

Parents' experiences with their children's grade-based acceleration: Struggles, successes, and subsequent needs

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Abstract

Grade-based acceleration is when high-ability children progress through school at a rate faster than typical by being placed with older classmates. This educational practice can help meet the learning needs of high-ability children. In this study, 56 parents of high-ability children who underwent grade-based acceleration in Australian schools shared their experiences through an online questionnaire. We posed the following research question: "What are the experiences of parents whose children accelerate into classes with older classmates?" Our findings revealed that parents perceived successful academic, social, and emotional outcomes of acceleration for their children. However, parents encountered some resistance towards acceleration among teachers, which may have interfered with the availability of accelerative options. For some parents, ill-informed attitudes among other adults placed a strain on parents' social relationships. Parents also described their accelerated children's educational needs, which were not universally met within their respective schools. Practical implications for parents and teachers considering acceleration are discussed.

Introduction

High-ability students have greater than typical academic potential and, consequently, special learning needs (Gross, Urquhart, Doyle, Juratowitch, & Matheson, 2011). One educational practice that can help meet the learning needs of high-ability children is *acceleration*. Pressey (1949) classically defined acceleration as progress through school at a faster rate or younger age than typical. Accelerants (i.e., students who have accelerated) often experience a better match between their abilities and the pace of study

(Assouline, Colangelo, & VanTassel-Baska, 2015). Adjusting educational pace can happen in two main ways: (a) through content-based acceleration, where the student receives materials at a faster pace in a same-age class; or, (b) through grade-based acceleration, where the student moves into a class with older students (Assouline et al., 2015). Grade-based acceleration may better meet the educational needs of high-ability students who have a pre-existing grasp of age based curriculum and a thirst for being with intellectual peers (Gross, 2010). By contrast, not accelerating very highly able students may be detrimental due to "the maladjusting effects that can arise through prolonged educational misplacement" (Gross, 2010, p. 263)

Candidates for Acceleration

Acceleration is often suitable for students who have "excellent cognitive potential" (Culross, Jolly, & Winkler, 2013, p. 37), including those identified as gifted (Gallagher, Smith, & Merrotsy, 2011). However, formal identification of giftedness may impose restrictive criteria that vary from district to district. Therefore, referral for acceleration should be independent from gifted identification (Colangelo, Marron, Clinkenbeard, & Calvert, 2010). In their *Guidelines for Developing an Academic Acceleration Policy*, Colangelo et al. (2010) recommended that students scoring at or above the 95th percentile on routine standardised tests be automatically considered for acceleration.

Accelerative Options

Although the word *acceleration* often evokes thoughts of grade-skipping, there are many ways to adjust the pace of education to match a child's needs. Assouline et al. (2015) listed 20 types of acceleration including the following:

early entrance to school, grade-skipping, continuous progression, self-paced instruction, subject-matter acceleration, combined classes, curriculum compacting, telescoping curriculum, mentoring, extracurricular programs, distance learning programs, concurrent enrolment, advanced placement, International Baccalaureate programs, accelerated high school, credit by examination, early entrance to middle school, high school, or college, early graduation from high school or college, and acceleration in college. We refer the reader to Assouline et al. (2015) for a comprehensive discussion of each type of acceleration. As described by Southern and Jones (2004), some forms of acceleration involve individually accelerated students, while some students accelerate in small groups (e.g., single-subject mentoring), or even as a class (e.g., Advanced Placement classes in the U.S.A.).

Evidence for Acceleration

Many researchers have quantitatively investigated academic, social, and emotional outcomes of different types of acceleration (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Gross & Van Vliet, 2006; Hattie, 2009; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011). In their comprehensive review of the research, Colangelo et al. (2004) examined findings across 25 studies comparing accelerated and non-accelerated students of similar high ability. Accelerants consistently out-performed high-ability students who were not accelerated on measures of achievement, with mixed but mostly small effects on social and emotional measures. In their meta-analysis, Steenbergen-Hu and Moon (2011) examined 38 studies on acceleration that were conducted between 1984 and 2008. They compared accelerated to non-accelerated same-age peers and found a statistically significant positive effect for academic achievement and a small, positive effect on social-emotional measures. In a longitudinal comparative case study, Gross (2006) examined the academic, social and emotional development of 60 students in Australia with very high ability. Gross (2006) found significant differences in “educational status and direction, life satisfaction, social relationships, and self-esteem as a function of degree of academic acceleration” (p. 404). For very highly able students, more acceleration was better.

In the report, *Releasing the Brakes for High-Ability Students*, Gross et al. (2011) described exemplary practices among Australian schools providing accelerative options. They found that availability and practice of acceleration varied by region and school system, and recommended

greater use of acceleration to meet the needs of high-ability students. Moreover, Gross et al. (2011) concluded that acceleration might happen as a result of parental advocacy in schools and/or systems that would not otherwise offer accelerative options. Many researchers have examined educators’ attitudes towards acceleration (Gallagher & Smith, 2013; Gross et al., 2011; Hoogeveen, van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2005; Missett, Brunner, Callahan, Moon, & Price Azano, 2014; Rambo & McCoach, 2012; Siegle, Wilson, & Little, 2013; Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989; Wood, Portman, Cigrand, & Colangelo, 2010) and there is emerging research on students’ views on accelerative practices (Dare & Nowicki, 2015a; Kanevsky, 2011; Perrone, Wright, Ksiazak, Crane, & Vannatter, 2010). However, few researchers have reported parents’ perspectives and experiences with their accelerated children (Gallagher & Smith, 2013). Our study was a collaborative project between a Canadian and an Australian university and provides an update on parents’ experiences with grade-based acceleration across Australia.

