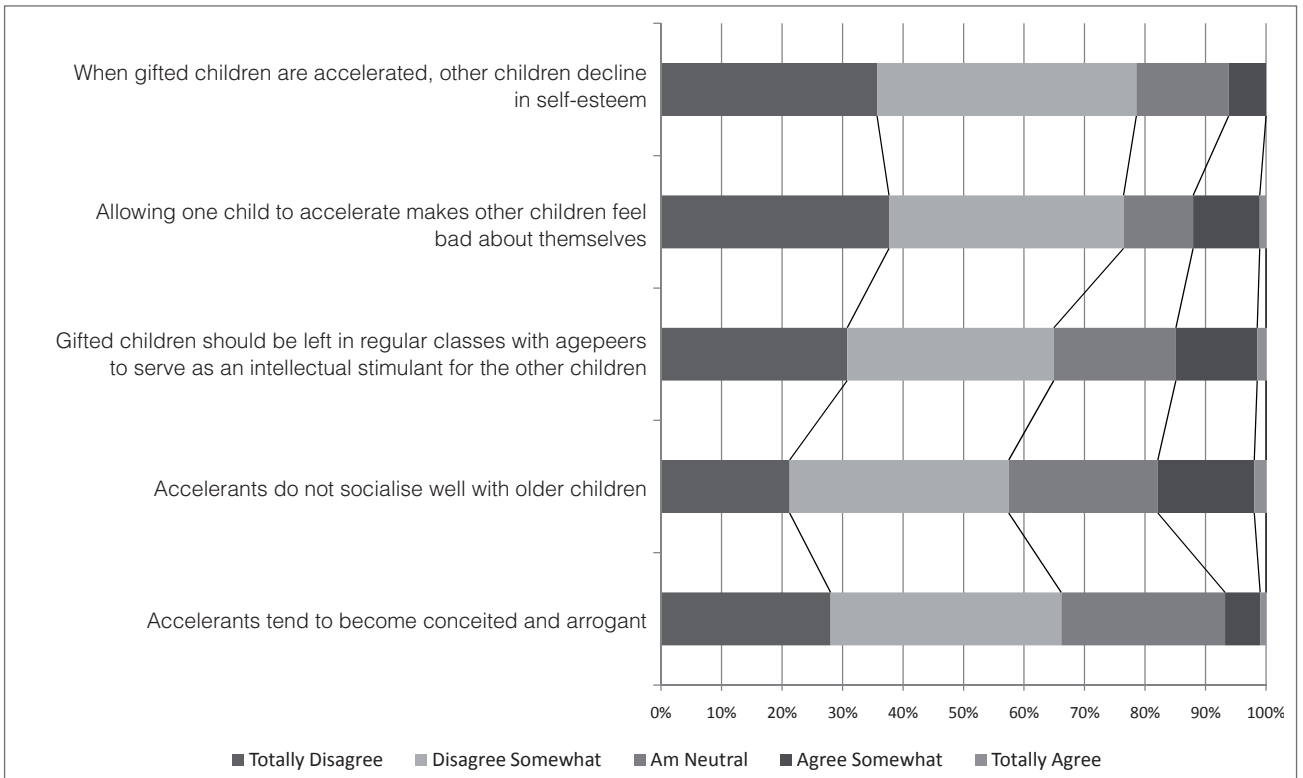
Broadening the focus to other aspects of scholastic advanced promotion, it is apparent that opinions vary, significantly. Nearly half of all respondents agree that starting school early is good for some bright individuals, but the other half divides fairly evenly between those who disagree and those who profess neutrality. When the question was posed as to whether entering university early was a good move, 'Am Neutral' was the preferred response, attracting 64.9 per cent of respondents. Perhaps teachers view students' progression to tertiary education as less their responsibility than students' movement across the school years.

An interesting finding of the survey was one issue that did not appear to be a cause for concern. Whatever the perceived merits of acceleration among respondents, they do not generally object to it *on the grounds of inequity*. There is little or no suggestion on the part of those surveyed that moving a gifted child up a rung or two is in any way unfair on the other students (Figure 3.2). More than three-quarters of the sample disagree, at least slightly, with the idea that accelerating the talented

**Figure 3.1 Acceleration as One Solution to the Problems of the Gifted Learner**



**Figure 3.2 The Impact on Other Children**



makes the others feel bad about themselves and a similar proportion doubt that it produces a decline in their self-esteem. Only minorities of responses favour the proposition that the talented should stay un-promoted so as to intellectually stimulate their classmates (14.9%), or the idea that they do not socialise well with older children if accelerated (17.8%), or that they then tend to become arrogant and conceited (6.8%). So if we are to find the roots of anxieties about the emotional and social impact of acceleration policies, the focus should not be upon the effects on those *around* the accelerand, but rather upon the child in question.

As discussed in earlier Sections of the report, a key focus of decision-making around the acceleration of the talented concerns their personal suitability, whether they are mature enough (or even tall enough!) and a good candidate for the procedure. Likewise, as Figure 3.3 reveals, it is around matters of a young person's social and emotional development that the concerns of our teachers and administrators cluster.

Only about one-fifth of respondents think that acceleration places excessive demands upon the child academically. This makes sense, as it is presumably for academic reasons that the issue of early promotion comes up in the first place; if the student evidently could not cope with work more advanced than that ordinarily assigned, he or she would not be under consideration for acceleration. Nor for that matter is it a question of the scholastically accelerated student becoming too exclusively focused on their studies. Bookworm stereotypes notwithstanding, few among those surveyed view an accelerated student as less inclined to be involved in extracurricular activities (8.7%, and even that is entirely 'Agree Somewhat'). Rather, the perceived problems with a policy of acceleration, when it comes to what is expected of the accelerand, lie in other areas.

Moreover, these apparent grounds for concern are longstanding frustrations for advocates of the advancement of the talented student, who have argued that there is no good evidence of academic acceleration creating emotional problems for the child (Vialle et al, 2001) and even that the absence of developmentally appropriate education for the very bright is more likely to be a source of childhood misery and misbehaviour (Gross, 2006). Despite this, around thirty per cent of our present survey respondents agree at least somewhat with the suggestion that acceleration will create stress and risk early burnout,

with nearly as many suspecting that accelerands have fewer friends than they would have had otherwise. Granted, few members of the sample group are willing to say that accelerands are not as happy and/or not as well-organised as their age-graded contemporaries, but it is telling that over 37 per cent were unwilling to express an opinion for or against in each of these cases.

The remaining items in Figure 3.3 point to sharp differences of opinion on the personal and emotional impact of acceleration. A third of respondents think it 'pushes children to grow up faster than they should', but half disagree. Just over forty per cent see it as leading to problems of emotional adjustment; slightly fewer than forty per cent disagree. Fully 47.3 per cent endorse the proposition that 'accelerands miss important social interaction'. So if there are concerns among our sample of teachers about the impact of an advanced placement on the child involved, it is not an academic matter *per se*, but one of looking at the whole person and viewing the child in situ. If we are to promote the use of acceleration for the gifted student, it is here that there are manifest concerns to be addressed. They are echoed in some of the respondents' written remarks on their experiences with gifted individuals:

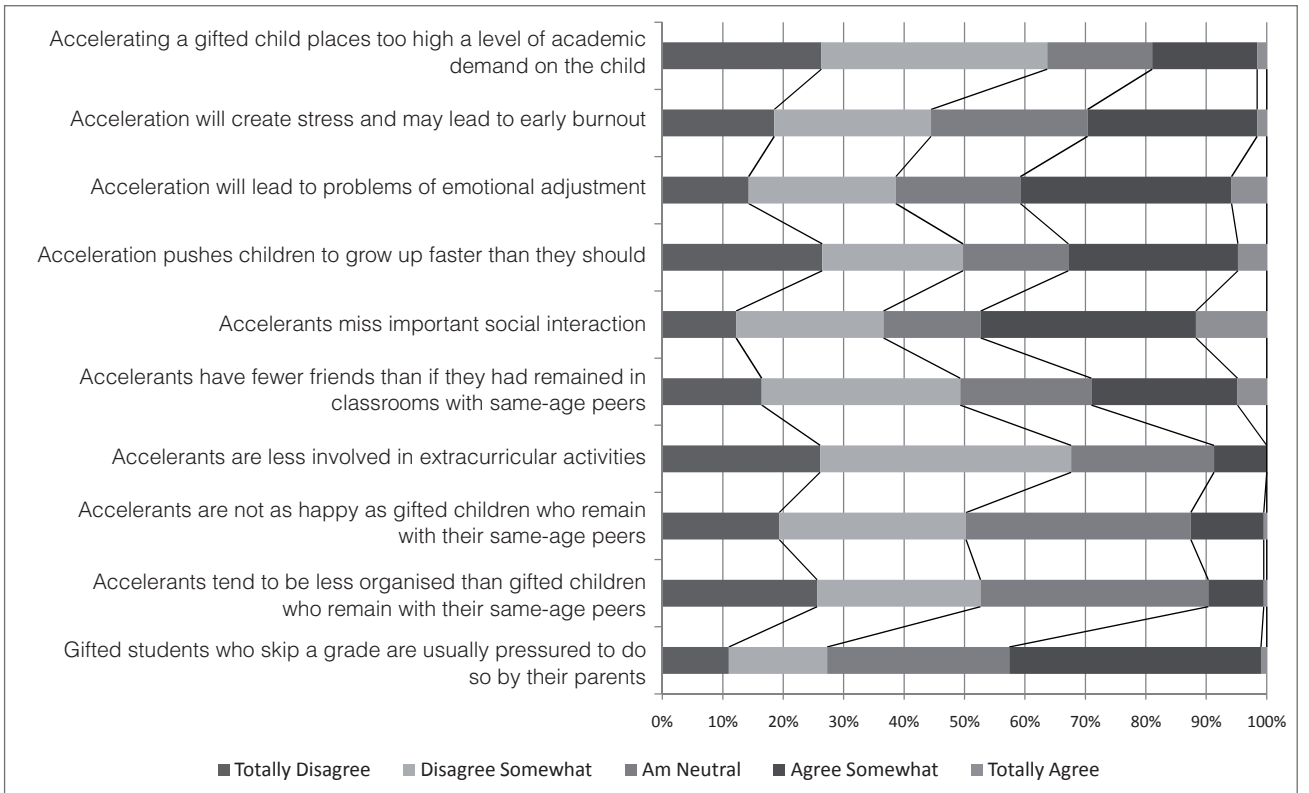
*Good intellectual rigour, however aspects of interpersonal skills lacking relationship-wise.*  
(Teacher, Male 48, Queensland)

