

Acceleration: Some Considerations

*Many pupils
need an opportunity
to push ahead.*

THE phone rings. A primary school principal begins to talk about a six year old boy whose conversation shows the insight and vocabulary of one many years older. "This child frightens me. What can we do for him? He reads like a fourth grader and his other skills are more or less at the same high level."

"Whatever you do, Mr. Principal, it will involve some kind of acceleration."

"But he is too young to skip and anyway he seems to enjoy the first grade so much."

"I didn't say we would put him ahead a grade, although that is a possibility. We will see if there are better ways of adapting the program to him."

An eighth grade student is reading a biography while his classmates are working percentage problems. He says he has finished his arithmetic and has done the extra assignment. His teacher agrees. "What more can I do? I have assigned reports for him to make on arithmetic in taxation, insurance, commerce. I have helped him find material on other number systems; he helps other students much of the time. I have just run out of enrichment ideas."

"Why don't you introduce him to the next step in mathematics?"

"What good will that do? He already helps his older brother with algebra and if I work with him he will get further out of step."

A father talks with a high school principal.

"Joe apparently wants to follow the family tradition by becoming a physician. I was twenty-eight when I was able to establish my own office. Is there any way to save a year or two?"

"Joe is an honor student and would probably benefit by more difficult courses. We are considering some college level classes for next year, or perhaps the following year, but that won't help Joe. His college may be able to save some time for him, but we can't."

Why Accelerate?

These are not theoretical cases. They existed last year and the year before and they will be with us and most other school districts next year and the next. They point out the more obvious reasons for acceleration. Children are different;

Clifford W. Williams is Director of Special Curriculum Projects, Public Schools, Portland, Oregon.

they learn at differing rates; they have different aspirations. What these brief sketches also show is that school programs, of necessity, are geared to the large majority of youngsters and variations for individuals are difficult to make. They demonstrate something more—the myriad reasons which can be found for not accelerating.

“He is too little to skip a grade.” “He will get further out of step.” “We haven’t started advanced classes yet.”

Significant, also, are some other phrases: “This child frightens me.” “I have just run out of enrichment ideas.” “He would probably benefit by more difficult courses.”

This also adds up to the fact that somewhere we were pushed into a position in which the adaptive function of the school had to operate within unrealistic limits. American education undoubtedly had to undergo just such pushing and tugging in order to become what it is today. In the same way, tomorrow’s schools will benefit by differing theories of today’s educators.

Before the turn of the century, when comparatively few children could avail themselves of formal education, there was little need to vary the pace of instruction for children of different capacities. As the American dream, education for *all* children, became a reality, appropriate provision for those of highest and lowest abilities was an increasingly persistent and complex problem. Multiple-track plans and flexible promotion systems were instituted in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Grade-skipping came into vogue in the first two decades of the present century.

By 1920, however, the Progressive Education movement began to exert a powerful influence on schools, particularly elementary schools. Considerable

light and some confusion now were shed on laws of learning and the importance of the group to the individual. Questions were raised about the wisdom of removing gifted children from their age group to put them in classes with older children. Schools began to substitute groups within classes for multiple tracks and to substitute *enrichment* for *acceleration*. Under the weight of popular opinion among professional educators, the use of ability grouping and grade-skipping diminished and almost disappeared before 1940.

One of the strange phenomena of the period of growing concern for personality development and the importance of heterogeneous grouping was the emotional charge attached to key words and concepts. Thus acceleration came to mean “unwise hurrying”; track systems were said to be for trains, not children; the word “gifted” was made synonymous with “elite.” The acceptable words were “heterogeneous,” “self-contained home-room,” and “enrichment.”