Our Approach to This Study

In this study, we examined how parents experienced their children’s grade-based acceleration to better understand the parent perspective on this educational option. A pragmatic qualitative approach was used as it is ideally suited to understanding everyday experiences of phenomena (Patton, 2002). Our study was guided by the following research question, “*What are the experiences of parents whose children accelerate into classes with older classmates?*” The data for this study are taken from a larger study about grade-based acceleration, which included an online questionnaire examining parental beliefs about potential outcomes of acceleration. In the larger study, parents of high-ability children were invited to consider possible good and bad outcomes of acceleration, (to which one parent replied, “I don’t know what bad could happen”). In response, many parents used the unlimited word/character count text box to describe their own experiences with their children who were accelerated; the parents’ experiential descriptions form the basis of this study.

Study Strengths

The qualitative data for this study was collected through online questionnaires. While closed-ended quantitative questionnaires may “limit participants’ abilities to fully explain all of their choices” (Culross et al., 2013, p. 40), qualitative research can offer a richer and deeper

understanding of the lived experiences of individual subjects, and is particularly well-suited to unique subject groups (Patton, 2002). Through our open-ended online survey tool, parents could explain as much, or as little, as they wanted to share about their experiences, and in their own words. As respondents completed the questionnaires anonymously, our data was not subject to potential interviewer bias, which may arise in other methods of qualitative data collection such as interviews or focus groups.

Method

Recruitment.

Ethics approval was obtained from our respective institutional research committees prior to recruitment. Parents of high-ability children were recruited through several gifted education organisations across Australia, including GERRIC at the University of New South Wales, and various state-level parent support groups across Australia. The organisations were provided with information about the study, including a link to the online questionnaire and an invitation to the parents to participate. Organisations informed their members about our research by posting the information in their newsletters, websites, and online forums.

Participants.

Participants were parents of high-ability children who responded to our online questionnaire between 1 November 2015 and 15 February 2016.

To clarify the term grade-based acceleration, we included the following definition and examples: “Grade-based acceleration is when a student progresses through educational material at a faster rate or younger age than conventional by being placed with older classmates. For example, a year seven student with high-ability in maths might go into the year eight class for maths. In some cases, a student who has high-ability in all areas might skip a year.” Data was from 56 survey respondents, including parents with at least one child who had experienced acceleration and who provided information about their experiences with acceleration.

Participants were from seven states across Australia (see Table 1) and included 47 females, seven males, and two individuals who preferred not to identify their gender. Participants ranged in age from 33 to 59 years, with a median reported age of 43 years. When asked about their highest level of completed education, the majority indicated that they had completed graduate degrees ($n = 43$), 10 had completed college or university, two had completed high school, and one person did not respond. All participants had school-aged children, which may be an indication that their experiences with acceleration were recent. As each case is unique and children may experience more than one form of acceleration, we did not ask parents to strictly categorise the type of grade-based acceleration their child (or children) experienced. However, to give a sense of the range of experiences reported in this study, we provided the following examples of terms

Table 1

Number of Participants by State

	Number of Participants
New South Wales	29
Queensland	12
Western Australia	6
Victoria	3
South Australia	3
Australian Capital Territory	2
Northern Territory	1
Total	56

parents used to describe their children's acceleration: "early entry", "skipped kindergarten", "whole-grade accelerated", "compacted a year", "accelerated in [various single subjects]", "two-grade acceleration", "home-schooling," and "radical acceleration with private home teacher." Among participants, 31 indicated at least one of their children had an Individual Education Plan for high-ability.

Data Analysis.

Data were analysed using qualitative data analysis software. A phenomenological approach was taken to analysing the responses, which ranged in length from 17 to 818 words. Phenomenological research "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). In this study, we examined the concept of having a child who had accelerated. The first author read through all the data, closely examining responses for descriptions of parents' first hand experiences with acceleration. Initial coding involved breaking the data into discrete parts, closely examining the parts to extract descriptions of personal experiences, then comparing extracted parts for similarities (Saldaña, 2016). This initial coding identified that some of the data described experiences prior to acceleration and some described experiences following acceleration. Having made this distinction, codes were assigned to identify descriptions of experiences before and after acceleration. Data describing experiences prior to acceleration were coded into the category Prior to Acceleration. Among descriptions coded into the category Experiences After Acceleration, we relied on Wilson-Grau and Britt's (2012) principles of Outcome Harvesting to identify all results that parents described "whether good or bad, planned or unplanned" (p.3). In this approach, an outcome is defined as "a change in the behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution" (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012, p. 2). The analysis revealed two sub-sets of Experiences After Acceleration: those that directly related to children's own experiences, which we labelled Child-Centered Outcomes, and those that parents experienced, which we labelled Parent/Family Centred Outcomes. Finally, some of the data described experiences after acceleration that did not fit the definition of outcomes, but presented challenges. We labelled data in this category Challenges After Acceleration.

As shown in Figure 1, our final coding structure consisted of three overall categories containing eight themes and fifteen sub-themes. The shading of the sub-themes in the figure indicates relative emphasis among the data according to

frequency counts in the sub-themes. The frequency counts indicate the number of comments within each sub-theme.

Findings

In the following section we describe our findings in each of the categories, grouped by theme. Findings are reported in chronological order, describing experiences before and after acceleration. Figure 1 illustrates the number of comments within each sub-theme. The strongest sub-themes were positive academic and positive emotional outcomes experienced following acceleration.