*Adults: Interesting conversation but often socially awkward. Children: independent and need constant stimulation otherwise you'll have behaviour problems.*  
(Teacher, Female 31, NSW)

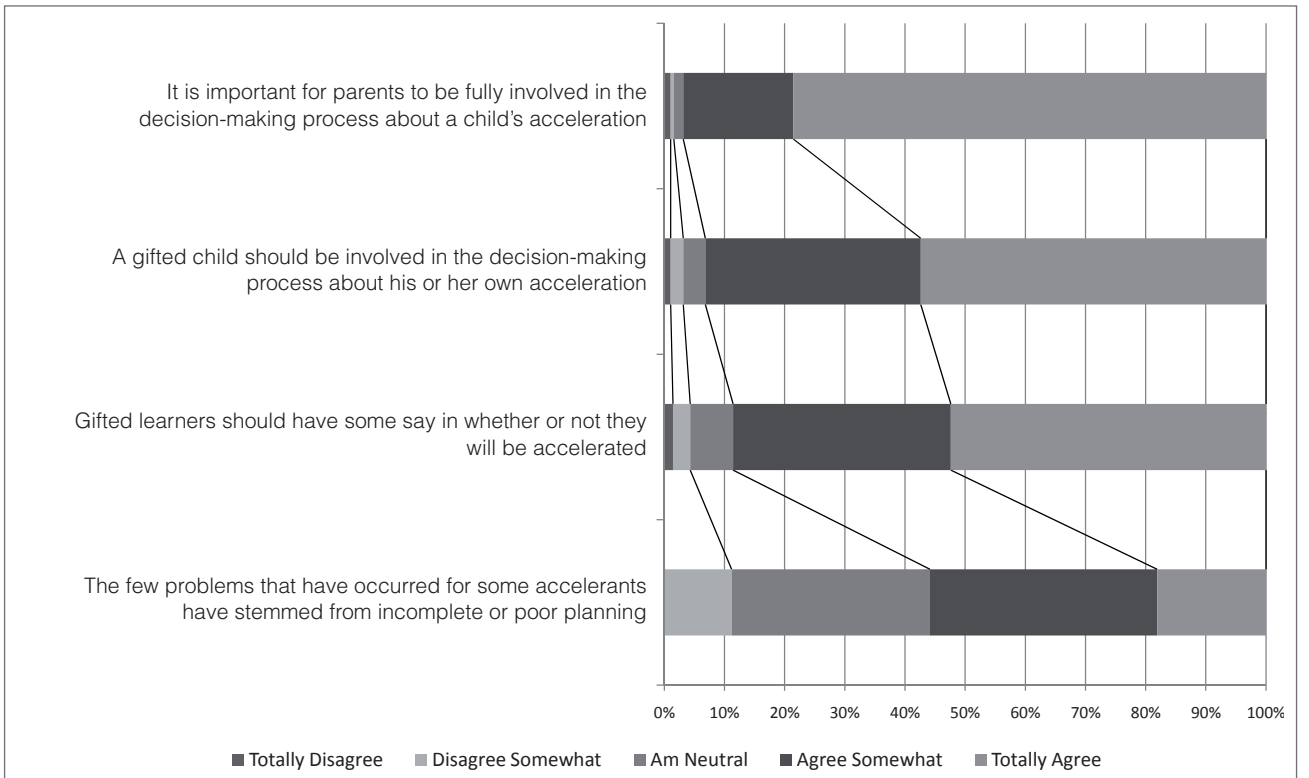
*I have been aware of difficulties people have suffered as a result of being accelerated (social difficulties) However, my personal experiences have been good.*  
(Teacher, Male 31, Tasmania)

If educators disagree about the effects of acceleration on the child's social and emotional progress, attitudes to decision-making about *whether* to accelerate and how to constitute are, in contrast, a shining example of near-consensus. (See Figure 3.4) The importance of parents being fully involved in the decision-making is something with which 78.5% of respondents totally agree while another 18.3% agree somewhat. Two questions addressing whether gifted children should be involved in decisions about their acceleration are both answered overwhelmingly in the affirmative, with around 90% in favour of each.

**Figure 3.3 Problems of Social and Emotional Development**



**Figure 3.4 Decision-Making for Acceleration**



Approximately 55 per cent of those surveyed endorse the view that poor or incomplete planning has been responsible for any problems that have arisen for some accelerands, with a further 33% declining to express a view. The child's feelings about being grade-skipped strike the educators surveyed as of primary importance, but this is consistent with international best practice. For example, the *Iowa Acceleration Scale* (Assouline et al., 2009) includes as one of its key criteria the presence or absence of any antipathy towards acceleration on the part of the would-be accelerand. The best interests of the child presumably include her or his own wishes regarding the educational experience.

Respondents disagree about whether acceleration has adverse effects on a child's social and emotional development. In contrast, they are largely in agreement about the gifted learner's need for assistance, the lack of any harm done to other students by accelerating a classmate, and how it is vital to involve the child and his or her parents in the decision-making about acceleration. In terms of a strategic response, however, it is still worth knowing about the extent to which the various statements of concern endorsed were mainly expressed by the same respondents or occasionally agreed to by a wider range. Are those survey respondents who believe that acceleration gives rise to emotional adjustment problems the same people as those who believe that it forces children to grow up too fast, for example? Is believing that acceleration creates excessive demands on the child associated with blaming it for stress and early burnout?

In fact, rather too many possible combinations of items exist for simple cross-tabulated counts and percentages to sum up the patterns of co-variation in these opinions. Just the first fifteen Likert items on attitudes to acceleration in general would give us 105 pair-wise cross-tabulations. Instead, it was decided to adopt the traditional social-psychological convention that the intervals between any two successive points on the scale of one to five can be assumed to be the same size, thus permitting the use of linear correlation techniques. Specifically, our questionnaire's first 15 five-point Likert items on general attitudes to acceleration were subjected to a Principal Components analysis using *SPSS*. The results are shown in Table 3.5. The right-hand column gives average item scores on a scale from 1 (Totally Disagree) to 5 (Totally Agree). The remaining columns provide the respective variables' loadings on the four components identified by the analysis.

As the table indicates, most of the items suggesting concerns about acceleration load on the first component, which accounts for about 33% of the total variance. Concerns on the part of teachers and administrators about accelerated pupils experiencing emotional adjustment problems, stress and burnout, excessive demands and pressures to grow up too fast are worries that tend to be related. Beliefs that other interventions might be better for the gifted young also load on this same factor.

A second component revolves around the ideas that there is more than one way to accelerate, that some of these permit the student staying with age peers and that a great effort is involved in "getting it right". It is intuitively plausible that these considerations of 'how' rather than 'whether' co-vary, and that they do so somewhat independently of the extent of one's support for, or reservations about, acceleration in general. Finally, two items appear to vary independently, namely the importance of involving the child and their parents respectively in the decision-making about the former's education. As noted previously, these are areas of broad agreement across the sample, regardless of other views for or against accelerated progression.

The principal components analysis makes it apparent that concerns about the possible negative impacts of acceleration tend to occur in the same people. For those who do not care for such multivariate statistical analyses, let us note merely that of our 211 respondents, 76 were concerned about problems of emotional adjustment, and 50 of the latter were also concerned about children having to grow up too fast. Only 36 of teachers and administrators in the sample believed that accelerating students placed excessive academic demands upon them, but 24 of those also favoured the view that stress and early burnout are risks of the process.

In summary, the results of the survey indicate that respondents disagree about whether acceleration has adverse effects on a child's social and emotional development. In contrast, they are largely in agreement about the need to facilitate the gifted learner, the absence of any harm to an accelerand's fellow students and, above all, the importance of involving the child and his or her parents in the decision-making process around educational options.



**Table 3.5 Principal Components: Component Loadings and Mean Item Scores**

	Component				Mean Score 1-5
	1	2	3	4	
Acceleration will lead to problems of emotional adjustment	.837	.143	.039	.124	2.99
Acceleration pushes children to grow up faster than they should	.811	.196	-.006	.072	2.66
Acceleration will create stress and may lead to early burnout	.788	.234	.101	.234	2.71
Acceleration is not as suitable as enrichment for gifted learners.	.763	.066	.082	.030	3.05
Accelerating a gifted child places too high a level of academic demand on the child	.697	.220	.329	.099	2.35
Acceleration is the most effective intervention for gifted children	-.670	.047	.278	.200	2.57
A greater number of gifted learners should be allowed to skip a grade	-.653	.041	.126	.364	3.06
Allowing one child to accelerate makes other children feel bad about themselves	.581	.271	-.001	-.050	2.01
The few problems that have occurred for some accelerands have stemmed from incomplete or poor planning	-.515	.296	.420	.203	3.61
The key question for educators is not whether to accelerate a gifted learner but rather how to do so	-.399	.359	.376	.024	4.33
There are ways to accelerate gifted learners and still let them stay with their age peers	-.090	.725	.038	-.345	4.31
There are many different ways to accelerate a student	-.454	.576	-.122	-.258	4.41
It requires great effort to accelerate a gifted learner successfully	-.095	.547	-.041	.192	3.73
It is important for parents to be fully involved in the decision-making process about a child's acceleration	-.211	.366	-.679	-.053	4.74
A gifted child should be involved in the decision-making process about his or her own acceleration.	-.089	.167	-.416	.733	4.68

## 4. Positive Attitudes and Good Practice: Selected Case Studies

### 4.1 Exemplary practice

Exemplary practice should not be viewed as synonymous with *perfect* practice. There is no one absolute acceleration paradigm. Talented students (in Australia the term “gifted” is also used in some education systems to indicate students with multiple talents) differ in their areas of high-ability, their personalities, their home backgrounds, the attitudes and beliefs of their families, their early school experiences, the educational interventions that their schools have implemented or failed to implement, their hope for and beliefs about the future and their hopes for and beliefs about themselves.

This Section presents findings about what is happening in Australian schools with regard to the practice of academic acceleration with talented students, through describing exemplary attitudes and practices in the three principal education systems using case studies. As noted previously, names of participants and school have been changed.

