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"Allowing them to flourish": Parents support the leadership, academic and administrative challenges of full-year acceleration of their children at high school

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Abstract

Although there is a plethora of research evidence in support of the benefits of acceleration, the voices of parents are seldom heard in the literature around outcomes from full-year acceleration. This retrospective study reports on the views of the parents (N=16) of a group of New Zealand students (N=12) who were accelerated a full year in their first year of high school. The students completed five years secondary schooling in four years, before all proceeding to university, with the majority being 16 years old at time of entry instead of 17 or 18. As the data are substantial, the results are reported in two articles: the first reported on social and emotional challenges faced by the students. This current article reports on the parents' perceptions of the leadership, academic and administrative challenges of full-year acceleration. Most of the accelerands were moderately, not profoundly gifted and all resided in a lower socio-economic area. The parents reflect on the strategy of full-year acceleration and how it affected the opportunities available to their children. This positive account reinforces the international literature on the long-term benefits of full-year acceleration.

Background

A series of studies sought to investigate the dynamics of the strategy of full-year acceleration by listening to the voices of high school teachers (Wardman, 2009), administrators (Wardman & Hattie, 2012), and students, in addition to their parents. The students attended a state school situated in a lower socio-economic area. They were not wealthy (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Kohn, 1998; Sapon-Shevin, 1994); nor were the studies restricted to the profoundly gifted (Gross, 2006; Hollingworth, 1942; Terman & Oden, 1947). Fifteen moderately gifted students took part in a pilot programme of full-year acceleration. This retrospective qualitative study reports the perceptions of the parents of twelve of the students. Although some of the parents had approached previous school administrations when their children were not provided with adequate provision for their special abilities, they had not sought the strategy of full-year acceleration specifically, as they were unaware that it was possible. The students were offered the strategy after one term at high school as part of a new gifted programme, without the parents having to make any approach to the school for specific provisions.

High school in New Zealand runs from Year 9 (age 13) to Year 13 (age 17), and the usual age for entry into university is 18. Many New Zealand high schools now offer single subject acceleration in up to three subject areas. The gifted and talented students who qualify for such acceleration, as identified within school processes, sit the external qualifications of the three levels of National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) a year (or more) ahead of their age-peers. Most New Zealand high schools claim to have 'acceleration' programmes; however, the students in these programmes none-the-less stay at high school for the full five years; so for these students, the time spent at high school is still five years (Wardman, 2010). Although some subjects may be offered a year ahead of age peers, accelerated classes in some schools appear to only offer enrichment (Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind & Kearney, 2004).

Students regularly achieve sufficient results in the NCEA endorsed with Excellence, in their penultimate year of school to enter university early and skip their final year of high school. Although many students achieve the necessary qualification to go early to university, in practice it is relatively uncommon for New Zealand students to skip their fifth year at high school. The common provision of single subject acceleration does not adequately prepare students for the selective tertiary courses in many pathways, which require high levels of achievement in NCEA level 3, over a number of subject areas. Instead of progressing into the tertiary course of their choice from their penultimate year, students who have been

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accelerated in single subjects tend to remain at school and study extra subjects for their final year (Wardman, 2010).

Full-year acceleration in junior high school has the advantage of providing the breadth of accelerated classes for four years, with the added bonus of the accelerands enjoying the social and leadership opportunities, which are often only available to final year students. Few students in New Zealand are offered the chance to accelerate a full year in *all* their subjects, and thereby reduce the number of years they have to spend at school (Wardman, 2010).

Although the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs), which govern the running of all state schools in New Zealand, specifically state that appropriate provisions have to be made for gifted and talented students, schools are autonomous (Education Review Office, 2008a). They are administered by a small Board of Trustees of elected parents who volunteer their service. Officially the Board makes the decisions on the running of a school, but in reality, it is principals and their senior management teams who make the decisions (Wardman & Hattie, 2012). Those decisions include whether or not full-year acceleration is available. Many parents complain that the strategy of acceleration, despite the overwhelmingly positive evidence-based literature, is not available at their local school.

With the new interest in giftedness in the early years of the new millennium, Harrison High School (pseudonym) had appointed a coordinator for Gifted and Talented (GAT) Education with a time allowance of 0.4 (i.e. the equivalent of two classes or ten hours a week) to provide for the needs of approximately 70 gifted students out of 800 students enrolled at the school. Full-year acceleration was just one of the strategies offered in the innovative programme. The principal had chosen to allocate funding from the income sourced from foreign fee-paying (FFP) students; this source of funding varied from year to year, thereby making the time allowance allocated to the gifted and talented programme precarious (Wardman & Hattie, 2012).

