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Saving the Smart Kids

Are schools leaving the most gifted children behind if they don't allow them to skip ahead?

By JOHN CLOUD/THORNBURG

Americans don't seem to have any problem with teenagers who show genius in sports (LeBron James) or entertainment (Hilary Duff). But we have a deeply ambivalent relationship with intellectually gifted kids. For every lovable Doogie Howser, M.D., we fear there's also a William James Sidis. Little William was born in 1898 to an experimentally minded psychologist, Boris Sidis. He trotted William through school so quickly that the boy was enrolled at Harvard by age 11. William graduated with a math degree at 16, but soon after he lost interest in math and spent much of his life working at clerical jobs and writing esoteric books. Boris Sidis had offered his prodigy to the public as proof that young children can learn prodigiously; reporters would hound William Sidis as a failure for the rest of his life. He came to resent his parents for driving him and died alone at 46.

Dickensian tales like Sidis' may help explain why most educators mistrust the whole idea of grade skipping. We catch a whiff of élitism around parents who want their kid to leapfrog others. What's called radical acceleration — finishing high school at 15 or younger — is viewed with particular skepticism, since one suspects today's striving parents may be no less aggressive in pursuit of their child's glory than Boris Sidis was. Judith Roseberry, president of the California Association for the Gifted, says several couples a year approach her seeking to have their fetus identified as gifted. "They say, 'We're positive he is. I'm playing him music ... I'm telling him about art when I go to the museum,'" says Roseberry.

What gifted means hasn't always been clear. Older definitions, for instance, wrongly exclude the artistically talented. But most experts define the term as the top 3% to 5% of scorers on IQ and other standardized tests. For the smartest of these kids, those who quickly overpower schoolwork that flummoxes peers, skipping a grade isn't about showing off. Rather, according to a new report from the University of Iowa, it can mean the difference between staying in school and dropping out from sheer tedium. "If the work is not challenging for these high-ability kids, they will become invisible," says the lead author of the report, Iowa education professor Nicholas Colangelo. "We will lose them. We already are."

Since it was signed in 2002, the No Child Left Behind law has focused attention on the kids who can't keep up, but research shows that gifted kids are also at risk. In a 2000 study for *Gifted Child Quarterly*, Joseph Renzulli and Sunghee Park found that 5% of the 3,520 gifted students they followed dropped out after eighth grade. Astonishingly, that's almost as high as the 5.2% of nongifted kids who dropped out. Untold numbers of other highly intelligent kids stay in school but tune out. "When we ask exceptional children about their main obstacle, they almost always say it's their school," says Jan Davidson, a co-author of the new book *Genius Denied: How to Stop Wasting Our Brightest Young Minds*. "Their school makes them put in seat time, and they can't learn at their own ability level."

The Iowa study, which carries a similarly alarming title, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*, says exceptional children are kept with age-mates because most educators believe, incorrectly, that grade skipping will endanger these kids socially and academically. The report also says schools don't want to upset slower kids by removing their apt peers.

Released this week at nationdeceived.org, the report is a distillation of hundreds of past studies on grade skipping and other forms of acceleration (everything from taking a year of math in a semester to early college entrance). Those who follow education debates know that most school-reform ideas — charter schools, phonics and high-stakes testing leap to mind — are promoted on the strength of highly contested evidence. By contrast, as far back as 1965, Milton Gold said in his book *Education of the Intellectually Gifted*, "No paradox is more striking than the inconsistency between research findings on acceleration and the failure of society to reduce the time spent by superior students in formal education." Forty years later, the authors of *A Nation Deceived* — Nicholas Colangelo and Susan Assouline, who teach at the University of Iowa, and Miraca Gross of the University of New South Wales in Australia — must tell us, once again, that "we are not aware of any other educational practice that is so well researched yet so rarely implemented."

The *Nation Deceived* authors, longtime academic investigators not known as partisans in the education wars, have amassed persuasive evidence showing that, for decades, accelerated students have performed almost as well on standardized tests as older classmates, even those with similar IQs — meaning that an accelerated 7-year-old with an IQ of 133 typically scores nearly as well as on the same test as a 133-IQ 8-year-old who has had an extra year of school. Accelerants far outscore their equally gifted age-mates who did not move ahead. Radical accelerants also do well, even after jumping years of classes: a 20-year longitudinal study of Australians who had skipped at least three grades found they were more likely to earn advanced degrees than equally gifted students who didn't skip.