### 4.2 Case #1: Belhaven College

*Well it wasn't easy for the first ten years but I have been here 30 years and it's been dead easy for the last 20! As a general rule, people know how important it is to the girls, they have got enormous numbers of gifted kids in their classes and at the moment we have trained every staff member in Understanding by Design, so that they all understand, they have to go for deep understandings. So as a general rule people are very sympathetic to the programme. Sometimes they worry about particular girls - we have got a girl who is hopelessly disorganised and seems to be really "away with the fairies" - but she is a gifted girl and we just have to somehow or other find our way through there and that is what we are trying to do.*

(Margaret, Gifted Education Coordinator)

Belhaven College is a large Independent school for girls, in an inner metropolitan suburb of a state capital city with a history of talented and gifted education going back more than 20 years. Margaret Anderson, the Gifted Education Coordinator, a mature and experienced teacher much respected by her colleagues, is the school's Head of Teaching and Learning and thus

responsible for curriculum from Kindergarten to Year 12. She is responsible for special education and gifted education across the school and also holds responsibility for the professional development of teaching staff. She has a Master of Education degree specializing in gifted education and her watchful oversight of the school's identification procedures, enrichment programs and active, ongoing selection of students as candidates for acceleration has been a major factor in developing an atmosphere of trust and acceptance of gifted education in the school community.

Margaret is herself academically talented and experienced the benefits of acceleration as a child. She explained:

*With my case they started me at school when I was just four. I was (only) 16 when I did Year 12, but I was always tall, you see. I was in a little country town primary school and a small high school before I went away to boarding school and the primary teacher used to put me at a front desk and I did Shakespeare while he did 'I Can Jump Puddles' with everybody else. He thought Shakespeare would keep me quiet . . . which it did! But the fact is, I have always known about accelerated kids; I was always the youngest in my year.*

Margaret has taught many accelerated students during her years at Belhaven and speaks of their social and emotional maturity and, in the majority of cases, their lack of conceit or arrogance about their ability.

*Well the thing that made this girl [Carol] such a joy is that she loved learning so much and she was humble and because of her humility she... well, for example in Year 12 when the girls were all stressed with the Year 12 exams, she wasn't [stressed] because she was completely organised. But if the students' common room...if all the dishes hadn't been washed or something, she would go and wash them for them... or she would bring them chocolate biscuits. So some accelerated students are really treasured and loved. Others are sometimes difficult, but as a general rule as long as they have got somebody they can talk to..... they..... well, they know that this room is here, they come here anytime..... so we look after them that way too.*

Academic excellence and social-emotional maturity are essential constituents for Belhaven when they are considering a student for acceleration. They are looking for a student whose intellectual ability is in the top 10% when compared against the average for the school. In the case of Belhaven, a leading Independent school where the average IQ is significantly above the population mean, this would require an IQ of 140 or above. The student should also be performing at a level above the average of the group she will accelerate into and she should have a long attention span and be a highly motivated learner. However the school is aware that students who have spent long periods of time in a learning situation which does not encourage motivation or extended periods of task involvement may not demonstrate this in response to curricula designed for their chronological age and this is taken into consideration when evaluating students' potential for acceleration.

It is important to note that the authors of this report are not suggesting that we should consider for acceleration only students of IQ 140+. Rather, the ability criterion should be cognitive ability which is at least one standard deviation above the mean for the school in which the candidate for acceleration is enrolled. Obviously, this will vary from school to school.

Margaret emphasises that the only time Belhaven would not accelerate a student who is intellectually and emotionally suited is when the student herself does not want to accelerate.

*For example I had one child and we realised straight away, within six weeks, I mean this child came and asked me... she had entered the school in Year 8...and I was on yard duty and she wanted to know, since I was in charge of the history curriculum, why was it that they did ancient civilisation for two years when there was so much other history! I said "What's your name?" and I investigated her immediately and we realised we had to accelerate her so we called her in first - in the middle school and upper school, the girls are first [to be asked how they would feel about a possible acceleration] not the parents - and I explained why I thought she needed to be accelerated and she said, "Well I don't want to be, I have made friends now, I am perfectly happy as long as you keep the reading up to me...and she added "... and for goodness sake don't tell my parents [I've said no] because they will make me [do it]!"*

*And others don't want to be accelerated because they are the swimming champion or the athletics champion and they know if they go into the next year level they won't be; there might be somebody faster than them. So basically speaking from age 12 upwards we ask the girls first and below age 12 we would ask the parents first. So the girls are always involved and there always has to be a psych report as well. The psychologist's report will include the student's IQ test results and areas of particular aptitude.*

Margaret acknowledged that some students may experience a temporary dip in self-esteem after acceleration but believes that this will be balanced by the social and academic advantages. She spoke of another girl who had been recently accelerated

*Well, we considered that her self-esteem may drop if she moves into a class with very able students and finds herself in the middle of the class instead of at the top. She will be the youngest in that class (although not in the whole grade). But we have taken the risk and so she was accelerated...and there it is...extended challenge in an Individual Learning Plan.*

The teacher into whose class the student had been accelerated was very happy with the girl's academic and social acclimatisation into the new class as were the girl and her parents.

Highly gifted children may be socially isolated in a class of age-peers; they may be just too different in their abilities, attitudes and values to be easily accepted. Belhaven is aware of this and does not view a child's social isolation in the mainstream classroom as a negative indicator of a child's potential for success in acceleration. Margaret, the Gifted Education Coordinator, expanded on this:

*Most of the time, the kids that we are accelerating in fact don't have friends in that (their chronological age) year level but we know they are going to have friends in the next!*

It is important to note that Belhaven does not view the absence of friends as indicating extreme introversion or lack of social skills. With academically talented students the school sees it, rather, as an indication that the girl is possibly misplaced in terms of the grade she is enrolled in. Where discussion with the child's current teachers, her parents, and the girl herself, suggest that there is indeed

an educational misplacement, acceleration is considered as means of ameliorating this.

Belhaven College has been guided in their practice of acceleration over several years by a Gifted Education Coordinator with postgraduate qualifications in the field, and (at the Coordinator's instigation) by their thoughtful use of the material contained in *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*, the comprehensive report on acceleration funded by the John Templeton Foundation (Colangelo, Assouline and Gross, 2004). An important element of Belhaven's vision for all its students is that they should progress at a pace dictated by their ability, aptitudes and interests through a supportive partnership of home and school.

Teachers, however, are individuals and not all may agree with every element of their school's policies and practices. Patricia, for example, a teacher at Belhaven College, disagrees with her school's adoption of the Gagné definition of gifted students as comprising 10% of the population and views gifted students as exemplary scholars who occur very rarely indeed. "I think," she said, "in terms of truly gifted students I have probably come across very few in my almost 30 years of teaching."

Patricia is very wary indeed of acceleration and believes that she speaks for most of her colleagues when she states that her colleagues share her concern. 'I have seen students who have been accelerated through school and have arrived at Year 12 too early in their social and emotional development and have not had such a good outcome as they would have had if they had stayed with their peer group and had been extended and challenged more sort of horizontally rather than vertically.'

Patricia took action to disband a program of acceleration at her previous school.

*Before I came to Belhaven I was Head of Maths at Viewforth College and I guess I was responsible there for basically ceasing the program of acceleration that had been in operation and that wasn't just my view alone...it was a view that the whole maths faculty shared. Here these decisions aren't made by me because I am a teacher, not a Head of Faculty, but in talking with my colleagues I think my view is shared... because, just as I said, we sometimes see that it doesn't turn out as well as it could.*

As in many schools Belhaven's Principal, Carolyn Barnes, has the final responsibility for deciding whether a student should be accelerated, although she invariably seeks the views of her staff, and particularly the advice of Margaret, her Gifted Education Coordinator. The interview with Carolyn was interesting because as she was speaking she paused, then started again and contradicted what she had said earlier about the incidence of acceleration within the school.

*As a school we have a very clear acceleration policy; we are less inclined to accelerate because we believe that we have such a range of ability and so in a general chronological year level we have over a year and a half in terms of age (spread) but in terms of ability it might be three or four years. So acceleration isn't always the answer if it is around the social competency of the child... We probably have two girls who have been accelerated.*

Then, after a reflective pause she said, 'Oh no, we have got three who have been accelerated for one year and then subject acceleration is so common here because for example two years ago all the Year 10 girls had done a Year 11 subject. But that's just part of what, that's what we call "differentiation" so I would define acceleration as going up a year level. But with subject acceleration - well, we do subject acceleration all the time.'

At this point the interviewer re-explained that for the purposes of this research study, acceleration was defined as a student working at a level normally required of someone a year or more older. Barbara replied confidently, 'Oh well, we would have probably two thirds of our students doing *that* within the school. I just think *that* is just such an embedded part of our culture as a learning organisation.'

It was interesting to see that even in a school which has subject acceleration as an integral element of curriculum delivery the term "acceleration" at first caused such a negative response from the principal. She was genuinely surprised when the interviewer gently pointed out that what she was describing as an integral element of curriculum management within her school was, indeed, one of the 18 forms of acceleration identified and discussed in the research literature in gifted education (Colangelo, Assouline and Gross (2004). One wonders how many other schools may be practising subject acceleration without viewing this process as a form of acceleration.

Fully 10 years ago a group of Australian researchers (Vialle, Ashton, Carlon and Rankin, 2001) discussed Australian teacher beliefs and attitudes towards acceleration, the lack of understanding of acceleration in most school systems and, indeed, the concern that the word gave rise to in both the education and the larger Australian community. Although educator attitudes seem to have changed for the better across the intervening decade, this vignette illustrates the negative reactions the word can still elicit where the hearer's definition of acceleration differs significantly from the speaker's.

### 4.3 Case #2: St Anthony's School

St Anthony's School is a K-12 school for boys within a church-maintained education system in a non-capital Australian city. Unusually, the school has not one but two teachers who have responsibility for the Gifted and Talented program, Cathie Cameron serving as Gifted Education Coordinator in the Senior School and Jacquie Mazzini in the Junior School, and this illustrates both the importance St Anthony's places on appropriate education of its highly able learners and the importance it places on services to gifted students being maintained as they move from primary to secondary schooling within the school.

Cathie has a Master of Education degree with a significant component of gifted education study, while Jacquie has a Masters in Gifted Education, and they have both undertaken and presented substantial amounts of professional development (teacher inservice courses) in gifted education. Both have strongly positive attitudes towards acceleration.

Both Cathie and Jacquie were asked for their perceptions of the general attitude towards gifted and talented students within the school and both answered positively.

*If you were looking at my colleagues I would say 80% have a good understanding. And 20% would be perhaps more "old school" type teachers who may not necessarily...well, you know...I guess the "labelling" is the big issue they have. But we do such vigorous professional development of our teachers here that I think they all have an understanding and when they look at the checklists [cognitive and affective characteristics of gifted students] and listen to the speakers [that the school brings in] they get a good understanding.*

*I would still say it would be fair to say that there might be 10% of – a set of us – well, people really that just don't want to know. But what we do is...we just don't place gifted students in their classes. Simple as that, really.*

(Cathie, Gifted Education Coordinator, Senior School)

As an element of this solution, St Anthony's places accelerated students in the classes of teachers who have had postgraduate training or significant amounts of professional development in gifted education.