The international literature shows that parents sometimes succeed in achieving acceleration for their gifted children, but only after concerted effort and advocacy (Gross, 2004; Howley & Howley, 1985; Gallagher & Smith, 2013). None of the parents of the accelerands in this study suggested full-year acceleration as a strategy for their children. In the first term of high school, after collecting data from a number of sources, the parents were contacted by the school and full-year acceleration was offered as part of a holistic gifted programme, which included individual mentoring and a focus wider than just faster paced academic progression (Renzulli, 2004).

The theoretical framework of the programme was Gagné's *Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent* (Gagné, 2003). Identification in various domains of giftedness included the results from four Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT; i.e., Comprehension, Vocabulary, Listening and Mathematics) administered in Term 1 of the first year of high school. Students scoring above the 85th percentile in two or more PATs were automatically offered a place in the general GAT programme (the average PAT score at this school was the 45th percentile). The 85th percentile was chosen by senior administrators as it would capture the top cohort in this school and would include moderately gifted students (Wardman, 2010). Teachers, parents, fellow students or the students themselves were also allowed to make nominations. Data were gathered on not only specific abilities, but also on social and emotional maturity levels (Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplik, Lipscomb & Forstadt, 2009; Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Cornell, Callaghan, Bassin & Ramsey, 1991).

It is noted that approximately one quarter of all students offered a place in the GAT programme subsequently turned it down. The pullout nature of the extension classes did not appeal to some, while others did not wish to be singled out of their peer-group for a 'special' programme. These two factors had the effect of limiting the number of Maori and Pacific Island students who accepted places in the GAT programme; culturally, they were not comfortable with a withdrawal programme that separated them from their friendship groups and resulted in them feeling isolated from their culture (Bevan-Brown, 2009). Another group were the underachieving gifted (Rimm, 2006) who declined participation after being advised that the programme would involve "harder work" (Heinbokel, 2001). Given the programme was optional, many other students declined the opportunity for a variety of reasons.

The overall aim of the programme was to include, rather than exclude students, if teachers, parents or students themselves thought the opportunity would be of benefit. Consideration of students for full-year acceleration was not based on standardised tests alone (Borland, 2009). The co-ordinator gathered data over a period of weeks on the students' class-work and interaction with teachers and students, before approaching the student and their parents. In most cases, acceleration was suggested to the individual GAT student after

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Term 1 at high school and, if accepted, the student moved directly into Term 2, of the year group above, in all subjects. All the accelerated students were accelerated in clusters of at least two, and up to five, accelerands (Biddick, 2009). Fifteen students at the school accepted the offer of full-year acceleration over a four year period. It is noteworthy that the school appears to have the only planned programme of supported full-year acceleration carried out in a New Zealand state school.

Method

Participants.

Sixteen parents of 12 of the accelerands contributed to the focus group, held in 2009, at least 7 years after their children had undergone full-year acceleration in their initial year at high school. At the time of this retrospective study, their children were all tertiary students; the parents are identified by their children's pseudonyms. At time of the focus group Mac was in his 4th year of a law degree (then age 19) and on graduation was recruited by a top legal firm in New Zealand. Currently he is a lawyer in London. Maxwell (then age 20) was in his final year of a Bachelor of Engineering degree and is now an academic in the field of bioengineering. George (then age 19) was in his final year of a double degree of Commerce and Accounting and a Bachelor of Arts in Economics. He planned to continue his studies once in the workforce and to become a chartered accountant. Jane (then age 18) was completing a Bachelor of Arts and thereafter completed a Law degree. She is currently a lawyer in Auckland. Nadia (then age 18) was completing a Bachelor of Science degree. Tom (then age 18) was in his third year of a conjoint degree in Marine Biology and Law. He is now a lawyer in Auckland. April (then age 18) was completing a Diploma in Outdoor Recreation Leadership and then transferred to gain a degree in physics and mathematics. She then completed a post-graduate qualification to become a high school teacher. Richard (then age 19) graduated from high school with university entry in Physics, Calculus, Chemistry, Biology and Accounting. He then took a gap year, after which he re-entered university to start a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Japanese with mixed results. He planned to study biology and environmental science in the future. Logan (then age 17) was completing a degree in Mechanical Engineering and then completed a masters degree in Engineering. Bobby (then age 18) was completing a Bachelor of Science degree, which would lead to entry into a Medical degree. He planned to become a doctor specialising in General Practice. Charles (then age 17) had embarked on a double degree of Bachelor of Music and Bachelor of Science in Psychology and Biology. Following those degrees, he planned to study Medicine, eventually specialising in Psychiatry. Glenn (then age 17) had started his studies towards a Bachelor of Education (Teaching) Primary Specialisation.