But our greatest fears about acceleration are not pedagogical but psychological. The leapfroggers may ace exams, but isn't it depressing to leave friends and become the runt in a class of older strangers? How does a 12year-old react when her 15year-old classmates start making out after school and getting their driver's permits?

In interviews with educators in eight states this month, TIME reporters heard such worries repeatedly. Debbie Peña, supervisor of gifted education for the Garden Grove Unified School District, south of Los Angeles, says her school system discourages grade skipping and instead approaches the challenge of exceptional children with this question: "How is it [that] we can meet the needs of gifted kids in a regular classroom without saying, 'Gee, you're 5, but you can read at a seventh-grade level, [so] let's put you up to at least sixth grade'? It doesn't make sense at a social or emotional level," says Peña.

Even the most enthusiastic proponents of grade skipping would have qualms about placing a 5year-old in an ordinary sixth-grade class of rowdy tweens. But most kids who are accelerated — even radically — turn out fine. Accelerated students are nearly as likely to participate in extracurriculars as nonaccelerants and rate no differently on personal-adjustment scales. Some early entrants to college find freshman year difficult, but by the end of that year, they score virtually the same as older classmates do on psychological inventories. Some researchers have found a little-fish-big-pond effect on the self-esteem of kids who are moved into classes with intellectual equals for the first time. But the effect is usually small and temporary (and, some speculate, healthy for the often outsize egos of highly talented students).

A 2001 study of 320 adults who were accelerated as highly gifted kids 20 years ago found that more than 70% had no regrets about the experience. Among those who were dissatisfied, nearly half wished they had accelerated more, not less. A 1996 study also found that students who had been accelerated made more money than gifted kids who had decided to move at the normal pace. That doesn't mean acceleration leads to success, of course. But it does mean that acceleration doesn't usually carry long-term negative consequences.

Andrew Fowler, 17, is typical of grade skippers. After vaulting over first grade in Ames, Iowa, 11 years ago, he was worried about leaving friends behind. The first year "was kind of hard," he says, but "by the end of the second year, I was fine ... It wasn't like I didn't see all the other people I knew ever again." Fowler, who just started Cornell College in Iowa, sounds as though he may not have accelerated fast enough. "It was kind of boring throughout elementary school," he says. "In middle school, it began to get more challenging."

Since it first appeared in 1981, David Elkind's The Hurried Child, which has sold more than 300,000 copies, has prompted educators to wonder whether parents are racing their children through childhood. "'Let kids be kids.' You hear that a lot," responds Colangelo. "But a lot of times, when you make no move, you are causing harm ... Would you rather your kid be miserable in class every day just so he can get his driver's license at the same time as everyone else?"

Acceleration doesn't always work out, of course. Angela Carr, 34, a teacher at Kaplan Educational Services in Chicago, says her early entry into a South Side elementary school, at age 4, as well as a subsequent grade skip, hindered her upbringing. "I was so much younger than my peers," says Carr. "In high school, I was teased about being a virgin. Soon, I wanted to do the things my friends were doing, even though I was younger." As a teen, Carr started drinking with older classmates. Now she realizes that although she was "book smart," she lacked the maturity to be in high school.

Carr has also had more recent problems with acceleration. Because he tested well, Carr enrolled her son Alonzo Jr. in kindergarten at age 4 in 1998. But he wasn't socially prepared, and he began overturning chairs and tossing books in class. Alonzo was eventually diagnosed with a behavior disorder. Last year, the Carrs decided to have him repeat Grade 4. Working with age peers for the first time, he now gets straight A's.

A Nation Deceived doesn't ignore such cautionary tales. It includes the results of a study released this year showing that 63% of early entrants were judged by their teachers to have adjusted "relatively well" or "very well" to school — but that leaves 37% who, like Alonzo, had adjustment problems. Colangelo and Assouline say errors can be avoided by screening potential accelerants — judging not only academic prowess but also levels of motivation, emotional development, motor coordination. "We're not saying it should be a quick decision," says Assouline. "But we have every reason to believe that when the decision is carefully made, the student will do fine."

It's impossible to say how many students who should be accelerated are kept with their age-mates, but more than 22,000 of the 87,000 seventh- and eighth-graders who take the SAT as part of talent-search programs each year score at the level of college-bound seniors. "If they can do that kind of work, the typical curriculum is going to be way below their needs," says Colangelo.