Another element of St Anthony's curricular offerings for gifted students is a pull-out program (in Australia we use the term "withdrawal") in which students are withdrawn from their regular classrooms for a period of time each week to undertake an enrichment program led by the relevant GAT Coordinator. Currently (June, 2011) 106 students are served by this program; St Anthony's attracts a substantial number of academically talented students.

St Anthony's is strongly supportive of the use of acceleration with its academically talented students. It is important to note that decisions on acceleration are never made by a single person, whether teacher or senior administrator; the school has an acceleration committee which is composed of teachers who have training in gifted education and chaired by the Principal of the relevant sub-school. The Committee uses the *Iowa Acceleration Scale* (Assouline, et al. 2003) as a tool to guide planning and decision-making. Cathie Cameron reports that currently in the school there are at least eight students who have been accelerated from one grade to the next during the course of a school year (e.g. a Grade 1 student accelerating to Grade 2 half-way through the school year) while an extremely talented Year 6 student has been radically accelerated to Year 9 (in the senior school) with considerable success. It is important to note that the final decision on whether to accept an offer of acceleration is made by the parents of the student under consideration, in consultation with the student himself.

Cathie Cameron related a recent situation in which the school was considering accelerating a highly gifted boy who was very much a "loner" and seemed reluctant to make friends. On closer investigation, however, the school found that the boy did indeed have friends in his neighbourhood – but they were two or more years older. On this basis they advanced him to the grade above where he promptly made good friendships with talented students in that class who were closer to his developmental age.



The St Anthony's teaching and administrative staff have noticed that occasionally the "picture" they receive from a gifted student's parents (regarding the child's intellectual and social maturity) can differ considerably from the picture the child presents to the school. They have learned, over time, to place greater trust in the parents' portrayal which derives from a knowledge of the child's attitudes, feelings and behaviours in the out-of-school situation, a context to which the school personnel do not have access. A child who happily plays and socialises with children two years older in his neighbourhood but has no access to his "developmental age" peers at school can be viewed, by teachers, as a loner at best, or even anti-social. The child's family, by contrast, has the opportunity to see him in the context of warm and facilitative friendships, with children who like and accept him. This discrepancy may be particularly acute with highly talented students (Gross, 2004).

#### 4.4 Case #3: Geoffrey McIntyre

We have selected Geoff McIntyre as an example of exemplary practice in school leadership. Geoff is principal of a primary (Kindergarten through Year 6) school in the state education department, located in a "middle ring" suburb of an Australian metropolitan city. He is an enlightened educational administrator who has profoundly changed both the climate and the educational practices of his school in relation to the needs of gifted and talented learners.

Geoff's definition of a gifted child is not performance-based; it relates to a child's *capacity* to perform above the level usually expected for his or her age even when (for whatever environmental or personological reason) he or she is not doing so. He adopts the Gagné definition of giftedness and talent which has also been adopted by the state education system of which his school is a member. In this model, giftedness relates to *ability* significantly above the average while talent relates to above average *achievement*. Gifted students become talented students through a learning program which allows ability or aptitude to develop into achievement both through facilitative factors in the child him/herself and through a supportive school and home environment. Within this model an underachieving gifted student is one whose high abilities have not been translated into commensurately high achievement.

The teaching staff of Geoff's school have generally positive attitudes towards gifted students and gifted education because the school already has extension classes for able students and, as he puts it, "they have been part of the school culture for the past eight years". The considerable majority of teachers on Geoff's staff acknowledge that this provision works and that it is valued by the students and their families. He is concerned, however, that there are still some teachers on his staff who confuse high-ability with sustained, unfailingly high achievement and who are reluctant to acknowledge that a highly able student may underperform or "switch off" from learning. This may be particularly problematic when there is a significant discrepancy between a child's capacity to express his thoughts in speech and his ability to get his ideas down on paper. Many talented students actively dislike having to produce sustained passages of writing because their minds are generating ideas very much faster than they can write. When a child is "in flow" and ideas are pouring in, it can be intensely frustrating if the ideas flit out again before he or she can capture them in writing.

*This is one of the great challenges for teachers who have these students in their classes because, obviously, they have to produce some written output...But as I say there is still confusion in the minds of some teachers who expect an extension class to be like the classes of the 1960s and 1970s which were totally based on performance, favoured children who did neat work and favoured compliant children, and of course none of these things necessarily relate to a child being gifted... it's a big confusion in people's minds.*

Over the last six years, five students in Geoff's school have been year-level accelerated and in every case the acceleration has been a conspicuous success. Even so, a minority of his teaching staff disapprove of the accelerations through a concern that, while the accelerations certainly appear successful in the short-term, the students may experience social problems later in their adolescence or young adulthood.

*One teacher has brought up the problem of the fact that they will get their driving licences later than the others, which I personally think is a bit irrelevant. There's a little bit of that sort of feeling. But it [the accelerations] has worked so in general people are positive.*



Something that particularly delights Geoff is the “blossoming” that he sees when a talented child is placed with students with whom she has more in common than she has with age-peers.

*There's a little girl who's currently in Year 3 who we allowed to enter school earlier than usual. She has absolutely blossomed because she relates to children of that age. I haven't noticed any social problems whatsoever. There was another boy that we accelerated who skipped Year 4 – he went from Year 3 to Year 5 and again, I didn't see the social problems that everybody tells me can happen.*

Geoff has a great deal of respect for the parents of the children in his school. ‘If they believe that their child should be accelerated I believe you have to take the time to talk it through with them.’ He believes the school should organise for the potential accelerand to have an IQ test which will provide an objective measure of his or her intellectual ability. He is insistent that, as principal, he should talk personally to the child about the possible acceleration, as well as to the child’s parents. He believes strongly that acceleration will not work unless the teacher in whose class the child will be placed is “empathic” to the situation. ‘Above all’, he emphasises, ‘to do these things you have to have the culture of the school just right so that ‘differences’ are accepted as “normal”. And a child being accelerated is just one example of something that is different, just like girls who might get a place in the soccer team or boys who might like to be in a dance group.’

The interviewer asked Geoff whether there had been any constraints on him, as principal, in making the decision to include acceleration in the school's repertoire of educational responses to individual differences. He pointed out that the gifted education policy of his state allows acceleration even though it is underutilised and that he is fortunate in having a teaching staff who, in almost every case, are supportive of innovation when it is thoughtfully planned and carefully monitored. ‘We do a lot of things at this school that are quite different from lots of other schools - not only in the area of accelerating children - and I think that makes it a lot easier.’ He points out that thoughtfully monitored change takes time and that a principal who wants to introduce a change in practice needs to spend time and work with people who are going to be affected by the change.

The staff and parent body of Geoff's school have come to accept acceleration as one of the procedures through which the school responds to the learning needs and the social-emotional needs of academically talented students. The school uses several forms of acceleration including early entry to school, grade advancement, subject acceleration and acceleration into secondary school. The form of acceleration planned for a particular child is decided in consultation with the child's present teacher, the teacher who will teach the child after acceleration, the child's parents and the child himself or herself.

Geoff expressed a strong concern that in some other schools a young child may not be consulted on a possible acceleration; he believes that if the child is mature enough to accelerate s/he is mature enough to participate in the decision-making process. He argues strongly against the often heard statement that “every parent thinks their child is gifted”.

Geoff is dubious about the belief held by some teachers and academics that a child who is accelerated will experience a dip in self-esteem through no longer leading the class academically.

*I believe their self-esteem is increased because they feel valued, they don't feel “dumbed down” and they feel accepted...They feel far more comfortable within themselves. I see that they make friends more easily because they've got children of like minds. Academically, I believe it keeps them motivated and wanting to learn. Whereas if you don't provide the right atmosphere there is a percentage of children who are very compliant and they will sit there and do what's expected of them even although it's totally repetitive and they already know it. . . . There are other children of course who will act out and a lot of naughty, particularly naughty boys, I think, who in some cases are bored boys. You also get children who actually become school-refusers because the whole thing is so tedious and probably to them, because they aren't adults, they probably don't understand the cause of their frustration.*

Several years ago Geoff trained in gifted education through the Certificate of Gifted Education (COGE) professional development program offered by the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). COGE comprises 80 contact hours of lectures and

seminars featuring, as presenters, leading international scholars in this field. He has also funded a significant number of his teaching staff to train through COGE and also organised for GERRIC to give a full day inservice to the entire staff of his school. Research undertaken by GERRIC and research colleagues in other universities has found that professional development inservice training taken by teachers and school administrators is strongly associated with significant positive attitudinal change towards gifted education and towards talented students themselves (Gross, 1997; Geake & Gross, 2008).

Geoff is happy with the atmosphere of acceptance and quiet pride that has developed in his school towards academically talented students.

*No one feels that that they have to dumb themselves down. So children can feel good about themselves and be accepted by other children even though they are quite different. And there's equally much rejoicing, or whatever you want to call it, about children who are the academic stars, who are the performing arts stars, the debating, the chess, the computers. That's all part of the school.*

## 4.5 Some preliminary lessons drawn from the case studies

### *The importance of teacher attitudes*

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of *teacher attitudes* towards acceleration of talented students when a school is working towards developing exemplary practice. Schools such as Belhaven College that view acceleration as just one of many strategies they have available to them to foster the talents of highly able students, and that have used it successfully for several years, have lost their initial wariness towards allowing talented students to take individual subjects earlier than is customary or to grade-advance. As discussed earlier, talented students may be socially isolated in the regular classroom; they may be rejected by age-peers because their interests and aptitudes differ – sometimes very markedly – from those of their classmates. It is important that teachers do not view a talented student's social isolation as an indication that the student herself *prefers* to be a “loner”; being allowed to accelerate even in one subject of special aptitude gives the talented student access to older students with whom she may have more in common than with her age-peers and, in addition,

allows her age-peers to understand that she can indeed achieve academic success and social acceptance in a different context; one in which she is liked, valued and successful.

### *Training or inservice in gifted education*

In all three instances of exemplary practice described above teacher training or professional inservice in the education of talented students has significantly influenced both attitude and practice. This is consistent with earlier research, for example Lassig's (2003) findings that Australian teachers who have participated in postgraduate study and inservice in gifted education have more positive attitudes towards high-ability students and provide greater support for acceleration.