Only one of the 16 parents had progressed to tertiary education from high school, while another had achieved a degree as a mature age student. The occupations of the parents in this study did not resemble the occupations of the fathers in Terman's study (Sears, 1984). Rather, the occupations included a plasterer, an electrician, a bookstore owner, and a soldier. Seven of the mothers worked in support of family owned small businesses.

Instrument

Focus group.

A focus group was chosen as a method of data collection from the participating parents, as it may incorporate a self-reflexive component (Schon, 1985) and as it may enable them to individually and collectively reflect on their perceptions of acceleration. As the participants were required to make reflections over the previous seven year period, an emphasis was placed, during the data collection process, on assisting the participants with any memory issues.

Findings and Discussion

Parental involvement.

The parents first discussed how much or how little they had been involved in their children's schooling. Richard's father described himself as an "absentee parent" as he had worked away from home during the week, for nine years out of the last 20 (Richard's mother's work also required her to be overseas for long periods). Richard's father indeed reflected that: "I could have known more and even maybe even helped a lot more..." He also stated that the parental/ home situation should be one of the factors assessed before a student is considered for full-year acceleration: "My recommendation is that you put some thought into that; as a kid who can excel - how capable are his parents to support him to do that?"

Jane was the only accelerand whose parents chose the acceleration programme over her own wishes. She had not wanted to leave her new best friend and move to the class above. Jane's opinion 7 years later was: "I'm extremely glad I did [accelerate] now. In hindsight, it's like I can't explain how happy I am." Jane is her

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mother's sixth child, and has four much older half-brothers and sisters. Jane's mother explained:

> [Jane] has a whole lot of half-brothers and sisters; my other children. I have a son...but he dropped out of school at 15 and he spent 15 years just bumming around between jobs and on the dole [unemployment benefit] and all that... but he is bright; but he just got lost. There is no way I was going to let that happen to [Jane]. So in a way I was a wee bit of a pushy parent, no not pushing—guiding, guiding, until they wake up.

Parents' Perceptions of Leadership Challenges. The studies of Southern, Jones and Fiscus (1989) and Townsend and Patrick (1993) showed concern with potential leadership consequences of full-year acceleration. Both studies reported the attitudes of primary school teachers to the strategy and the respondents' concerns could be seen as pertaining to the younger age of their students. In the current study, the students were accelerated at high school.

During the focus group, the parents discussed their viewpoints of different aspects of leadership. Maxwell's parents described their son as neither a leader nor a follower: "He does what he wants to do and if people want to go with him well, that's fine: but you won't make him go and do something he doesn't want to do." Some of the parents noted that their children's involvement in extra-curricular activities (which were encouraged through the mentoring program) had been beneficial in promoting confidence. Richard's father noted his son's leadership skills being developed as a martial arts instructor. Tom's mother described the type of leadership roles within the school that most of the accelerands experienced:

> He developed leadership characteristics in other spheres. Like mentoring peers in his class, like he took on a leadership role in helping the, I guess, the slower children in the class, so he learnt by teaching others and that's where his leadership came in...

Jane was also a martial arts instructor and her mother referred to that and her other extra-curricular activities:

> I think the GAT gave Jane more confidence... And I know in tutorials... at university...she seems to be the only one talking and she tries to be quiet, but she's just used to talking out. But I think leadership too, it doesn't have to be at the school, it can be the things they do outside of school.

Tom's mother also noted a negative side to her son's leadership abilities prior to acceleration. Tom had shown considerable leadership in his primary school in setting up clubs, which were later banned by the principal as the students were spending too much time on them:

> I don't think leadership came in as part of acceleration. I think that's something Tom already had. And I think that's what caused his problems. The fact that it was quite a threat to have someone that young being that confident in a class. I think that's what led to quite a lot of his problems he had in school.