Experiences Prior to Acceleration: Child's Experiences in School.

Among parents who described what school was like for their child before acceleration, all shared negative experiences; however, some comments were stronger than others. At the milder end of the spectrum, a mother in New South Wales (NSW) wrote that her child "was not unhappy in the lower grade, but she was switching off and her mind was wandering." Other parents expressed stronger concerns, and witnessed frustration and withdrawal when their children were unchallenged. For example, a father in Western Australia wrote, "[my child] was very frustrated and disengaged." A mother in Victoria recommended that high-ability children be engaged through new learning: "practising the same skills on a million different problems just frustrates them and they need some new skills to keep them interested."

A few parents told of very strongly negative experiences prior to acceleration. One mother in NSW described her child's experiences as miserable: "There were years of suffering before [acceleration] happened." Another parent portrayed the years before acceleration as particularly hostile: "Not having been accelerated meant that school was essentially a disaster and we recently had an appointment with [a psychologist] who mentioned PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], and that school was like a war zone for [our child]." The same parent recalled a negative change in her son's emotional state when he began kindergarten: "He went from being a child delighted about learning, excited about 'Big School', to one who was crying about attending—in six weeks' time." When high-ability children exhibit negative changes of behaviour, our findings suggest that parents may link this change to boredom in school. One mother wrote of her son, "He was starting to exhibit out-of-character anxiety behaviours when being taken to school, saying school was boring and he didn't want to go."

Additionally, some high-ability students do not fit socially with same-age classmates, with one

mother of an accelerant in South Australia (SA), explaining that her daughter “struggled to get along with those her own age.”

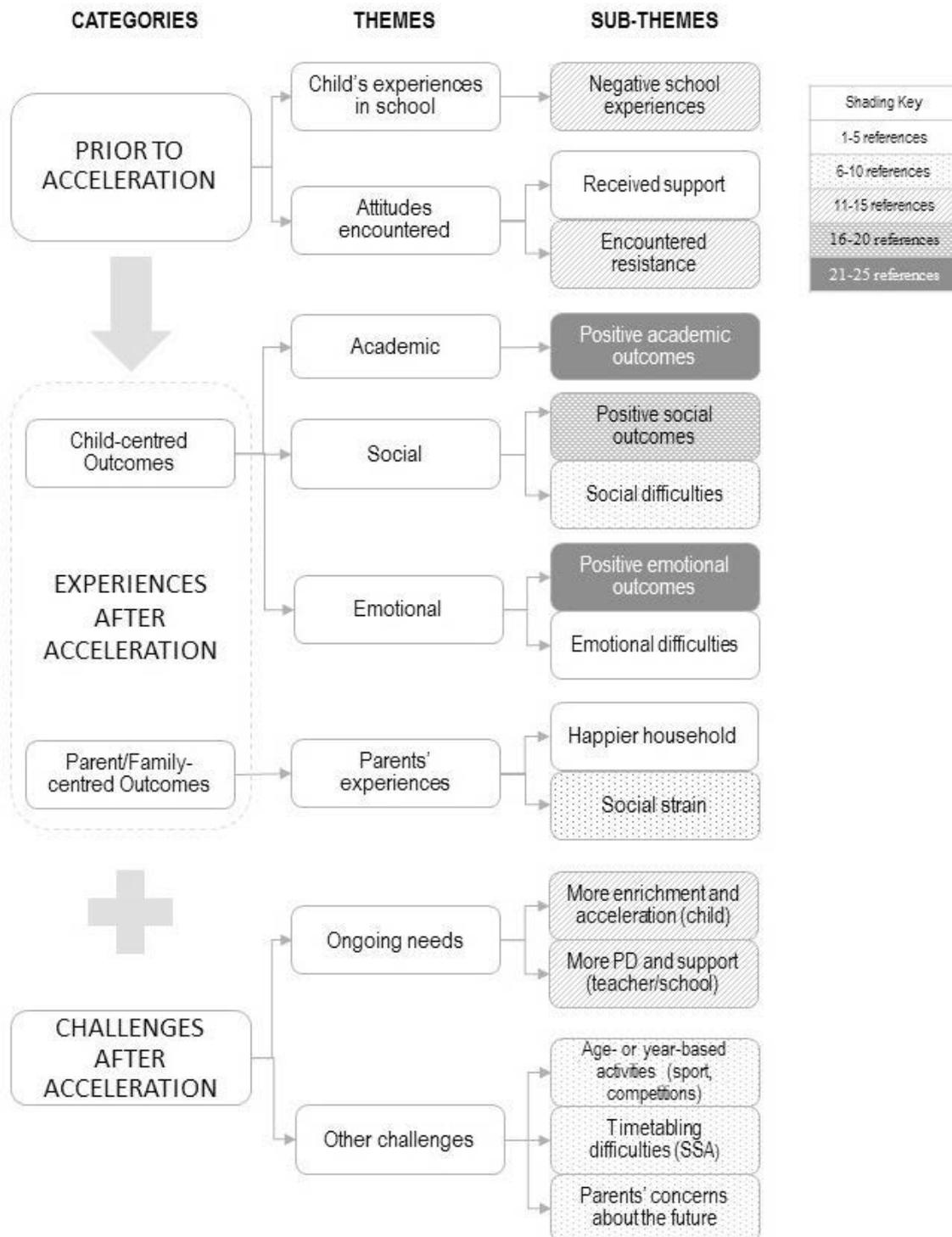


Figure 1: Coding Structure and Emphasis

Experiences Prior to Acceleration: Support for and/or Resistance Towards Acceleration.