Margaret Anderson of Belhaven College, who is responsible for curriculum from Kindergarten through Year 12 and who has oversight of the school's program of acceleration, has a Master of Education degree specializing in gifted education and her careful guidance of colleagues in their nomination of possible student candidates for acceleration increases their confidence in nominating students for consideration. As noted earlier, this has been a key factor in developing an atmosphere of acceptance and confidence among the teaching and administration staff.

At St Anthony's School both gifted education coordinators have a sound knowledge of the field; Cathie Cameron has an MEd degree with significant focus on this area and Jacque Mazzini has a Masters in Gifted Education. This encourages the teaching staff to seek advice from the two coordinators on many issues in the education of talented students including the different types of acceleration.

Geoff McIntyre trained in gifted education through the University of New South Wales' Certificate of Gifted Education and has used his knowledge of the field to propose, design and scaffold the successful acceleration of five talented students over the last six years.

Teachers who are wary of accelerating a talented student may be reassured (or at least had their concern somewhat diminished) by the knowledge that the staff member who has been given responsibility for overseeing the education of talented students has substantial training in this field of education and has access to a wealth of research findings which demonstrate its success.

### ***Acceleration is embedded in the school culture***

In each of the three schools described above, acceleration is considered an integral and essential part of educational practice when the occasion warrants it and with students who have the intellectual and emotional capability to benefit from it. Care is taken to consider not only whether a talented student may benefit from acceleration but what form of acceleration would provide the most effective response to a given student's cognitive and affective characteristics. The form or forms of acceleration selected should not only be a "talent match" but also an effective response to the student's social and emotional needs. As a result, acceleration is no longer regarded with wariness but as an integral element of the school's repertoire of professional response to students who could benefit.

### ***Festina lente***

Lastly, but importantly, acceleration should be undertaken with thought, care and in timely fashion, but not in undue haste. The *Iowa Acceleration Scale* is an excellent structural tool to assist us in planning. All stakeholders in the process of planning, implementing and responding to a talented student's acceleration should have input. This takes time. Hasten slowly. *Festina lente*.

### 5.1 Improvement in teacher attitudes towards acceleration

In this final phase of the study, the research team has conducted thoughtfully designed, in-depth interviews with school administrators (principals and deputy principals), gifted education coordinators (teachers or school administrators who have been given special responsibility for programs designed to respond to the special abilities of academically talented students), classroom teachers, parents of academically talented students and the students themselves.

We have been surprised and delighted by the degree of tolerance, and in many cases, active support, we have observed in schools towards the provision of a differentiated education for academically talented children and adolescents. There is still considerable *wariness* towards academic acceleration but, despite this, it is certainly being practiced – perhaps not as widely as it could be but certainly much more widely than we had anticipated before commencing this final stage of our investigation.

We believe there are three principal reasons for this.

(1) The first is the wide availability, in Australia, of the Templeton National Report on Acceleration, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*, co-authored by Australia's Professor Miraca Gross together with Professors Nicholas Colangelo and Susan Assouline of the University of Iowa. Australia is a very strongly multicultural society and *A Nation Deceived* has been translated, by the John Templeton Foundation, into a number of community languages which are the first language of many "new Australians" (immigrants) who have arrived from overseas with their families or who have married and started their own families since their arrival. This has made the report, which has its own website, highly accessible to the large number of immigrants who, understandably, might be much more inclined to read, and be influenced by, a report written in their first language than in English and who might more readily adopt recommendations that seem to be directed more closely to their concerns and needs than reports written only in the tongue of the dominant culture.

In many interviews conducted by GERRIC as an element of the current study, teachers and school administrators have stated frankly that the ease of access to *A Nation Deceived* has prompted them to read the report, and that the research findings reported in it have increased their willingness to "try out" acceleration with a student whom they believe would benefit. As discussed in this report, they have been encouraged, by the positive outcomes, to adopt various forms of acceleration as acknowledged elements of their "repertoire of response" to academically talented students.

(2) The second reason is the very much increased availability in Australia, over the last few years, of teacher Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs offered by the Australian state, Catholic and Independent education systems specifically in issues in identifying and responding to students who are academically talented. Although in general these CPD programs focus largely on identification and curriculum differentiation strategies (which are seen as being more immediately necessary than information on mentorships, ability grouping and acceleration) in recent years there has been a growing tendency to include some introductory information to acceleration and to alert attendees to the *Nation Deceived* website for further information.

(3) The third reason is the greater willingness, over the last few years, for Schools of Education (which are responsible for teacher pre-service training) in Australian universities to develop academic courses at undergraduate and/or postgraduate level which either focus specifically on the education of talented students or include significant amounts of information on identifying and responding to these students. *A Nation Deceived*, with its ready and cost-free accessibility, written by scholars of reputation who have themselves been classroom teachers (Colangelo and Gross) or school psychologists (Assouline) is frequently selected as a core or elective reading. Ten years ago it would have been rare for a young teacher to start her career having been trained in how to recognise and respond to talented students; by contrast, significant numbers of young teachers now commence their teaching career with this information, which includes the use of acceleration.

## 5.2 Teacher perceptions of the social and emotional maturity of high-ability learners

When children differ from their age-peers in their intellectual or emotional maturity, their responses to intellectual and emotional stimuli are liable to be likewise different. Some intellectually talented students respond with emotional intensity to things that leave their classmates relatively unmoved. Stories in the papers or on the news, passages in a book they are reading (or that the teacher is reading to the class), or another child's distress can bring them to tears. Professor Miraca Gross, formerly a primary school teacher, recalls reading "I am David", a book about a young refugee and his journey across Europe to find his family, to her South Australian class of academically gifted Year 6 and 7 students. (This was before the movie of the book was made.) At the close of the story, many of the class were weeping with joy and relief. Later that day one of the boys walked Dr Gross to her car in the school car park and said, 'You know what, our class is such a safe place. A lot of us were crying and *nobody* laughed.'

Some teachers misunderstand a child's "over-emotional" response to a distressing incident in the classroom, a quarrel or disagreement with a friend, being left out of a game or a discussion, or being exposed to deep poignancy (as in the incident described above) or great beauty, and associate it with immaturity rather than the capacity to empathise which appears rather earlier in academically talented children than in their age-peers (Silverman, 1993).

Where teachers or school administrators have had no exposure, or limited exposure, to information about the cognitive and affective characteristics of intellectually talented children or adolescents they may interpret, as immaturity, behaviours or attitudes which arise from the child's ability to think more deeply and at a more mature intellectual level than is usual for his or her age. Rather than say, "We can't place this student with students a year older; look how immature he is" we should consider that when emotional and intellectual sensitivity appear early in a young person they can herald an emotional and intellectual maturity that indicate that the child may be a candidate for one or another form of acceleration.

## 5.3 Towards releasing the brakes on acceleration: Possible futures

The following recommendations for possible future actions by education systems and schools within Australia are based on the major findings of this study.

**Finding #1:** Schools and education systems are, in general, rather reluctant to accelerate talented learners, not through any fear that they will be unable to cope with the work that will be presented to them in an accelerated setting but through the assumption that they will experience difficulties in socialising with the older students with whom they will now be placed for the purposes of instruction and, of course, socialisation.

### Recommendations:

1. Teachers should be given ready access to the findings of international research which show that:
  - Academically talented students, in general, differ from their age-peers not only intellectually but also in their social and emotional development which, in general, resembles more closely, social and emotional development that is characteristic of older students.
  - Academically talented students very often gravitate towards older students for purposes of play, socialisation and friendship. They feel more comfortable, academically and socially, when they have the companionship of older students, whom they resemble rather more closely in their abilities and interests, than they resemble age-peers.
  - Students who appear to be socially isolated are unlikely to have actively sought such isolation. Certainly, research has found that many academically talented students have a tendency towards introversion but this should not be equated with any unwillingness to form friendships; indeed the absence of companions who share their abilities, aptitudes and interests can be a significant cause of distress.
2. Schools should be warmly encouraged to select and employ, from the "smorgasbord" of acceleration options, modes of acceleration that would meet the cognitive and affective needs of individual students, or groups of students, in their schools.



3. Schools should be encouraged to evaluate and document acceleration procedures that they have employed and/or are currently employing, to assess the effectiveness of various modes of acceleration with talented students currently within the school or who are in the process of moving from pre-school to primary school, from primary school to middle school (where schools have such a structure) or from primary to secondary school.

**Finding #2:** Information regarding the learning and socio-affective characteristics of talented students is rarely provided to teachers during their undergraduate training. It is more generally offered in postgraduate studies and thus is accessible only to the small minority of teachers who seek higher level educational qualifications.

**Recommendation:**

4. Trainee teachers in some Australian states (for example New South Wales) were formerly required to undertake a mandatory course in special education as an element of their undergraduate degree in education. We believe that this initiative raised the awareness both of the needs and characteristics of what were then called "special needs" students and enhanced the curriculum development and classroom management skills of teachers in relation to their recognition and response to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.  
We therefore recommend that Schools of Education in Australian universities should introduce an introductory course in recognising and responding to the learning characteristics and needs of intellectually/academically talented students in Australian schools. We believe that this initiative would raise teacher awareness of these students who, indeed, have special cognitive and socioaffective characteristics and needs, and would also enhance the curriculum development and classroom management skills of teachers in relation to these young people.

**Finding #3:** Quantitative and qualitative findings of this study indicate that respondents indicate a general support for the use of acceleration in response to the needs of talented learners. In general, respondents do not believe that acceleration has adverse effects on students' psychosocial development; however, teachers' perceptions of what constitutes or defines social-

emotional maturity tend to be subjectively based on selective examples of behaviour rather than a student's overall behavioural profile. Students who have few friends are generally viewed as deliberately withdrawing from social contact and, paradoxically, may not be readily considered for acceleration.

**Recommendation:**

5. School administrators and Gifted Education Coordinators in schools should familiarise themselves with the research that shows that academically talented students differ from age peers in their social and emotional development just as in their intellectual/academic development. Academically talented students tend to gravitate either towards age-peers who are academically talented or to older students (particularly older students who are also academically able) or both. Some talented students who have difficulty in finding friends in school, where gravitation towards older students may not be viewed as socially acceptable, may develop strong and facilitative friendships with older students in their neighbourhoods. Understanding this would assist Gifted Education Coordinators to advocate for the various forms of academic acceleration and/or ability or achievement grouping using research-based arguments that teaching colleagues would be more likely to understand and respect.
6. While the needs of very highly talented students are certainly of great importance and must be addressed in schools, it may be unwise for Gifted Education Coordinators to use these students, and the provisions made for them, *in the first instance*, as exemplars of educational response. The educational program developed for a student of profound levels of talent such as Terence Tao (Gross, 1986), which is well-known to educators in Australia, would be quite unsuited to a moderately talented student. Additionally, teachers may take the view that they are never likely to encounter such a remarkably talented student and that therefore the information is unlikely to be relevant to them. They are more likely to relate to, and consider implementing, programs and provisions for students whom they can envisage as appearing in their class or school at greater levels of frequency.