Tom's father recalled that his son stepped up to the leadership role in the family whenever his father was overseas with the Armed Forces. Richard's father also referred to improved confidence leading to a willingness to put oneself forward for a leadership position: "So I suppose it comes from a more deep-seated confidence in oneself." This view was echoed by George's father: "My son matured also because of the course [acceleration] and the friends he developed during the program. I believe this empowered him and assisted him with his leadership abilities."

Mac's father noted that while the accelerands had obvious leadership abilities, they chose to be reticent about putting themselves forward for official leadership positions at high school:

> I think in some ways the potential for leadership was subjugated a little bit by the difference in age with [the peer group] and I think it is, well my feeling is, that it's probably since he has got to university that that side has perhaps developed more apace with his peers. Whereas I think I always had the feeling that because of two years difference in general with his peer group, he [Mac] was always conscious of that age thing.

In summary, the parents of the accelerands felt that while at school, the age difference between the accelerands and their peer group led them to be hesitant about putting themselves forward for more formal leadership positions, although all were happy to provide leadership as mentors, supporting less able students in their classrooms. On the other hand, the parents noted their increased self-confidence improved their general leadership abilities. The parents observed that,

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since entering university, their children have appeared to be more actively involved in leadership roles.

Parents' Perceptions of Academic Challenges. The students' perceptions of full-year acceleration were recorded in individual interviews and these will be reported in a future publication. The parents' views mirror their children's. The parents of the accelerands in the focus group were almost unanimous (the exception being Glenn's father) in their perception that full-year acceleration had been positive in terms of academic challenge for their children. George's father observed: "The strategy was to make the pupil more productive and be stretched academically, as without this acceleration my son was coasting...my son was forced to do more work and stay ahead. He thrived on the challenges." April's mother agreed: "I thought April coped well with the academic side of being accelerated. She was extremely bored with school work in Year 9 [prior to acceleration] and enjoyed the challenge of Year 11."

In the focus group, the challenges provided by full-year acceleration were a recurring theme. Jane's mother observed: "Our one took the challenge and exceeded beyond our expectations against the older children in the class that she attended; so positive." Maxwell's father explained that his son had "stepped up and was sort of right up at the top of the class with the older age-grouping, in all his subjects across the board." The exception to full support of the strategy from the parents was Glenn's father. He believed the positive effect of full-year acceleration lasted only in the short term. In the long term, Glenn, according to this father, "lost motivation and did not reach potential."

Parental expectations. The parents' academic expectations of their children varied. In the focus group, Bobby's father mostly preferred to listen and nod his agreement to other parents' contributions; English is not his first language. When asked directly, however, about Bobby's academic outcomes after full-year acceleration, he simply replied: "I knew he could." George's father also recalled: "We had fun, but he knew that we expected him to keep ahead."

Richard's father expressed different expectations:

> I think Richard was, you know, the same, what he wanted to, he did excel at; but I think that he got so used to it, excelling academically and possibly with other things as well, that he kind of felt there was an expectation on him to do that which then kind of backfired in a way. Because, we didn't feel that expectation.

Academic outcomes. In general the parents felt that, prior to acceleration, their children were 'cruising' academically at high school. Even after acceleration, the accelerands' academic outcomes varied between their subject areas. According to Mac's mother:

> Mac did really well at those subjects he wanted to do really well at. So yeah I think he exceeded [expectations]; so I think it was a really positive thing for him. There were subjects he didn't do well in but that was about choice, rather than ability. It's not as if he failed them, he just thought, well he just went into neutral in some of the subjects.

Other parents concurred that the variations in subject outcomes were due to students' choices, rather than any lack of ability; some parents identified those choices as being linked to teacher expectations. Logan's mother reflected:

> Logan, I felt that he excelled really well with teachers who expected him to. There was an expectation from some teachers that, 'OK, he's brightish; he's been accelerated; so we can really push this child'. It took him [Logan] a wee while to get into the habit of it, but there were some teachers who didn't expect that and so they didn't get the results.

Some of the parents linked the academic and social issues. Mac's mother explained that acceleration had made all the difference to him: "I think intellectually he was more amongst his peers in moving up... he was less bored and school was more interesting to him..." Even after full-year acceleration, the parents noted some boredom and lack of enjoyment, in some of the subject areas.

In summary, the parents' view was that the academic challenge offered by full-year acceleration was successful for all the accelerands in the short-term and successful in the long-term for all but one (Glenn). Many of the parents commented on the academic boredom suffered by their children prior to acceleration and stated that the strategy had led to improved academic outcomes through reducing, but not eliminating, the boredom (Hertzog & Chung, 2015). Some parents felt that without acceleration at high school level, their children would have "dropped out" of school

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early. The comment was also made by parents that expectations of teachers and others were factors in the academic achievements of the accelerands.

