

ENRICHMENT OR ACCELERATION OR BOTH?

HOW TO BEST PROVIDE FOR GIFTED STUDENTS.

The research shows the enrichment classes are not enough to cater for gifted students. What should schools be doing instead? JUDE BARBACK investigates.

With so much attention being given to the 'long tail of underachievement' in New Zealand's education system, it is easy to forget about the students at the other end of the scale. Dr Janna Wardman, a research fellow in the School of Learning Development and Professional Practice, University of Auckland believes the system is also failing many gifted students.

Wardman, in an article published in University of Auckland's *Te Kōwhiri* makes a strong case for acceleration. She suggests that in spite of decades of evidence-based studies that show that acceleration is effective for a wide range of gifted students, the research is not informing practice in New Zealand schools.

This is echoed by a 2008 Education Review Office (ERO) report, *Schools' Provision for Gifted and Talented Students* noted that only 18 per cent of New Zealand primary schools and 13 per cent of secondary schools had good provision for gifted students.

This may come as a surprise to many schools, which have accelerate classes, however, Wardman suggests that the term is used inappropriately by most.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF ACCELERATION

ERO's findings may come as a surprise to many schools, as many believe they have suitable provision for gifted students. Typically this takes the form of an enrichment class - grouping bright kids of the same age together. Some schools call them 'extension classes', others 'advanced ability classes'. In any case, Wardman suggests these methods do not accurately reflect acceleration.

True acceleration can take many forms, she says. Full-year acceleration is when a student moves into the class a year or more ahead, enabling the student to work and socialise with their ability-peers rather than their age-peers. Curriculum compacting or telescoping can also constitute acceleration; this is when two years of learning might be covered in 18 months, for example. For secondary schools, dual enrolment with tertiary education providers is another form of acceleration.

John Hattie's 2009 synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to educational achievement, found that acceleration, in these forms, had the highest school contribution to student achievement; enrichment - the method currently most preferred by schools - did not even reach Hattie's 'hinge point' as a strategy that made a visible difference.

Enrichment, Hattie says, is a form of horizontal extension. Acceleration is vertical extension.

WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK OF ENRICHMENT?

A group of students at Henderson Intermediate's advanced ability class expressed their enthusiasm for being in the class. There appears to be a big emphasis on competition. "The challenge is to be consistently the best," says student Lia Kenept. Madeline Ion-Robinson says the class "provides a unique opportunity to challenge myself to reach new heights in my education."

"Although we are all really competitive we can all work as a team as well," she says.

"You can see the competitive flame in a peer's eye when you achieve something which leads into a friendly competition and from there on you are always pushing each other to learn more, and to keep up with your peers, which is great motivation," says fellow student, Jadon Stupples.

Why this drive to be the best? Henderson Intermediate teacher, Kevin Elmes, suggests that because of higher expectations from teachers and parents, students in enrichment classes often strive to achieve more. "Students who are academically competitive can be motivated by the successes of others to 'keep up' with their classmates," he says.

Lia, Madeline and Jadon certainly exemplify this type of student. Naturally, they are delighted to be a part of the class. Their talents have been acknowledged and they are thriving from the challenge of being the brightest of the bright.

THE DOWNSIDE OF BEING GIFTED

However, enrichment classes can sometimes have the opposite effect. Some students who are streamed into such classes, claim they never get to experience the 'top of the class' feeling. They feel decidedly average, even inadequate, in a class full of bright cookies.

Even top students are not always comfortable being identified as gifted and talented. New research emerging from University of Canterbury found that many gifted students downplayed any perceived abilities in order to maintain their social status in school. The study, carried out by Canterbury PhD student Louise Tapper, tracked gifted and talented students from Year 9 over 18 months.

"Students and parents in the study said that being gifted and talented in New Zealand is not something to shout from the rooftops," says Tapper. "It was rather an identity that should be underplayed in keeping with the preferred New Zealand cultural demeanour of modesty and self-deprecation.