**Finding #4:** Parents of academically talented students are sometimes confused about advocacy strategies; they face the dilemma of their child being denied acceleration if they are considered too “pushy” and having requests for acceleration disregarded if they are not sufficiently forceful in their advocacy. That said, parents who develop a collaborative relationship with school personnel and access independent professional advice in preparing a proposal for acceleration are effective advocates for their child.

**Recommendation:**

7. Organisations that provide courses, information programs and seminars for parents of high-ability students should, as a matter of priority, include a focus on effective and collaborative parent advocacy strategies within these programs.
8. State associations in Australia might consider developing an advocacy resource kit (similar to The NAGC Mile Marker Series™) for parents. This resource could be designed to help parents identify and negotiate policies regarding acceleration in the various sectors (State and Catholic) or Independent Schools; outline the most appropriate steps to be taken to advocate for consideration of acceleration for a student and list professional resources available to assist parents to build an advocacy strategy or support them in approaching a school. Building parents’ and educators’ knowledge and awareness of the research and the issues surrounding acceleration will enable acceleration to be considered with less conflict and greater focus on the individual student’s academic and psycho-social needs.
9. Promotion of the *Iowa Acceleration Scale* as a tool for assisting collaborative and objective decision-making, based upon research and using data collected about the student, will assist parents and schools to make decisions in the best interests of the student and reduce conflict surrounding this issue. To help Australian school administrators feel more confident about using the *Iowa Acceleration Scale*, an information booklet could be developed outlining test instruments commonly used in Australian schools (that could appropriately be substituted for US-based tests currently listed in the *Iowa Acceleration Scale*). They could also be provided with copies of the *IAS* sold to Australian schools.

**Finding #5:** Characteristics common to high-ability students often result in sensitive students expressing intense and complex feelings in such a way that adults may interpret this behaviour as emotional immaturity. High-ability learners may have highly developed cognitions but not yet have the same level of self-awareness to identify strong emotions, and the emotional literacy, or language skills, to adequately express their feelings. Intense emotional expression may result in adult perception that the child lacks the capacity to regulate emotions whereas this suggests asynchrony rather than developmental immaturity.

**Recommendation:**

10. High-ability students would benefit from well-targeted affective education programs to develop self-awareness, emotional-literacy and emotional regulation.
11. Schools should implement an affective curriculum or preventative group counseling program, designed to build greater self-awareness, emotional-literacy and emotional regulation. Such programs should be led by gifted education coordinators and appropriately trained counsellors with knowledge of the affective characteristics and needs of high-ability students.
12. Programs should be structured to take account of and anticipate developmentally appropriate issues for high-ability students as they progress through school. Participation in an affective program that is designed to address the needs of high-ability students will not only skill students, but also allow an opportunity for them to express feelings in a safe environment and help them to understand that others share their concerns.

**Finding #6:** Further research is needed to develop more objective and suitable measures to assess social and emotional maturity. This study found that many respondents believe learners’ levels of social and emotional maturity are crucial factors to be considered in decisions regarding acceleration. However, definitions of maturity vary widely and do not take into account the socio-affective characteristics of high-ability youth, raising issues of how maturity should be assessed.

**Recommendation:**

Conduct research to develop an appropriate instrument to measure high-ability learners' social and emotional development and maturity, taking into account the socio-affective characteristics of high-ability students. Objective, standardised measures and comparisons can then be made to determine if a high-ability student is suitable for acceleration.

13. Instruments have been developed to measure the social and emotional maturity of children and adolescents but these instruments have not been standardised with high-ability students. Further research on existing instruments to develop norms based on high-ability populations should provide greater confidence in using these instruments.

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# UNSW



**GERRIC**

Gifted Education Research,  
Resource and Information Centre

## [Invitation to Participate in Survey Research – Schools]

Dear Principal,

My name is Miraca Gross. I am a Professor within the School of Education at the University of New South Wales and Director of UNSW's Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC).

My colleague Robert Urquhart and I are presently engaged in a study, which investigates the use of accelerated progression with gifted students in Australia. At this stage of the study we are investigating the factors that encourage or discourage Australian schools from accelerating gifted and talented students. Teacher attitude towards acceleration is one of these factors.

The UNSW Ethics Committee has approved both the study and the questionnaire which we will use to seek teachers' thoughts about academic acceleration. We have also sought and gained permission from ..... to conduct the study (please see copy attached).

We would like to administer the attached questionnaire to 10 teachers within your school. The questionnaire takes approximately 15-20 minutes to complete and should not cause any distress or concern. Anyone who would rather not complete the questionnaire is, of course, quite free to decline.

We have enclosed sample copies of both the information letter which I would send to your teachers, and the consent form which teachers would sign to indicate their agreement to complete the questionnaire, if you are kind enough to allow me to include your school in this survey.

If you **agree** to this questionnaire being administered to your teachers, please indicate your agreement on the enclosed Principal Consent Form and return it to me in the



When you receive these I would be grateful if you could ask one of your administrative staff to place a copy of the information letter and the consent form in the pigeonhole of up to 10 members of your teaching staff. If you have more than 10 teaching staff, please select them randomly – every second, third or fourth (etc) name on your staff list, depending on your total number of staff. The information letter is self-explanatory and asks the teachers to return the completed form to you within two weeks of receiving it.

At the close of the two weeks, your administrative staff member would mail the completed questionnaires back to me in the postage paid envelope.

If any participant decides, at a later time, that they would prefer that their completed questionnaire should not be used in the study, data from that participant will be destroyed and not included in the study.

If you **do not agree** to your school participating, please indicate this on the enclosed form and return it to me. We will not make further contact with you but I would like to thank you, now, for taking the time to read this letter.

I can assure you that complete confidentiality will be maintained regarding the identity of schools who agree to participate in this study and the identity of teachers who complete the questionnaires. Information will be keyed into central data storage in such a way that responses from individual respondents or schools cannot be identified. Data from the study will be stored in locked filing cabinets within The University of New South Wales for a period of seven years from the close of the study. If you have any questions on the research process Robert Urquhart, Research Fellow, GERRIC, can be contacted on (02) 9385 1993 or [r.urquhart@unsw.edu.au](mailto:r.urquhart@unsw.edu.au).

My sincere thanks for your assistance with this.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Miraca U. M. Gross

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The University of New South Wales

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**GERRIC**  
Gifted Education Research,  
Resource and Information Centre

To: Professor Miraca Gross  
GERRIC,  
The University of New South Wales,  
UNSW Sydney 2052.  
Email: M.Gross@unsw.edu.au

## Principal's Permission to Conduct the Research

### Permission

I have read the Principal's Information Letter, which you have sent me regarding your study of teacher attitudes towards academic acceleration of gifted students and I hereby give my consent for you to approach teacher members of my staff through me with a request that they complete the questionnaire "Releasing the Brakes for Gifted Learners". You will do this through me by sending me copies of the questionnaire, which I will distribute to randomly selected members of my staff.

I understand that if at any time participants in this study decide that they do not want information from the questionnaire to be used in the study, they can inform you of this and you will ensure that their questionnaire is destroyed and any details from it deleted from the data collection.

Principal's name:

School:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

### Withhold Permission

I do not give consent for you to approach teacher members of my staff with a request that they complete the questionnaire "Releasing the Brakes for Gifted Learners" and I return the questionnaire herewith.

Principal's name:

School:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



GERRIC

Gifted Education Research,  
Resource and Information Centre**[Invitation to Participate in Survey Research – Teachers]**

Dear Colleague,

My name is Miraca Gross. I am a Professor within the School of Education at the University of New South Wales and Director of UNSW's Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC). Your principal has kindly given me permission to survey a number of teachers in your school.

My colleague Robert Urquhart and I are presently engaged in a study, which investigates the use of accelerated progression with gifted students in Australia. At this stage of the study we are investigating factors that may encourage or discourage Australian schools from accelerating gifted and talented students. Teacher attitude towards acceleration is one of these factors.

We would very much appreciate it if you would complete the attached questionnaire. It should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. If you would rather not complete the questionnaire you are, of course, quite free to decline.

If you **agree** to complete the questionnaire, please complete it within the next two weeks, sign the enclosed Teacher Consent Form and return both the questionnaire and the consent form to your principal, or to the administrator to whom s/he delegates the task, who will return your schools' forms to me.

If you **do not agree** to complete the questionnaire, simply return it to your principal. I will not make further contact with you but I would like to thank you, now, for taking the time to read this letter.

I can assure you that complete confidentiality will be maintained regarding the identity of schools who agree to participate in this study and the identity of teachers who complete the questionnaires. Information will be keyed into central data storage in such a way that responses from individual respondents or schools cannot be

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identified. Data from the study will be stored in locked filing cabinets within The University of New South Wales for a period of seven years from the close of the study.

If at any time you decide that you do not want information from your questionnaire to be used in the study, please contact Robert Urquhart or I at the address provided and we will ensure that your questionnaire is destroyed and any details from it deleted from the data collection. If you have any questions on the research process Robert Urquhart, Research Fellow, GERRIC, can be contacted on (02) 9385 1993 or [r.urquhart@unsw.edu.au](mailto:r.urquhart@unsw.edu.au).

My sincere thanks for your assistance with this.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Miraca U. M. Gross". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Professor Miraca U. M. Gross  
GERRIC  
The University of New South Wales  
UNSW Sydney NSW 2052  
[M.Gross@unsw.edu.au](mailto:M.Gross@unsw.edu.au)

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT  
AND CONSENT FORM (TEACHERS)**

***Releasing the Brakes: Administrator, Teacher, and Parent  
Attitudes and Beliefs That Block or Assist the Implementation of  
School Policies on Academic Acceleration***



**GERRIC**

Gifted Education Research,  
Resource and Information Centre

You are invited to participate in a study of what school educators know and feel about various forms of academic acceleration for students with gifts and talents. Your school was nominated for its current length of experience with your state's acceleration policy. If you decide to participate, you will be given a 7-page questionnaire which should take you approximately 20 minutes to complete. When these results have been collated and the data have been analysed, we will ensure that the results of this study are shared with you at your school. There is no risk to you in participating in this study should you decide to do so. We hope you will be willing to share your opinions with us.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission, except as required by law. If you give your permission by signing this document and returning it with your questionnaire, you are acknowledging that the results may be published in various scholarly journals at some later time. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you and your school cannot be identified.