Retention. The literature suggests that when gifted students are not permitted to accelerate, the effect on them is the same as retention (Gross, 2006). They suffer negative consequences; for example, boredom, lack of motivation, decrease in achievement and, in many cases, early exit from school (Rimm, 1995; Robertson, 1991). During the focus group there was an exchange between Maxwell's mother and father regarding academic outcomes of non-acceleration. Maxwell's father stated: "But when you look at it, if the kids hadn't been accelerated, they still would have done well in all their exams." His wife, however, responded: "Would they? Or would have totally lost interest though?" Some of the parents were in no doubt that, if their children had not been accelerated at high school, they would have lost interest and left school early with no qualifications. Mac's mother stated:

> I'm talking about this more than I have in a long time… but umm, I think perhaps the biggest advantage that has come out of this for Mac himself is the danger of what might have happened if he hadn't done it and that has, in some ways, got far more to do with the inadequacies of teachers or the education system than it has to do with the individual concerned ... basically his reaction to being bored or not being taught, was perceived as misbehaviour and he was very rapidly becoming labelled as... you know, bad news... because it [school] wasn't interesting to him really. Um, yeah, it's not where... intellectually it wasn't stimulating to him. Moving up meant it could be; he got on well with his peers as he moved up. Still a lot of those people are still the people he mixes with. [If he had not been accelerated] he would have been bored and fed up and left.

Charles' mother agreed: "I'm quite sure that [Charles] would have dropped out and gone bad if he hadn't been accelerated."

Parents' Perceptions of Administrative Challenges.

Some of the parents, in recounting the experiences of their children at primary and intermediate schools, referred to "accelerant classes" as the name given to the top streams in which their children had been placed. The parents did not observe any acceleration, in terms of their children proceeding at a faster pace through the curriculum, in these classes. At best, they offered poor enrichment or as Maxwell's father described it: "He was at intermediate at school, in the 'accelerant' classes and it was a waste of time, an absolute waste of time." Jane's mother confirmed: "They can give them 'busy' work, like enrichment is, but more and more of the same sort. But that's not what the kids want, they want to take it a level up." Logan's mother had followed her four very able sons' programmes closely; she had not been impressed with provision offered, particularly at intermediate school:

> Some of the teachers' attitudes towards the 'accelerant' class and I have also heard this umm, about our niece, at a different school and one of Logan's friends, was [shouting each word for emphasis]: 'Right; we just need to give these kids lots of work to do at home and all this research; and we expect pages and pages of beautifully presented stuff!!' Nah, that wasn't what was required!

Her outburst at the focus group was confirmed by many in the group nodding their assent. Maxwell's father concurred: "That sounds familiar doesn't it?" Several of the parents had originally rejoiced in their child gaining a place in what they first perceived as a prestigious class at their primary/intermediate schools. Later they were to change their opinion. In the following years, several of the parents stated specifically that their younger children were not to be placed in these classes, as the parents perceived the 'acceleration' programmes at primary school to be simply a marketing exercise.

Mac's mother summed up the comments of the other parents:

> It seems to be much more about giving the school an image, than it is about those kids... if you get a really good teacher [teaching our sons], but otherwise it's all about 'they produce this work and then they have got to put it on show.' It wasn't about development or learning.

It seemed to the parents that although the primary and intermediate schools wanted to attract gifted and talented children, there was a general lack of knowledge on the part of administrators and teachers as to how to best cater for the needs of the gifted. Mac's father continued:

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> It seems to me in a lot of places the label 'accelerant' is used basically…as almost like a placebo for parents that perceive their children are gifted and therefore they got [into] an excellent class so 'Phew. They are going to be dealt with!'...umm?

In summary, the parents viewed 'accelerant' classes at primary and intermediate schools as marketing exercises where the programme offered enrichment, mainly of poor quality, with little or no evidence of progressing through the curriculum at a faster pace. In the general view of the focus group, they had such a negative effect on their child's learning that some of the parents deliberately did not permit their subsequent children to be placed in these classes at primary school.