Following World War II, the critical demands of a changing world confronted educators with the necessity for re-examining their means, the general purposes of education, and the special problems of educating the gifted. Such a re-examination was inevitable, but the rapid scientific and technological advances of a world at war brought it about much sooner than might have been expected. Following the decline of ability grouping and of multiple-track systems, the elementary school and the junior high school, to a large degree, became a series of self-contained, heterogeneous classes. Teachers, pledged “to start with each child where he is and take him as far as he can go,” were charged with providing appropriate instruction to each child. This they could do fairly satisfactorily in

primary grades, but older children presented a difficult problem since they ought to become more different; they ought to be more varied in their abilities and interests.

The teacher of the eighth grade is confronted with children who vary as much as seven or eight years in their knowledge, skill attainment, and capacity to learn, and who vary considerably in their interests and aspirations. It is asking a great deal to expect a teacher to provide appropriately for each child in each field, particularly in view of the fact that the teacher is himself human and has human strengths and limitations.

It is for these reasons that re-examinations were inevitable. Beginning with the Harvard Report of 1945, the public schools were sharply criticized for a program designed to meet the needs of a "somewhat colorless mean, too fast for the slow, too slow for the fast." Other critics accused the schools of fostering a "cult of mediocrity" by aiming instruction at the average and making too few gestures toward the capable.

It should be pointed out here that every observant educator must recognize the tremendous contribution of the self-contained classroom. Most criticism has not taken into account that "problems can be met through this organization that must inevitably be met if one is to have a good school."¹ What the critics have noted is that an unexplainable inflexibility of thinking has grown up around the self-contained classroom. The fault in this type of program is not that it lacks value but that some of its proponents claim that it is a panacea, solving all of the problems of all children of all ages.

¹ Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. *The Self-Contained Classroom*, Washington, D. C.: the Association, a department of the National Education Association, 1960.

An increased critical concern has resulted in some relaxation in the rigidity in educational thinking. Moreover, a wealth of studies of considerable magnitude now show that fears of acceleration, elitism, and ability grouping are largely unfounded.

A period of experimentation with administrative devices favorable to abler students has been in progress over the past ten years. Nearly all studies have been concerned with some form of acceleration in combination with enrichment. Grade-skipping is being revived as a means of giving abler children opportunities more nearly appropriate to them. Most of the newer systems, however, are based on a premise that grade-skipping is a poor form of acceleration. Consequently they attempt to achieve proper pace in education without the real or imagined disadvantages of skipping. No one holds a particular brief for this one form of acceleration, especially if other forms can be devised to accomplish the aim of appropriate instruction with a pace that allows for proper concentration of strength.

Ungraded Elementary Schools

A valid criticism of grade-skipping is that acceleration is accomplished in such a way that gaps can appear in the child's knowledge. Therefore, any plan which achieves the same end without the accompanying disadvantage is worthy of examination.

One promising practice, and in many ways the most complex, to come out of the concern for individual differences, is the ungraded, or nongraded, technique in elementary schools. In the ungraded school, children enter at the usual age. They are not assigned to grades but to a program appropriate to their ability and

past learning. Usually, children of several age groups may be found together, but the groups change somewhat depending on the tasks. Normally, the program of the primary section should be completed in three years, at which time the child is promoted to the intermediate section for another three years.

An advantage of this system lies in the fact that all children do not have to follow the typical pace. A few may take four years to complete a three year program. Others may take only two years. The determining criterion is whether or not the assigned tasks, in the program of learning, have been accomplished.

The Milwaukee, Wisconsin, system has probably the best known ungraded program. Others include Appleton, Wisconsin; University City, Missouri; Park Forest, Illinois; LaJunta, Colorado; and Marysville, California.²

Acceleration in Specific Subjects

In schools which continue the graded system of administrative organization, various plans have been established to make it possible for students to study subjects at a more rapid pace. Subgroups in self-contained classrooms can study arithmetic at varying levels, since normally the groups are comparatively homogeneous. Several school systems have planned programs for accelerating arithmetic for abler children in this way.