Should you have concerns or questions about this study before deciding to participate or once you have decided to participate, please feel free to contact either Mr Robert Urquhart (02-9385 51993, email: [r.urquhart@unsw.edu.au](mailto:r.urquhart@unsw.edu.au) or Professor Miraca Gross (02-9385 1971, email: [m.gross@unsw.edu.au](mailto:m.gross@unsw.edu.au) ). Should you have any complaint once the study proceeds, you may direct your complaint to the Ethics Secretariat, The University of New South Wales, UNSW Sydney NSW 2052 (phone 9385 4134, fax 9385 6648, email [ethics.secretary@unsw.edu.au](mailto:ethics.secretary@unsw.edu.au) ). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Your decision to participate or not will not prejudice your future relations with your school, the University of New South Wales or the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC). If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

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## ***Releasing the Brakes for High-Ability Learners***

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Family status:                      Single \_\_\_\_\_  
    Married \_\_\_\_\_  
    Married with children \_\_\_\_\_  
    Divorced/Separated \_\_\_\_\_  
    Widowed \_\_\_\_\_

Position \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_

Is current school: State? \_\_\_\_\_ Independent? \_\_\_\_\_ Catholic? \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Experience: As teacher \_\_\_\_\_  
    As educational administrator \_\_\_\_\_

Do you or have you worked directly with gifted students? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, for how many years? \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, in what capacity(ies)? \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate your experience with gifted learners

Extensive	_____
Moderate	_____
Occasional	_____
None	_____

Training in gifted education (please tick *all* that apply and estimate *hours spent*)

Undergraduate coursework in gifted education	_____	_____	hrs.
DipEd. coursework in gifted education	_____	_____	hrs.
Postgraduate coursework in gifted education	_____	_____	hrs.
Mini-certificate training in gifted education	_____	_____	hrs.
Certificate training in gifted education	_____	_____	hrs.
Series of in-service sessions in school setting	_____	_____	hrs.
Single in-service session on gifted education	_____	_____	hrs.
Personal research on gifted education	_____	_____	hrs.
On-line chats, internet research on gifted education	_____	_____	hrs.
Access to some articles on giftedness	_____	_____	hrs.
Other (please describe)	_____	_____	hrs.

Please rate your previous training in gifted education:

Excellent	_____
Good	_____
Sufficient	_____
Some	_____
Very Little	_____

## Your Own Early Education (tick *all* that apply)

Primary School : State \_\_\_\_\_ Independent \_\_\_\_\_ Catholic \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 In gifted program in primary school? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of primary school attended: \_\_\_\_\_

Secondary School: State \_\_\_\_\_ Independent \_\_\_\_\_ Catholic \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 In selective secondary school? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
 In gifted or advanced program at secondary school? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of secondary school attended: \_\_\_\_\_

Were you formally identified as gifted while in school? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Degrees Obtained [tick *all* that apply and *specify major field(s)*]:

Teaching Certificate	_____	Masters by Coursework	_____
Bachelor's Degree	_____	Masters by Research	_____
Diploma of Education	_____	Ed.D	_____
Specialty Certificate	_____	Ph.D.	_____
		Other training	_____

Have you had any personal experiences with gifted individuals, children or adults, in your adult life? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

In general, were these experiences...  
 Very satisfying \_\_\_\_\_  
 Satisfying \_\_\_\_\_  
 Not very memorable \_\_\_\_\_  
 Disagreeable \_\_\_\_\_  
 Very disagreeable \_\_\_\_\_

Please explain:

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## Your Thoughts About Academic Acceleration

Please tick the box that best rates your agreement or disagreement with each of the statements about academic acceleration that follow.

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Totally Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree Somewhat</i>	<i>Am Neutral</i>	<i>Agree Somewhat</i>	<i>Totally Agree</i>
Acceleration is not as suitable as enrichment for gifted learners.					
Accelerating a gifted child places too high a level of academic demand on the child.					

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Totally Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree Somewhat</i>	<i>Am Neutral</i>	<i>Agree Somewhat</i>	<i>Totally Agree</i>
Acceleration will create stress and may lead to early burnout.					
Acceleration will lead to problems of emotional adjustment.					
Allowing one child to accelerate makes other children feel bad about themselves.					
Acceleration pushes children to grow up faster than they should.					
Acceleration is the most effective intervention for gifted children.					
There are many different ways to accelerate a student.					
It is important for parents to be fully involved in the decision-making process about a child's acceleration.					
A gifted child should be involved in the decision-making process about his or her own acceleration.					
A greater number of gifted learners should be allowed to skip a grade.					
It requires great effort to accelerate a gifted learner successfully					
The few problems that have occurred for some accelerands have stemmed from incomplete or poor planning.					
There are ways to accelerate gifted learners and still let them stay with age peers.					
The key question for educators is not <i>whether</i> to accelerate a gifted learner but rather <i>how</i> to do so.					

In summarising **your attitudes about academic acceleration**, would you say your attitudes are... *(Please tick **one** of the options below.)*

- Very Positive  
 Positive  
 Sometimes Positive/Sometimes Negative  
 Somewhat Negative  
 Negative

**Please continue to the next section**

In summarising ***your attitudes about learners who have been accelerated***, would you say your attitudes are... *(Please tick **one** of the options below.)*

- Very Positive  
 Positive  
 Sometimes Positive/Sometimes Negative  
 Somewhat Negative  
 Negative

## Gifted Education Practices in Your Current School

(Note: Not all of these are acceleration practices)

Please tick the boxes that describe gifted services your school currently provides.

Enrichment, extension of content in regular mixed ability classes	
Withdrawal program (meet with other gifted learners 1-2 times per week) for content extension	
Provision of beyond grade level curriculum in specific area in which child excels	
Child placed in older classroom for specific subject area s/he excels in	
Placement in advanced class of high performers in a specific subject area	
Placement in a self-contained, all-gifted class for all academic learning	
Placement in an Opportunity Class or Selective High School (i.e., all gifted school)	
Placement in mixed ability class with 5-6 other gifted children as "cluster"	
Flexible performance grouping within the classroom for differentiated tasks	
Student conducts independent study in lieu of regular classroom work	
Child is pre-assessed and then allowed to skip parts s/he already knows	
Child is credited with work already mastered based on prior experiences child has had	
Grade skipping	
Early entrance to kindergarten or Year 1	
Multi-age or composite classroom, in which the gifted child is in the younger group	
Students can take part of their courses at a higher level of school during the day	
International Baccalaureate program	
Gifted students can enroll in advanced subject via an on-line or distance learning course	
Mentorships for gifted learners with content experts	
Gifted resource teacher in school develops services and curriculum as teachers request them	
A group of gifted children progress rapidly through the curriculum completing 3 years of work in 2 years (vertical grouping)	

For how many years has your school been using acceleration with gifted learners?  
(please tick *one* of the options below)

\_\_\_\_\_ Never

\_\_\_\_\_ 1-4 years

\_\_\_\_\_ 5 or more years

In summarising the *provisions your school offers gifted learners*, would you say your program is... (please tick *one* of the options below)

\_\_\_\_\_ Excellent

\_\_\_\_\_ Extensive

\_\_\_\_\_ Sufficient

\_\_\_\_\_ A Beginning

\_\_\_\_\_ Not Provided at All

**Any other comments you would like to make?**

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**Thank you for completing this questionnaire.**

**If not collected by the interviewer could you please forward your completed questionnaire to:**

**Professor Miraca Gross  
Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre  
(GERRIC)  
The University of New South Wales  
SYDNEY NSW 2052**



**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT  
AND CONSENT FORM (EDUCATORS)**

***Releasing the Brakes: Administrator, Teacher, and Parent  
Attitudes and Beliefs That Block or Assist the Implementation of  
School Policies on Academic Acceleration***



**GERRIC**

Gifted Education Research,  
Resource and Information Centre

You are invited to participate in a study of what school educators know and feel about various forms of academic acceleration for students with gifts and talents. We also hope to learn about the long-term views of students who have been accelerated, and their parents, about their experience of being accelerated. We hope the research results will contribute towards helping school educators find better ways to assess, plan and decide to accelerate students who are good candidates for acceleration.

If you decide to participate, we'd like to interview you, and invite you to share your thoughts and ideas about the use of academic acceleration for gifted students, and if you have taught a student who has been accelerated, your own involvement in the process. The interview should take approximately half an hour. With your permission we will digitally record the interview and transcribe the interview. When these results have been collated and the data have been analysed, we will ensure that the overall findings of this study are shared with you and with the school. There is no risk to you in participating in this study should you decide to do so. You do not need to answer any question, and you do not have to give a reason why. We hope you will be willing to share your opinions with us.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission, except as required by law. If you give your permission by signing this document and returning it with your questionnaire, you are acknowledging that the results may be published in various research publications at some later time. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you and your school cannot be identified.

Should you have any complaint once the study proceeds, you may direct your complaint to the Ethics Secretariat, The University of New South Wales, UNSW Sydney NSW 2052 (phone 9385 4134, fax 9385 6648, email [ethics.secretary@unsw.edu.au](mailto:ethics.secretary@unsw.edu.au)). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome directly.

Your decision to participate or not will not prejudice you or your child's future relations with the University of New South Wales or the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC). If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without any consequences.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask us, as your questions are important to us. If you have any additional questions later, (Robert Urquhart, 02-9385 51993) will be happy to answer them.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

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## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

*Releasing the Brakes: Administrator, Teacher, and Parent Attitudes and Beliefs That Block or Assist the Implementation of School Policies on Academic Acceleration*



**GERRIC**

Gifted Education Research,  
Resource and Information Centre

**You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that, having read the Participant Information Statement, you have decided to take part in the study.**

.....  
Signature of Research Participant

.....  
Signature of Witness

.....  
(Please PRINT name)

.....  
(Please PRINT name)

.....  
Date

.....  
Nature of Witness

## REVOCATION OF CONSENT

*Releasing the Brakes: Administrator, Teacher, and Parent Attitudes and Beliefs That Block or Assist the Implementation of School Policies on Academic Acceleration*

I hereby wish to WITHDRAW my consent to participate in the research study described above and understand that such withdrawal WILL NOT jeopardise any treatment or my relationship with The University of New South Wales or the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC).