"I would argue that for young adolescents this can bring mixed messages. Able students are encouraged to be the best they can be but, as these students have reported, they have learnt to keep quiet about their successes or else someone will turn around and be offended."

Tapper's findings ring true for teacher, Kevin Elmes. He believes enrichment classes can be "safe" places where nervous and shy students' academic success is admired by classmates and doesn't provide opportunity for negative attention."

However, Elmes also suggests that enrichment classes are not a true reflection of the 'real world'. "Different students have unique strengths and weaknesses and accelerated classrooms don't provide the same breadth of students which they are likely to find later in life in their professional experiences," he says.

Samuel Dale, a student at Mount Albert Grammar School who was in extension class for Years 9 and 10, agrees with this. "Compared to the very multicultural school I attend, my class generally was middle class Pakeha. It would be fair to say that this class was not a representative of the school. My perspective is that this is a disappointing attribute to extension classes."

Certainly, enrichment classes can introduce a sense of division among students, a sense of elitism, that is not always carried with much grace by 11 and 12 year olds. A student who has his or her sights set on 'making' the enrichment class, but misses out, may experience an unwarranted and unnecessary sense of failure.

This is often compounded by pushy parents. "Some parents of accelerate students push their children into these opportunities not because the child wants it but to satisfy their own personal goals," says Elmes.

Perhaps it is the 'tall poppy syndrome', hinted at in Tapper's research, that quashes the enthusiasm of intermediate-aged children who have enjoyed two years of enrichment class membership, by the time they reach Year 9.

It is interesting to note that although Dale now sees the advantages of being in an extension class, he didn't feel it was beneficial at the time. "On reflection, being in an extension class for two years was mostly a positive experience although I did not feel that it was at the time," he says. "Extension classes are not a perfect fit for everybody."

SINGLE SUBJECT EXTENSION

He may not have enjoyed his experience at the time, however Dale, now in Year 13, feels the time in the extension class has set him up for future academic success.

"Extension equated with me doing Year 10 work in Year 9 and Year 11 work in Year 10. More able children than me in the class worked two years in advance in some subjects. The school selected the subjects in which we were extended in, which comprised of science and maths. Initially, these were not my strongest subjects



Students from Henderson Intermediate's advanced abilities class (L-R): Jack Peach, Jadon Stupples, Madeleine Ion-Robinson, and Lia Kenep.

and I found science especially difficult to keep up with at times," says Dale.

Extension in single subjects is another form of acceleration, which is increasingly common in New Zealand secondary schools. Wardman says the result of accelerating in some subjects is that gifted students end up almost, but not quite, qualifying for entry into the university courses of their choice at the end of year 12. "They then have a choice of picking up extra subjects at level 3 or preparing for scholarship, in order to fill a year 13 timetable," she says in her *Te Kuaka* article.

Wardman notes some resistance from schools to the idea of dual enrolment with a university, even for a small selection of courses. She says some principals feel that early entry to university from year 12 would "rob" them of their school leaders, and lead to a reduced year of government funding for the school. In the words of one deputy principal, to do this would simply "not be in our best interests".

However, although subject extension may not have led to early enrolment at university, Dale finds himself in a good position.

"Now in year 13, in mixed ability classes, I find myself coping with new learning and the general workload better than most of my classmates. Perhaps because I started NCEA Level 1 exams in Year 10, I have more experience under exam conditions and have found a way to cope under pressure earlier than most."

Student leaders at Hamilton Boys' High School agreed that starting NCEA in Year 10 has set them up well for Year 13 by broadening their subject options.

Deputy head prefect, Oliver Wilding says that by completing Level 3 History a year earlier, he now has the option to take more subjects in his final year of high school.

Head prefect Sam Franicevic, like Dale, says that although he was "pushed into" taking subjects earlier at the time, he would now "strongly recommend" younger students do the same, as the benefits are now apparent to him.