Generally, the plan calls for completion of the normal eight year program by the end of the seventh grade. To accomplish this successfully, a start must be made as early as the fifth grade, preferably sooner. The intention is to keep able children working at demanding and in-

teresting concepts of arithmetic at a steady pace. Therefore, the first course in algebra generally follows the accelerated arithmetic plan one year earlier than usual. Such a plan for grades 3-8 is explained in Curriculum Publication M-28, Portland, Oregon, Public Schools.

Another example of specific subject acceleration which has developed rapidly in the past few years is the teaching of foreign languages in elementary schools. This has been done in a few places for many years, but the recent impetus of scientific technology and of international politics has caused rapid growth in this area. The teaching of foreign language is an example of acceleration only when it is planned in such a way that students complete the normal first year course one or more years earlier than usual. An unorganized acquaintance with Spanish, for example, may be valuable enrichment but is not acceleration.

Between High School and College

Acceleration in this manner is also possible in other subjects—science, for example. Yet all such attempts at speeding up the study of specific subjects are wasteful unless an arrangement is made with high schools to continue the adjustment. If articulation is so poor that students who take first year algebra, language, or science, in an eighth grade must repeat it in another school, acceleration does not take place and time has been wasted. Furthermore, if high schools are not prepared to carry mathematics, language, or science students through a well-planned fifth year of these courses, to offer an advanced placement class, or to graduate them a year early so they can enter college, then much of the advantage is lost.

² John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson. *The Nongraded Elementary School*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959.

Early Admission

Two programs specifically aimed at accelerating high school students were started in 1951 with the encouragement of the Fund for the Advancement of Education. The Early Admission to College program, carried out by 12 colleges and universities, selected exceptionally able high school students to enter college at the end of their sophomore or junior year of high school.

In a controlled study over a period of four years, the evidence demonstrated that well-selected younger students could out-perform equally able but older students in college. Moreover, it was shown that in social and economic adjustment the younger students were the equal of their comparison groups and of other students. Nevertheless, the Early Admission Program did not grow, in part due to the fact that colleges began to have more qualified applicants for admission from high school graduates than they could take. This left little room for students, no matter how exceptional, who had not graduated from high school.

Advanced Placement Program

The other program was the Advanced Placement Program. This is a different approach to the same problem but proposes to save the student's time in college rather than in high school. This approach has grown apparently because it has given colleges important assistance in guiding students into appropriate classes. Beginning in 1953-54, with 532 students taking fewer than 1000 tests, the program was turned over to the College Entrance Examination Board in 1955, and in 1960 more than 10,000 students took nearly 15,000 examinations.

Essentially, the Advanced Placement

Program assumes that well-selected high school students can complete satisfactorily a college-level course, and that satisfactory completion can be demonstrated by scores on examinations. The assumption is based on the thousands of students tested over the years and is apparently well-founded.^{3, 4}

Advanced Placement examinations are in fact the type of tests which would be given to advanced sections of college courses. Uniformity in scoring is assured by the test reading procedures which have been established by the CEEB. Still lacking to some degree is uniformity in the amount of credit and advanced standing allowed by colleges and universities. As the program grows, greater agreement is sure to develop.

This, then, is the place of acceleration at present. A typical program of studies is necessary to assist teachers with the large number of pupils who are enrolled. In a country in which the dream is to educate appropriately *all* of the children, some will be able to participate at a faster pace than others. Satisfactory development for these children will depend on the opportunity to push ahead, maintaining their strength through continuous exercise.

Saving a year or two for some students is probably desirable; grade-skipping will undoubtedly help some; other administrative devices certainly have a place. Yet the answer to those who ask, "Acceleration for what?" is that acceleration, in combination with effective and enthusiastic teaching, is insurance against under-education.

³ Elizabeth Paschal. *Encouraging the Excellent*. New York: The Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1960.

⁴ The School and College Study of Admission with Advanced Placement. *College Admissions with Advanced Standing*. New York: The Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1954.

Copyright © 1961 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.