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

.....  
(Please PRINT name)

The section for Revocation of Consent should be forwarded to:  
The Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre,  
UNSW, UNSW Sydney NSW 2052.

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**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT  
AND CONSENT FORM (PARENTS)**

***Releasing the Brakes: Administrator, Teacher, and Parent  
Attitudes and Beliefs That Block or Assist the Implementation  
of School Policies on Academic Acceleration***



**GERRIC**

Gifted Education Research,  
Resource and Information Centre

You are invited to participate in a study of what school teachers, school principals and parents know and feel about various forms of academic acceleration for students with gifts and talents. We also hope to learn about the long-term views of students who have been accelerated about their experience and how it differed or was the same as their expectations. The research is important because we hope the knowledge gained will help school educators find better ways to assess, plan and decide to accelerate students who are good candidates for acceleration.

If you decide to participate, we'd like to interview you, and invite you to share your thoughts and ideas about your experiences as a parent with having a child (or children) who were accelerated and your own involvement in the process. The interview should take approximately half an hour. With your permission we will digitally record the interview and transcribe the interview. When these results have been collated and the data have been analysed, we will ensure that the overall findings of this study are shared with you and with the school. There is no risk to you in participating in this study should you decide to do so. You do not need to answer any question, and you do not have to give a reason why. We hope you will be willing to share your opinions with us.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission, except as required by law. If you give your permission by signing this document and returning it with your questionnaire, you are acknowledging that the results may be published in various research publications at some later time. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you, your child, your child's teacher and your child's school cannot be identified.

Should you have any complaint once the study proceeds, you may direct your complaint to the Ethics Secretariat, The University of New South Wales, UNSW Sydney NSW 2052 (phone 9385 4134, fax 9385 6648, email [ethics.secretary@unsw.edu.au](mailto:ethics.secretary@unsw.edu.au)). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome directly.

Your decision to participate or not will not prejudice you or your child's future relations with the University of New South Wales or the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC). If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without any consequences.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask us, as your questions are important to us. If you have any additional questions later, (Robert Urquhart, 02-9385 51993) will be happy to answer them.

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**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT  
AND CONSENT FORM (ACCEL. STUDENTS)**

***Releasing the Brakes: Administrator, Teacher, and Parent  
Attitudes and Beliefs That Block or Assist the Implementation  
of School Policies on Academic Acceleration***



**GERRIC**

Gifted Education Research,  
Resource and Information Centre

You are invited to participate in a study of what adults - school teachers, school principals and parents - know and feel about various forms of academic acceleration for students with gifts and talents. As part of the research, we are also keen to better understand the opinions of bright young people like yourself about what it is like to be accelerated and looking back now, how this might have compared to your initial expectations. The research is important because the researchers want to help adults find better ways to assess, plan and decide to accelerate students who are good candidates for acceleration. We hope you will be willing to share your opinions with us.

If you decide to participate, we'd like to interview you, and invite you to share your thoughts and ideas about your experience of being accelerated and if this was the same or different from what you had expected. The interview should take approximately half an hour. With your permission we will digitally record the interview and later make a written record of the interview. When these results have been collated and the data have been analysed, we will ensure that the overall findings of this study are shared with you. There is no risk to you in participating in this study should you decide to do so. You do not need to answer any question, and you do not have to give a reason why. As your stories always belong to you, you can withdraw from the study at any stage, even after you have been interviewed, and you also do not need to give a reason why.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission, except as required by law. This means that if you tell us that you or another child are not safe, and they are not being helped to be safe, in order to keep you safe we would then talk to the adults whose job it is to help in these situations. If you give your permission by signing this document and returning it with your questionnaire, you are acknowledging that the results may be published in various research publications at some later time. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you, your family, your teacher and your school cannot be identified.

Should you have any complaint once the study proceeds, you may direct your complaint to the Ethics Secretariat, The University of New South Wales, UNSW Sydney NSW 2052 (phone 9385 4134, fax 9385 6648, email [ethics.secretary@unsw.edu.au](mailto:ethics.secretary@unsw.edu.au)). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome directly.

Your decision to participate or not will not prejudice your future relations with the University of New South Wales or the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC). If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without any consequences.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask us, as your questions are important to us. If you have any additional questions later, (Robert Urquhart, 02-9385 51993) will be happy to answer them.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

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**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT  
AND CONSENT FORM (PARENTS/GUARDIANS)**

***Releasing the Brakes: Administrator, Teacher, and Parent  
Attitudes and Beliefs That Block or Assist the Implementation  
of School Policies on Academic Acceleration***



**GERRIC**

Gifted Education Research,  
Resource and Information Centre

Your child has been invited to participate in a study of what adults - school teachers, school principals and parents - know and feel about various forms of academic acceleration for students with gifts and talents. As part of the research, we are also keen to better understand the opinions of bright young people like your child about what it is like to be accelerated and looking back now, how this might have compared to their initial expectations. The research is important because the researchers want to help educators find better ways to assess, plan and decide to accelerate students who are good candidates for acceleration.

If you decide they can participate, and with your child's permission, we'd like to interview your child, and invite them to share their thoughts and ideas about their experience of being accelerated and if this was the same or different from what they had expected. The interview should take approximately half an hour. With your and your child's permission we will digitally record the interview and later make a written record of the interview. When these results have been collated and the data have been analysed, we will ensure that the overall findings of this study are shared with you and your child. There is no risk to your child in participating in this study should you decide to agree to them participating. Your child does not need to answer any question, and they do not have to give a reason why. We will explain to your child that as their stories always belong to them, they can withdraw from the study at any stage, even after they have been interviewed, and they (or you as their parent) also do not need to give a reason why.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with your child will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission, except as required by law. We will explain to your child that if they were to tell us that they or another child are not safe, and they are not being helped to be safe, in order to keep them safe we would then talk to the adults whose job it is to help in these situations. If you give your permission for your child by signing this document and returning it with your questionnaire, you are acknowledging that the results may be published in various research publications at some later time. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you, your child, your child's teacher and your child's school cannot be identified.

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Your decision to participate or not will not prejudice you or your child's future relations with the University of New South Wales or the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC). If you decide to your child can participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without any consequences.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask us, as your questions are important to us. If you have any additional questions later, (Robert Urquhart, 02-9385 51993) will be happy to answer them.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

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## INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

### Releasing the Brakes for High-Ability Learners

75

#### Questions To Be Asked - Principals

1. How would you define/describe a gifted or talented student?
2. In general, how would you describe your staff's attitudes towards gifted and talented students?
3. In general, how would you describe your staff's attitudes towards academic acceleration of gifted students?
4. Did you ever teach a gifted or talented student? *Probe:* Can you tell me more about that?
5. How often have you had a gifted student in your school/s?
6. When you were a teacher, did you ever teach a student who has been accelerated? *If yes* - How did that go? *If no* – did you ever teach a student whom you thought might benefit from acceleration – can you tell me about that student?
7. Have you ever been responsible as a Principal, for accelerating a student? *If yes* - can you tell me about this? *If no* – go directly to question 15.
8. What issues did you feel important to consider while you were making the decision? *Prompt:* What academic or emotional qualities would consider important? [*If more than one accelerant* – can tell me more about one of these students?]
9. Where there any constraints on you in making the decision? *Probe:* Suitable teaching staff? Policy issues – formal or informal? Parent or family issues?
10. Were there any circumstances that particularly facilitated your decision about accelerating?
11. What form did the acceleration take? *Prompt:* grade skipping? early entry? single subject acceleration? some other form?
12. How did you choose that form of acceleration?
13. What do you feel were the academic and social outcomes for the student from being accelerated?
14. Based on this experience, would you consider accelerating other gifted and talented students? In what types of circumstances?
15. [*Only for Principals who have never been involved in a decision to accelerate*] What issues would you feel important to consider if you were to make a decision about accelerating a student? *Prompt:* What academic or emotional qualities would you consider important?
16. [*Only for Principals who have never been involved in a decision to accelerate*] Are there any forms of acceleration that you might consider more than others? *Prompt:* grade skipping? early entry? single subject acceleration? some other form?
17. *Background variables:* Have you ever done any training or inservice in gifted education – what was it? *Prompt:* Undergraduate course, postgraduate coursework, significant inservice or professional development?
18. What did you learn from this training about acceleration? What were the key points?



## Questions To Be Asked – Parent of Accelerand

1. What do you see as some of the characteristics of a gifted and talented student? *Prompts: Academic? Social? Emotional?*
2. In what ways do these characteristics describe how you see your son or daughter?
3. Can you tell me about how your child came to be accelerated?
4. What form of acceleration has your child experienced? Can you describe it to me?
5. Are you familiar with any other form of acceleration?
6. Which of the characteristics you described when talking about your son or daughter, do you feel may have influenced the school to accelerate them?
7. How much involvement did you have in the school's decision to accelerate?
8. To what degree do you feel your involvement was important in the school's decision?
9. What was important to you in considering whether or not you would agree to your child being accelerated?
10. Based on your child's experience with acceleration, would you recommend acceleration to another parent of a gifted student?
11. Have you participated in any courses or workshops specifically designed for parents of gifted children?
12. Was any information about acceleration included in the course or workshop – can you tell me about it?

## Questions to be Asked – Accelerand (students aged 16 and over)

1. Can you tell me how and when you came to be accelerated?
2. Were you accelerated more than once?
3. Was your acceleration for all of your subjects, or just some of them? Which ones?
4. What have been the main advantages of acceleration for you? Academically? Socially?
5. Have there been any disadvantages for you? Academically? Socially?
6. How were you told about the idea you that might be accelerated? Who told you?
7. How much involvement did you have in the school's decision to accelerate you?
8. How much involvement did your family have in the school's decision to accelerate you?
9. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to another student of your age (at acceleration) and ability level regarding how to handle acceleration?
10. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to the school which accelerated you on how to go about accelerating gifted students?

11. If you could go back in time to before you accelerated would you make the choice to accelerate to the same extent as you did, to accelerate less, to accelerate more or to stay with your age-peers? *Probe*: Can you tell me more about that?
12. If you could go back in time to before you accelerated would you make the choice to accelerate at an earlier age than you did, later than you did, or at the same age? *Probe*: Can you say a bit more about that?
13. What did you like about the experience of being accelerated?
14. Is there any aspect of your acceleration that you think could have been/could be improved?
15. Is there anything else you think is important, which we should have asked, but didn't?