Among responses explaining how their children accelerated, parents described the influences of others, which helped or hindered the process. In some cases, the school suggested acceleration: “Full-year acceleration has been a successful and necessary move for our eldest. It was suggested by our school counsellor when my son was in [kindergarten].” Among parents who experienced school support for their child’s acceleration, this support was credited with easing the transition to a higher class: “Grade acceleration was wonderful for my daughter and us. A large part was the way it was done by the school. The transition was smooth and she is very happy.” Parents also received support outside the school, and one father in NSW credited a parenting course at the Gifted Education Research, Resource, and Information Centre as a key source of encouragement: “I have to say that the course made all the difference [when discussing acceleration with teachers and principals].”

In one case, a parent recalled her own initial resistance to acceleration, which was overcome when the school informed the parents about evidence-based benefits: “We were resistant to the idea of grade skipping until our son’s school convinced us to read the research and we learned that it was important for his social integration for him to be with older, more similar classmates.” However, another parent’s enthusiasm for the support received was tempered by the feeling that the school could have done more: “The school and teachers have been good, but until parent intervention were not proactive enough.”

Although some parents received support, others struggled against resistance towards accelerating their child. Resistance can come from different sources, but parents in our study most often mentioned school staff. For example, a mother in Australian Capital Territory (ACT) remarked: “the teachers are very against it.” Even when schools acknowledge a child’s advanced academic ability, they may hesitate to support acceleration to meet the child’s needs. One mother in Queensland stated: “I have had a school inform me my child is 4 years ahead but REFUSE to accelerate her as the guidance counsellor is philosophically against it.” Another parent commented: “I cannot overstate the level of negative reaction to grade-skipping—for all sorts of reasons, including what seemed to be ‘in principle’ rejection of the idea.” Following an initial acceleration, some highly-able and mature students benefit from further acceleration in one or more subjects (Jung & Gross, 2015). However, this mother in NSW encountered resistance to the idea of multiple accelerations, despite the

school’s support for one whole-grade acceleration: “an external gifted consultant advised us [our child] needed at least another subject acceleration in Maths this year and his current school have been oppositional to any further acceleration.”

Not surprisingly, parents can become frustrated and disappointed when they perceive a need for acceleration, but the child’s school is not supportive. A mother in Queensland stated, “I have been very disappointed in how my child’s education has been handled over the last year and a half. Rather than support and guidance we received suspicion and marginalisation.” Lack of support can lead to disenchantment with the school system as a whole. For example, a mother in NSW opined: “schools do not understand acceleration. It was a huge effort to organise and it came too late in many respects.” Parents must advocate wisely, and may need to connect with staff members who are knowledgeable about acceleration. As another mother in NSW experienced:

The process [of acceleration] was not easy. Traditional approaches to education meant huge resistance from most teaching staff [towards acceleration]. We were fortunate to find some innovative views that allowed the consideration to be more open minded and less conservative.

Parents may also encounter negative attitudes towards acceleration among family and friends when discussing the possibility of accelerating their child: “the advice/feedback from almost our entire family, social, and educational networks concerned possible negative consequences.” This lack of support can place a strain on parents’ social relationships, and create additional worry when deciding whether acceleration is appropriate.

Children’s Experiences After Acceleration

This category includes parents’ descriptions of their children’s experiences following acceleration; these experiences are grouped according to academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Parents placed similar emphasis on all three areas, and mentioned links among them.

Academic experiences.

Without exception, parents who mentioned academic experiences reported positive outcomes. Academically, accelerants still performed well after acceleration, and many achieved at the top of the higher-level grade. For example, one mother in NSW commented “academically, he is at the top of the year he

was accelerated into” and another commented, “he is now in a class of older students and he is out performing them.” Parents mentioned “very good grades” and “grades are great”, and one parent credited their child’s acceleration for “higher academic achievement due to better engagement.” As mentioned by parents describing experiences prior to acceleration, when schoolwork is not challenging enough, high-ability children can become bored and disengaged. According to a mother in Victoria, acceleration re-engaged her child by “enabling her to be academically challenged.”

Emotional experiences.

Participants in our study also viewed their children’s emotional outcomes after acceleration as largely positive. One parent said her child “actually enjoyed going to the higher class for maths” and another said his child “has been much happier” following acceleration. Positive emotional outcomes included greater liking of and engagement in school work. Accelerated children were described as “mostly engaged with content” and “more engaged with school work.” One mother in Victoria credited improved emotional wellbeing to an increased sense of belonging, as the accelerant no longer felt “different to her classmates.” Parents also reported improvements in other aspects of their children’s emotional wellbeing, for example, a mother in NSW observed acceleration “boosted [my daughter’s] self esteem, self efficacy and confidence.” Countering fears that some children might not be as emotionally mature as their older peers, this mother in NSW found her child “matured to reflect more of her classmates’ EQ [emotional quotient] as time progressed.”

A few comments related to emotional difficulties that accelerants experienced after moving to a higher class. One parent qualified her description of positive outcomes with the following:

on the other hand, [my son] can become negative about his abilities if he finds something very difficult. He can compare himself to other students who have also been accelerated and this can sometimes cause him to feel he is not ‘smart enough’.

Notably, this accelerant’s feelings of inadequacy were in comparison to other accelerants. Another parent bemoaned the challenge faced by his son in finding like-ability peers even among older classmates: “it is still hard to find a child at [the] same or similar level of intelligence... [he] is happier during class time, but not necessary outside class time.” In one case, a family in NSW re-located their son with same-age friends when he transferred into a school that

provided suitable extension and enrichment, demonstrating that acceleration can be successfully undone if need be: “We chose to replace our 3rd child into year one at a school move, after acceleration at the previous school ... the current school is happy to extend and enrich.”

