



## Factors in the social adjustment and social acceptability of extremely gifted children

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This presentation proposes that, as practitioners and researchers in gifted education, we differ significantly from our counterparts in other areas of special education, such as teachers of intellectually handicapped or hearing impaired students, in our failure to recognize and respond to the different levels or degrees of the condition we study.

We recognize, for example, that the intellectually handicapped student has learning needs which are different from those of his or her age-mates of average intellectual ability, and the further such a child is from the average the more we acknowledge that he or she needs a special educational setting. We may mainstream a child of IQ 70 or 60, but few educational systems would propose full time main streaming of children of IQ 40. Yet the majority of children 60 or more IQ points above the mean are in heterogeneous classrooms. What happens to them?

Terman, fewer than 10 years into his longitudinal study of 1528 gifted children of IQ 135+, was already discussing the special problems of loneliness and social isolation which had become apparent in the sub-group of children of IQ 170+. (Burks, Jensen, & Terman, 1930). Hollingworth (1926) defined the IQ range 125-155 as "socially optimal intelligence" and claimed that above the level of IQ 160 the difference between the exceptionally gifted child and his or her age-mates is so great that it leads to special problems of development which are correlated with social isolation. Hollingworth emphasized however that this isolation did not arise from emotional disturbance, but was caused by the absence of a suitable peer group with whom to relate. When extremely gifted students who had been rejected by age-peers were removed from the inappropriate grade-placement and were permitted to work and play with intellectual peers, the loneliness and social isolation disappeared and the child became accepted as a valued classmate and friend (Hollingworth, 1942).

The current presentation outlines the major findings of a longitudinal study, formally commenced in 1986, of the intellectual, academic, social and emotional development of 40 Australian children of IQ 160 and above. Very few studies of exceptionally gifted (IQ 160-179) or profoundly gifted (IQ 180+) children have been conducted anywhere in the world and there has been no previous study of this population in Australia.

The study follows a multiple-case replication logic, and employs a wide range of observation techniques. The data gathering procedures include tests of general ability, off-level standardized testing of achievement in several academic subject areas; the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory; the Defining Issues Test of moral reasoning; audio-taped interviews conducted with children and parents at regular intervals; several written questionnaires completed by the subjects' parents; official school records; health records; family diaries; and much other documentation. The combination of quantitative and qualitative measures has allowed for a considerable degree of triangulation, increasing both the validity and reliability of the study. Findings of the first few years of the study are reported in Gross (1993).

The study has amassed a great deal of data on the children's academic, social, emotional and physical development. This presentation, however, centers on the social adjustment of the students and particularly on the extreme difficulties they experience in forming congenial relationships with age-peers of average ability.

Of the 40 subjects, currently aged between 6 and 17, 31 have been retained, by their schools, with age-peers of average ability or have been permitted a token grade-skip of a single year. The curriculum with which these children are presented requires them to underachieve by a margin of several years; a discrepancy of 5 years between a student's tested achievement in math or reading, and the level at which he or she is permitted to work in class, is not uncommon, and the study has recorded discrepancies of up to 9 years. An added complication, however, is that the majority of the 31 "non-accelerants" (so termed because this study has shown that acceleration by only one year makes little or no difference to extremely gifted students either academically or socially) also choose to underachieve deliberately in an attempt to gain social acceptance by their classmates. In general these attempts meet with limited success, as the moral development, reading interests, leisure pursuits and play preferences of the subject children are too different to permit effective camouflage and the majority of these children are socially rejected, isolated and deeply unhappy. Children of IQ 180+ who are retained in the regular classroom are even more seriously at risk and experience severe emotional distress.

By contrast, the minority of students (9) who have been radically accelerated by three or more years through a graded series of grade-skips, report that they have stopped, or significantly moderated, their under achievement as they feel that this is no longer necessary. They are now able to work and socialize with students who are three or more years their senior in age but who are their peers in social-emotional and academic development (Gross, 1992).

The study has found striking differences between the self-esteem of the radical accelerants and non-accelerants. In general the radical accelerants obtained positive but modest scores on the academic sub-scale of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, they were comparing their achievements with those of their older classmates. The subjects who scored more than one standard deviation beyond the mean for their age were, in general, non-accelerants who compared themselves with age-peers of average ability. By contrast, the radical accelerants had positive and healthy levels of social self-esteem whereas the majority of the non-accelerants had scores of more than one standard deviation below the mean, with a number of children obtaining scores that were disturbingly low. The social self-peers sub-scale of the SEI assesses students' perceptions of their social acceptability; not surprisingly the children's scores reflected the degree to which they were accepted or rejected by their classmates.

Social acceptability was also found to be related to the students' level of moral development. In almost all cases, the subjects' scores on the Defining Issues Test were several years beyond the mean for their ages. Those students whose moral reasoning was unusually accelerated, and who were retained in the regular classroom, had the most severe difficulties with social acceptance. Children of similar ages, with similar DIT scores, who had been radically accelerated, were much more likely to be accepted and valued by their classmates.

The results of this study suggest that whereas ability grouping with age-peers, or a moderate degree of acceleration, or a combination of these and other intervention procedures, may be an appropriate response to the academic and social needs of moderately gifted students, they are not adequate to the needs of the exceptionally and profoundly gifted. Extremely gifted students require a carefully designed and monitored program of radical acceleration, linked to ability grouping and individualized instruction. Keeping them with age peers is not the way to "socialize" these children. If we isolate them from true peers in the heterogeneous classroom we place them in the position of being the one-eyed man in the country of the blind who, far from being king, is feared and ostracized because he has vision or, perhaps, because of what he can see.

#### References

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