Why isn't that more obvious to school administrators? Consider the case of Davin Gros. Davin is a rangy, sweet, brilliant kid who lives with his mom, stepdad and three siblings on a remote stretch of Iowa cornfields outside Thornburg (pop. 91). Davin, who turns 15 this week, has blindingly blue eyes and blondish-brown hair that he colors jet black. The day we met was a Thursday, but Davin was at home. After a long struggle with the school system, his mom Laura Knipfer now home schools him.

Her fight to have Tri-County Community School teach Davin at a level commensurate with his rare intelligence — he has an IQ of 146--began when he was in first grade. Davin was always bored, but instead of recognizing his academic promise, Knipfer says, the school carped about her boy's fidgeting and poor handwriting.

Despite earning strong scores on his Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in Grade 3, Davin wasn't invited to join the school's talented-and-gifted (TAG) program until the following year — an oversight Knipfer attributes to the family's social standing in a small town. Laura runs a day-care service in their home, and her husband Russell is a truck driver. "We're low income, and I'm not in the local political game," she says. (School superintendent Jody Gray denies this and says Davin was enrolled in TAG as soon as the school recognized his gifts.)

Davin eventually came to loathe school. He says he would sometimes do his own research — on whether dinosaurs might have been warm-blooded, for instance — only to have teachers require answers directly from the textbooks. Davin could do many math problems in his head, but he says he was told to use a pencil. Outside class, he often could not relate to age-mates. There were playground incidents, some serious: his mom says that students threw rocks at him once and that he retaliated by giving one of his tormentors a massive wedgie.

By the time Davin was ready to start sixth grade, the family thought he might get along better with older students. He was ready academically; only 11, he had scored 18 on the ACT, just 3 points below the average for college-bound seniors. But the school set up roadblocks common in acceleration cases: administrators said Davin was socially unprepared to skip ahead because he couldn't get along with kids his own age. They also said TAG could meet his needs. Davin says TAG was just "extra homework" — not advanced material — and that he found most of his age-mates immature. "They just like to make fun of certain people, and I wasn't interested," he says.

Gray admits that her school — which has just 350 students in 13 grades and, as far back as she can remember, has never grade skipped a student — wasn't quite sure what to do with Davin. "We have kids who score well, but they weren't in the same league," she says. "And I'll be honest, I don't think we were prepared for a student like Davin. I know his parents were frustrated at times."

But Gray says school officials became frustrated too. She says they have an obligation to make sure a potential grade skipper will excel in all his higher-level classes. (Since Davin had not scored in the gifted range on ITBS's spelling and punctuation sections, the school was worried about his language skills.) Gray also says the school feared that skipping Davin could do more harm than good. Other kids already saw him as "élitist," she says. "And now when you're talking about a fifth-grader going into seventh ... you don't want him to be ostracized more." Eventually the school decided Davin would be able to skip most of Grade 6, but his parents pulled him before Tri-County could fully implement a carefully planned curriculum. "They gave it one day," Gray says with a sigh.

The Knipfers dispute that — they say they tried to work with the school for months — but it's immaterial now that Davin is being schooled at home. His mom teaches him using old college texts and the staggering array of home-schooling resources available online. She also gets help from the Davidson Institute for Talent Development, based in Reno, Nev., which currently assists more than 500 extremely gifted children, many of whom have fought acceleration battles at school. Like all Iowa home-schooling parents, Knipfer must submit her lesson plans to the state, and Davin still takes (and does well on) required state tests. Knipfer admits it has been hard at times: she had to cut back on her day-care business. But Davin is much happier. He is closing in on a black belt in Taekwondo and plans to study oceanography in college.

In a real world of overcrowded classes, it's difficult to imagine an education system supple enough to meet the needs of extraordinary kids like Davin.

But allowing more grade skipping would help. One of the advantages of acceleration is that it doesn't require more money — only a shift in attitude. "Unfortunately," says Colangelo, "the dialogue now is on remediation, bringing up the kids at the bottom to a basic level. I'm all for that, but it has diverted attention from the needs of high-ability kids — and they do have needs." Perhaps A Nation Deceived will help convince schools that the gifted sometimes need to run ahead before they can walk at their own pace.

With reporting by Christine Badowski/ Chicago; Betsy Rubiner/ Des Moines; Sean Scully/ Los Angeles

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