Social experiences.

Parents also reported mostly positive social experiences for their children following acceleration. Comments about social outcomes reflected the quantity and quality of friendships accelerants developed with older peers. For example, one parent reported her daughter developed “lovely friendships with the older kids.” Developing strong social ties maybe easier when classmates have common interests: “[My daughter] has some excellent friends in her class. They are all the bright kids and age doesn't seem to matter to them. They like the same things—quirky, creative and left-field ideas.” Similarly, a father in NSW commented about his accelerated son, “the truth was he felt less alienated being with other kids who shared his interests (this is NOT peer-group-age-related) and he was going to be teased (‘smart’ used as a derogatory word) whether he accelerated or not.” One parent suggested a link between improved social relationships and positive emotional benefits: “grade acceleration has been positive for my daughter as she relates better to older peers on a social-emotional level than her age peers.”

Some parents in our study observed an increase in their children’s range of social contacts following acceleration. This finding suggests that grade-based acceleration can provide opportunities for the accelerant to develop new friendships. For example, a mother in NSW said her daughter “has friends in every year from 7-12 now” and a mother in Queensland said that by accelerating, “gifted children find friends who are closer to their developmental level and fit in better with the older cohort.” For an accelerant in NSW, finding a better fit meant she “like[d] her new year group so much better.” Comparing her child’s social experiences in the accelerated class to his same-age cohort, another mother said that older children “look up to [my son] for his ability, rather than in his own grade where he was shunned for his ability.”

A few social difficulties were mentioned. Teasing was an issue for one accelerant: “the only issue was being teased by his classmates for being the youngest.” Another parent said the social outcome for his child was “OK” but there were “social issues with both old and new grades—hard to explain—but once accelerated doesn't fit comfortably in either grade. Still identifies with

'old' friends and is treated in new grade as 'special'." However, acceptance may take time. In one parent's experience, an accelerated child "may not be accepted by peers and have some stigma from parents and kids initially... this has settled in our experience." When accelerants do experience social difficulties, participants suggested such difficulties might not be linked to acceleration. As one mother in Victoria put it, "although socially it has been a bit 'bumpy' at times, we believe this is not due to being early entered, but a reflection of her sensitive nature and personality."

Parents' Experiences and Life at Home

According to parents in our study, having an accelerant in the family can shape parents' interactions with other adults, and may change some aspects of family life as well. For example, some parents described an improved atmosphere at home following their child's acceleration, because acceleration "made for a happier child and calmer household." Another parent experienced initial relief following their child's acceleration: "frankly, [acceleration] also took the pressure off us to provide outside challenge and stimulation." Conversely, in another case, the accelerant was "very tired at times and we find she constantly wants to be challenged and entertained at home because she is used to that at school."

For some participants, parenting an accelerant placed a strain on parents' social relationships. Some parents faced judgement from others who expressed negative or ill-informed views about acceleration. Such judgements came from educators, family members, or friends. Following her child's acceleration, a mother in NSW experienced "educator assumptions of pushy parents and hot housing." Another parent described "going under cover" when meeting other parents to avoid potential negative reactions.

Challenges After Acceleration

Despite experiencing mostly positive outcomes, parents in our study still faced many challenges following their child's acceleration. This category included two themes reflecting ongoing needs and other challenges.

Ongoing needs.

Many of the challenges voiced through this study were connected to accelerants' ongoing academic needs. A mother in Queensland commented, "simply placing a gifted child in a higher grade class should not be seen as a magic bullet to meet that child's needs." Even among

parents who expressed positive outcomes following their child's acceleration, some acknowledged the need for more challenge: "the single year acceleration is still not sufficiently challenging and [our daughter] still requires extension." Differentiated instruction is critical to meet the academic needs of high-ability students (Van Tassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). As one parent in NSW noted, "it is still frustrating when the teacher teaches the class only one level of learning." A parent in ACT explained that without individualisation, "often the pace is still not fast enough." Another mother in Queensland wrote, "moving to a higher grade does little to change the pace at which curriculum is delivered in the classroom, or the amount of review built into the weekly schedule." A need for further acceleration and enrichment may arise after a honeymoon period in the higher grade, as summed up by this parent:

after a period of time (maybe a term, maybe a couple of years) the child will have outgrown this new environment and further adjustments are required... Unfortunately, gifted development does not slow to match the pace of typical development once accelerated a year.

Other ongoing needs related to accelerants' needs for support from teachers. Some parents perceived a lack of informed support from teachers following their child's acceleration. This mother from Queensland recognised that teachers benefit from gifted education training: "From our experience, teachers need a lot of training to help this process [of acceleration] along, and they were mostly untrained and unable to cater to the child." She went on to describe how teachers may not realise the accelerated child needs assistance: "They forget [my child] has had an acceleration and expect all levels of his development to be superior." Lack of teacher support meant the initial period following acceleration was particularly difficult for this family in ACT:

It was terrible at first. The teacher was very against it, had no idea how to work with gifted children, and did not help him transition at all. It was very detrimental to him and he believed he was a naughty boy who was horrible. It was devastating for him and me as a parent.

Another parent in NSW reflected on the need for more teacher understanding of, and training in, gifted education: "In our experience to date, most teachers are not equipped to assist our son

and his abilities (or other children with similar abilities).”