Franicevic dismisses the suggestion that by taking NCEA subjects early, students may be cheating themselves out of their best possible results, however Dale says he was pleased to have the chance to better himself.

"Different students have unique strengths and weaknesses and accelerated classrooms don't provide the same breadth of students which they are likely to find later in life in their professional experiences."

"Last year in Year 12, I made the decision to resit Level 2 maths, as the previous year my results in that subject weren't fabulous and the alternatives were Level 3 calculus or statistics. This would have been a quantum leap for me. I believe this was because in year 9, maths and science was a struggle, covering two years work in one.

"When I sat Level 2 maths in Year 12, when my peers were, I received much better results than I had ever achieved previously in maths."

Subject extension seems to work well in these instances. Students are given the opportunity to push themselves, but also the opportunity to try for greater results if they want to.

THE EFFECT ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Subject extension also allows them to ultimately stay with their age-peers, whom they have gone through their education with. Many have argued that full-year acceleration has an adverse effect on a student's social development.

However, Wardman argues that the parents of accelerands considered acceleration brought significant benefits in their child's social development, and the accelerands matured faster through the phase of teenage years.

This is echoed by the Ministry of Education *Gifted and Talented Handbook*, which says that despite popular myths and misconceptions, students who are accelerated do not suffer harmful social and emotional effects, nor do they demonstrate any gaps in knowledge or skills in their learning.

Consequently Wardman suggests that many gifted students would prefer the challenge of completing their secondary schooling in four years and entering university courses early. "[Students] see retention for a second year of NCEA Level 3 courses as being more about the glory of the school and their competition in the league table of

published NCEA results, rather than focusing on what is best for the individual student," she says.

Acceleration is not a new concept, and it has gone in and out of favour in New Zealand education over the years. Typically referred to as being "pushed ahead", students whose birthdays fell at an awkward time of year - often June, July and August - and were deemed 'bright', were pushed ahead into Year 2 after six months or less in Year 1. Often the experience of these students, who were always the youngest in their class, was that although they were able to keep up academically, physically they were not, which affected their education in a negative way.

"I came top in many a test, but never won a race," reflects Alan, who was one such student.

"My first year at university as a 17 year old was tough socially as I couldn't go out and have a drink with new friends," says another.

FINDING MIDDLE GROUND

Certainly it is hard to separate ability from age entirely, which is no doubt why so many schools have opted for the enrichment class method.

Is there any middle ground to be found here?

Wardman says it shouldn't be an either/or argument about enrichment and acceleration, rather it should be both, according to the needs of the individual student.

"Subject acceleration may provide sufficient challenge for some - especially those for whom accolades are important. For others, who are bored to sobs with the pace of the school curriculum, it's important to get through those years in a faster time.

"Each student should be considered individually and in my opinion, it should be the student who makes the final decision on whether they follow an enrichment programme, or are subject accelerated in a few areas, or are full-year accelerated, maybe by two years and get the opportunity to start their tertiary studies at 16. If they are emotionally and socially mature, my research has shown it to be the best strategy; it keeps them challenged and there is less chance of them becoming bored and resorting to disruptive behaviour - which is more common with bright students than most schools would like to admit," says Wardman.

The *New Zealand Curriculum* acknowledges the particular needs of gifted and talented learners, and is designed to allow for flexibility of application so that the needs of diverse learners can be appropriately responded to. The Ministry's TKI gifted and talented website is rich in resources for how schools and teachers can adequately meet the needs of these students.

Tools like online learning, for example, may help bridge the gap between enrichment and acceleration. Hattie gives the example of enrolment with the Khan Academy, a global e-learning website, which might result in considerable advancement in mathematics. Such programmes, if integrated effectively, can allow for vertical extension within horizontal extension.

In any case, providing adequate provision for gifted and talented students is something that should remain of great importance to the sector. Just as the pursuit of raising the high levels of student underachievement should not waver, neither should the fight to make sure our brightest students are receiving the best education possible. ■