Even with the best intentions, some parents in our study experienced the reactions of some teachers to be less than ideal. One parent said her child’s teachers:

have given her a hard time and mistakenly [felt] they have to protect her from the social impacts of acceleration. Her tutor teacher keeps insisting she attend social events with her old year group which my daughter doesn’t want to do as she likes her new year group so much better.

Parents recognised the importance of a supported, holistic approach to acceleration, including a well-developed monitoring plan. Without a plan, parents may need to rely on their own resources to support their child’s learning needs:

Despite continual requests to provide ongoing review and support, the school generally doesn’t do that and only responds if a problem arises. It was almost impossible to organise help for any areas that needed support such as a topic of math that was missed, she was just expected to learn by herself. We paid for a tutor.

These responses suggest that the training, experience, and empathy of the receiving teacher are some key ingredients to reducing potential post-acceleration difficulties. As one mother in Queensland described, “A good teacher can be vital. They have to understand gifted children and their quirks, and recognise why this decision has been made.”

Other challenges.

Some other challenges following grade-based acceleration involved age-related activities. Sport was mentioned as a potential area of difficulty. A mother in Western Australia commented on positive experiences with acceleration overall, but pointed out that competing against older children may be challenging:

A negative aspect of whole grade acceleration is she has to compete in school sports with girls 18 months older than her. Sport is really important to her and she is very good at sport, she is [an accomplished athlete], but being younger and shorter is a big disadvantage.

Academic competitions were also mentioned as a potential challenge. As with sports, if competitions are based on school year, accelerated children must compete against older children—a situation which was viewed as a disadvantage by a few parents. In one unfortunate case, an accelerated child was deemed ineligible for school-based awards due to being accelerated:

My daughter had to agree to forgo academic awards in the subject she accelerated in. No, I don’t understand why either. To her credit, her response was, I want to learn far more than I need awards. Still, it was hurtful and bizarre.

Some comments focussed specifically on single-subject acceleration, a form of acceleration that can address students’ strengths in a particular area. Despite positive outcomes experienced by this mother in ACT, she observed her child had “constant issues with timetable clashes and missing classes due to this.” In some cases, a lack of flexibility in timetabling may strongly influence the child’s options: “to continue with accelerated maths, [our son] has to give up one of his electives. This has made him seriously reconsider whether to continue.” In another case, the school refused to implement single-subject acceleration because of timetabling challenges: “in relation to single subject acceleration, I found that the schools were against it as in their opinion it was too difficult to timetable.” Another parent found that single subject acceleration was not as well suited to her daughter’s needs as full-grade acceleration: “single subject acceleration (SSA) was less beneficial than full grade. My daughter felt more different and out of place with SSA. It created time tabling challenges and did not address the totality of her abilities.”

Other challenges included parents assessing past decisions about acceleration and contemplating what might happen in the future. For example, following a move across states to a school that provided educational support for bright and gifted children, one parent pondered whether the acceleration was necessary in the new educational environment:

Our child was accelerated in primary in [Queensland] where the school was basic and none of the local schools could cater to his needs... When we moved states for a school that catered well to bright children, he kept his acceleration, which at times seems a mistake. He has more friends in his age cohort class than his actual class and the school does a great job with gifted kids in all year levels. I

think he might have been fine in the year below although he still loves the challenge of the curriculum in his current year group.

Some parents voiced concerns over the future. One father in ACT wondered what the next school year would bring:

As we come to the end of the year, I again worry about which teacher he will have, and what the year will entail. I do worry about how much accelerating affected him, whether it was a good thing to do.

Looking further ahead, one mother in NSW commented, “we are a bit worried about university as she will be quite young and we worry about her leaving home.”

Summary of Findings

Some parents in our study reported negative school experiences prior to acceleration; their children were disengaged from school, and some experienced social isolation among same-age classmates. During the process of acceleration, parents encountered varying levels of support or resistance. Parents suggested that this support, or lack thereof, influenced their experiences during the transition period and after acceleration. Academic outcomes were resoundingly positive, with the caveat that after an initial period, further enrichment or acceleration may be necessary. Emotional outcomes were also largely positive; parents perceived improved self-esteem and all-round “happier kids.” Parents also perceived positive social outcomes for their children, with increased quantity and quality of friends. However, some parents also described social outcomes as mixed. Challenges after acceleration included the need for further support from teachers, and a few concerns tied to competitive activities. While some reported an improved home atmosphere following acceleration, the potential for strains on social relationships resulting from negative attitudes toward acceleration was also raised. Parents in this study did not appear to take the decision to accelerate lightly; they continued to reflect on their decisions and wonder about what the future will hold for their children.

Discussion and Implications

Our findings demonstrated that parents experienced struggles, successes, and subsequent needs when their children’s

education was accelerated. Below we discuss the findings from this study in the context of the extant research, and suggest implications for educational practice. Refer to Figure 1 for relative strength of themes among the data.

Struggles.

Our findings confirm that despite growing awareness of the benefits of acceleration (Gross et al., 2011), Australian parents and accelerants continue to encounter challenges in relation to grade-based acceleration. For parents in our study, the greatest struggles related to negative attitudes towards acceleration. Negative educators’ attitudes have been prevalent in the research literature (Bartley, 2014; Geake & Gross, 2008; Southern et al., 1989), although positive educators’ attitudes have also been indicated (Lassig, 2009). On occasion, these attitudes contributed to resistance towards acceleration and social strain following acceleration. Among study participants who encountered resistance to acceleration from educators, half of the comments reflected ensuing negative attitudes towards the school system as a whole.

Findings from our study suggest that some parents may respond to educators’ resistance by undertaking a search for the best educational environment for their children. Parents’ choices in this regard may be limited by financial and time constraints (Gross et al., 2011). Parents also commented on different strategies to find the best educational environment, including changing the child’s school, homeschooling, engaging private tutors, and taking courses to learn more about the specific needs of gifted children. Understandably, parents are keen to find the best education to meet their children’s needs (Farrall & Henderson, 2015). For many parents in our study, finding the best fit required a considerable degree of effort. We question what may happen to potential candidates for acceleration whose families do not have the resources to support time-consuming, energy-intensive efforts to find the right educational fit.

Other studies have shown that socioeconomic factors are correlated with identification of high-ability (Ambrose, 2013), and that students from impoverished backgrounds tend to be under-represented among students formally identified as gifted (Carman & Taylor, 2010). Among parents in our study, the majority (77%) had completed graduate degrees, suggesting that they had the educational background to advocate strongly for their children’s education. Research on parental advocacy has found that parents are sometimes torn between advocating effectively or being negatively viewed as aggressive (Gross et al., 2011). The advocacy

efforts of participants in our study did not always run smoothly, a finding that was reflected in this parent's request for assistance: "Please help us to cater for our children's needs in the school system." Our findings imply that more still needs to be done to foster widespread awareness and acceptance of acceleration as an educational option among teachers, principals, and society as a whole, even though previous research heralded similar recommendations (Gross et al., 2011; Lassig, 2009). Widespread acceptance of accelerative practices will promote more equitable opportunities for high-ability students who are motivated to accelerate their studies (Assouline et al., 2015).

Our study also revealed that parents of accelerants encounter struggles with social barriers among their own peers; these barriers stemmed from negative attitudes about acceleration. Some parents described being reticent about their child's acceleration, discouraged by others' beliefs about "pushy parents" or "hothousing" children. Similarly, research shows that parents may be reluctant to use the term *gifted* when discussing their children, feeling that "they or their children would be judged negatively by others if the parents used the term 'gifted'" (Matthews, Ritchotte, & Jolly, 2014, p. 372).

Our findings likewise suggest parents may face negative judgement towards having an accelerant in the family. When parents encounter mistaken beliefs in a pushy parent syndrome, these encounters may interfere with parents' advocacy efforts, as parents struggle to "find balance between force and effectiveness as advocates and at the same time maintain credibility" (Gross et al., 2011, p. 23). One parent expressed bewilderment about the negative attitudes he encountered: "I still haven't figured out why people offer their negative opinions instead of asking about our experiences." Further research into attitudes towards acceleration is needed to understand the beliefs that underlie these negative opinions. Such research may lead to strategies that can move the needle on societal awareness about the need for special education for high-ability students.

In terms of the struggles that students encounter, parents most often referred to difficulties related to social challenges. Indeed, the potential for social difficulties may prompt the greatest worry in the decision to accelerate (Cross, Andersen, & Mammadov, 2015; Gross et al., 2011). While an individual child's academic and emotional suitability for acceleration can be assessed using tools such as the Iowa Acceleration Scale (Assouline, Colangelo,

Lupkowski-Shoplak, Lipscomb, & Forstadt, 2009), social aspects involving the receiving class may be more difficult to estimate (Colangelo et al., 2004). The influence of the teacher, as well as the school culture, is critical in this regard (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2011; Gross et al., 2011). Gross et al. (2011) highlight the "importance of teacher attitudes towards acceleration of talented students when a school is working towards developing exemplary practice" (p. 45). Parents in our study confirmed that the teacher's role is critical in ensuring a smooth transition for the accelerated student. Teachers need pre-service education and professional development to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively support the special education needs of high-ability, accelerated students (Bartley, 2014; Fraser-Seeto, Howard, & Woodcock, 2015; Lassig, 2009; Plunkett & Kronborg, 2011). Teachers also need to work collaboratively with parents to support a successful transition to acceleration and productive accelerative outcomes (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013; Farrall & Henderson, 2015).

Successes.

A wealth of research has demonstrated that carefully planned acceleration can have positive outcomes for high-ability students (Assouline et al., 2015; Colangelo et al., 2004; Gross & Van Vliet, 2005, 2006; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011). Our findings confirm that parents across Australia experienced positive outcomes for their children who experienced grade-based acceleration. Moreover, our study revealed an equal emphasis on positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes, and outcomes were linked across these three areas. For example, parents communicated how greater academic challenge could re-engage students who had previous negative school experiences, leading to an improved atmosphere at home. Parents did not mention their children having any academic difficulties following acceleration. Only a few parents mentioned emotional challenges and in one case a family with more than one accelerated child chose to reverse the acceleration of one child following a change of school.

In our study, parents' comments about social difficulties tended to focus on teasing and difference. Indeed, research on social inclusion has shown that students may socially exclude classmates who they perceive to be different (Nowicki, Brown, & Stepien, 2014). Our findings suggest that any initial social exclusion may decrease over time for accelerants, and that age differences may be forgotten as the student is accepted in the receiving class. In a meta-

analysis of 32 studies on students' social competence, Nowicki (2003) found students who are above average in academic achievement are more socially competent compared to students who experience below average academic achievement. Therefore, we would expect high-achieving, accelerated students to have relatively competent social skills, which might help them to overcome initial perceived differences. In practice, teachers may be well advised to de-emphasise age differences when a student is accelerated to ease the process of acceptance.

Our findings emphasise the importance of connectivity among outcomes when considering acceleration. In addition to positive outcomes at school, parents in our study experienced positive changes in the home environment because their children were happier and more engaged in school. One parent commented on the need to consider "the emotional well-being of the child, and that often has to include acceleration. I think [acceleration] needs to be looked at holistically and not just as a means to greater academic achievement." Decisions about acceleration require a highly individualised approach (Vialle, Ashton, Carlon, & Rankin, 2001), where each case is addressed in light of academic, social, and emotional needs of the child, and within the context of the school (Gross et al., 2011). Educators can be supported to more confidently address strengths and potential difficulties in each individual case by using various supports. Available supports include guidelines for acceleration, such as the Iowa Acceleration Scale (Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplik, Lipscomb, & Forstadt, 2009; Feldhusen, Proctor, & Black, 1986); policies on acceleration, for example the policy and implementation strategies for the education of gifted and talented students (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2004); and professional learning resources such as those available through GERRIC (2015).

Subsequent needs.

Despite experiencing positive outcomes, parents in our study recognised that acceleration is not a one-time, fix-all measure for high-ability students. Accelerated students continued to need academic challenge and support from teachers. Following a consolidation period, accelerants often require individualised programming to fully meet their educational needs (Gross et al., 2011). For the most cognitively advanced and socially mature students, further acceleration may be appropriate (Gross, 2010). As one father in our study commented, "school in its standard form completely fails the profoundly gifted. Fiddling at the edges doesn't help."

Our findings suggest that although a few parents received exemplary support before and after acceleration, other parents did not. We contend that such inconsistencies in educational practice create inequitable opportunities for high-ability children to accelerate. As teachers play a fundamental role in accelerative programming (Dare & Nowicki, 2015a), their beliefs about acceleration critically influence the acceleration experience for the child and the child's family. Our findings indicate that when parents felt supported, the acceleration experience was "overwhelmingly positive." Moreover, a school's willingness to consider acceleration may be interpreted as "a positive sign that the school understands giftedness." On the other hand, a troubling finding from this study shows that even after the decision to accelerate had been made, some teachers did not embrace the child's need for accelerated learning. In keeping with existing research (Rowley, 2012), this finding reinforces the need for more teacher education and professional development in gifted education in general, and acceleration in particular. In addition, school-based policies and procedures supporting the practice of acceleration can assist and guide teachers in the process of acceleration (Colangelo et al., 2010; Culross et al., 2013).

Paving the Way Ahead

Across Australia, attitudes towards acceleration are improving (Gallagher & Smith, 2013; Gross et al., 2011) and schools are gradually adopting the practice of acceleration (Gross et al., 2011). One parent in our study described how she experienced this recent shift in attitudes and practice: "Now there are many more students accelerating so [my daughter] trail-blazed, jumped through the hoops, and made it much easier for others."

Informed parent advocacy can play a key role in supporting this move toward normalising acceleration (Gallagher & Smith, 2013). In their study involving parents of high-ability children with learning difficulties, Dare and Nowicki (2015b) found parents were "passionate in their support for their children and drew upon their resources to advocate for the best possible outcomes" (p. 215). Similarly, many parents in this study spoke of their advocacy efforts to discover the best educational support for their accelerated children. Parents explored accelerative options with school principals, teachers, guidance councillors, and external consultants. By having evidence-based information at hand, parents can work with schools to promote and inform others about the benefits of acceleration.

Existing research has demonstrated positive outcomes for thoughtfully planned acceleration (e.g., Assouline et al., 2015; Gallagher et al., 2011; Gross et al., 2011). This study showed children experienced successful acceleration, but some parents experienced struggles along the way as well as a variety of subsequent needs. As attitudes towards acceleration continue to shift across Australia, we must keep in mind that failure to appropriately accelerate the most highly able students can have negative emotional outcomes such as lower levels of life satisfaction and significant difficulties with socialization (Gross & Van Vliet, 2006). Comparing acceleration and non-acceleration, a parent in our study summarised eloquently: “We often think not accelerating is a neutral thing, it isn't. The consequences of not accelerating can be very negative.”

Limitations and Future Research

As with all online survey-based research, this study has some limitations. The data was self-reported and we were unable to verify children's ability levels. However, we are confident our recruitment through gifted education organisations targeted parents of high-ability children. In addition, all parents in this study indicated that their children had experienced grade-based acceleration, a strategy usually indicative of high-ability. Most participants were mothers, so our findings may not fully reflect fathers' perspectives on their children's acceleration. Future research could target the roles and experiences of fathers in their children's acceleration.

This study used an online survey tool for data collection, and the link to the survey was shared among gifted education support groups, so it was not possible to determine a response rate. While this data collection method gave unlimited opportunity for parents to express experiences in their own words, it did not permit follow up questions to probe more deeply or seek clarification.

Research shows some teachers remain hesitant to embrace acceleration (Bartley, 2014; Gallagher et al., 2011; Robinson, 2004), and some parents in this study encountered very strong resistance towards the practice. These findings underscore the need for future research on the beliefs that underpin attitudes towards acceleration, so that future teacher education, professional development, and other approaches such as teacher sharing of strategies, mentoring of early career teachers, or parent/teacher collaborations could target erroneous beliefs.

Moreover, our research demonstrated that parents support research in this area.

The Last Word: Parents' Support for Research in Acceleration

As we read through the data, we found numerous comments of thanks and support for research in this area, and were encouraged to find such unsolicited support among parents. We conclude by giving the last word to one of our study participants, who said,

Thank you for conducting research in this area. We have been lucky to have a fabulous school that provides acceleration, cluster grouping, and enrichment classes in which our girls have thrived, but so many schools don't embrace this and I hear the horror stories as well - so education fueled by research is key!

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