Teachers at primary, intermediate, high school and beyond. The parents viewed the quality of teachers as pivotal to their children's academic outcomes at high school. At primary and intermediate levels, where their children had one teacher for the whole year, poor teachers had lasting negative effects. In Tom's mother's opinion: "I think emotionally the teachers did more damage [to Tom] than the kids did." Many of the parents recalled their children being used as unpaid teacher aides, marking students' work and assisting the slower groups in classes. Often their children were left to work independently as Jane's mother explained:

> I know in intermediate, Jane's form teacher, when she did Math, he just gave her his workbook and said, 'you just work out of my work book while I work with the rest of the class'. And she [Jane] said that was all right for a while, but it got boring because she wasn't interacting with the kids.

The parents contrasted the attitude of their children's teachers before and after acceleration at high school. Mac's mother remembered. "But he had issues with some of his teachers. They weren't happy with him and... they did not like having a kid that young in their classes." Tom's mother agreed that Tom's younger age was an issue for some of his teachers: "At high school it was used as an excuse for any kind of misbehaviour of his. You know the teachers always used to make the excuse that he was socially immature or younger than the other kids." Maxwell's mother agreed: "There is that view that you are that bright and you are that young that you should be really well behaved and that seems really strange to me." George's father reported on negative teacher reactions to the programme itself:

> The majority of the teachers were happy with the acceleration, but there were others who did not openly voice resistance but said negative things to the pupils in class to make a mockery of the programme. As a parent, this worried me but I explained to my son that there would always be people in life who will want to live in the past and not embrace the future.

Even after the space of several years, the parents remembered the names of high school teachers who had made a significant positive impact on their children's learning. As George's father reported: "My son was forced to do more work and stay ahead. He thrived on the challenges. In most instances he was helped where it was needed." The parents named individual teachers as "legends" and observed that their children had consistently met the challenges and expectations set by these teachers: "[Name], he's another brilliant teacher who gets the best out of the best students. You know it's a big part of it... I mean that guy is a legend, probably one of the best teachers in the country. [Name] should be cloned!" Another teacher was mentioned by the parents as "particularly brilliant" and being at Harrison High for only a short time. An administrator had altered the timetable of classes so that the teacher was unable to teach the extension mathematics classes she herself had developed. The parents recalled: "Unfortunately, she left [Harrison High]."

The parents also acknowledged that the expectations of the GAT coordinator/mentor contributed greatly, and the value of having someone who knew the schooling system was recognized as a positive factor (Rubie-Davies, 2006). Tom's mother contributed: "It's having that contact person though and that person should be involved in every deal that the kids are involved in, otherwise they do get a bit lost. Generally teachers don't understand gifted children at all." Maxwell's mother explained:

> I think with Maxwell, the biggest expectation was him actually having to accelerate and do well, was from the push that [name, GAT coordinator/ mentor] used to keep tabs on him and I mean, he knew that if they 'skived off' [avoided working] that [name] would be knocking on their backdoor and you know, 'excuse me, what are you up to?' And I think certainly I was more aware of that, than actually coming from the teachers, but then I felt quite

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> removed from what was going on with his teachers.

At high school, students usually have up to 12 teachers a year in the junior school and, in the senior school they have five subject teachers and a form teacher. Therefore one or two negative teachers in a student's programme in the junior school would not have the same impact as, for example, a whole year at primary or intermediate school. In the senior school, however, the students often attempted to choose subjects in the time slots according to the teachers they preferred. The parents thought the answer lay with improved provision for education of the gifted in Initial Teacher Education programmes (Vialle, Ashton, Carlon& Rankin, 2001). Jane's mother observed:

> So we need to go back to the training colleges, or university training and look at what they are teaching... If there are student teachers going into those training colleges and they are not encouraged to look out for bright kids and know how to deal with them... Like I say you get poor teachers and you get poor tradesman in all walks of life. I'd love to see some more enthusiastic... I think some teachers just get tired.

Richard's father felt that lack of time was at the core of failure of some high school teachers to connect with the students:

> Well I think it's time actually... it takes more time than the teachers actually have, to get to know the kids. Because I think when you are accelerating people, you're not actually giving them something, it is like allowing them... It's more like they are the normal ones and all the rest of them have been shut down because they haven't been allowed to flourish like our children have been, because that's what I see the way that they do. Accelerated... if they have got a teacher who is their buddy, who they really like and the education is like a carrot, they really want it, then they will just succeed at it, excel at it. It's not that difficult for people to excel at something they really love.

George's father stated that one strength of the programme for him had been the principal:

> A principal that was aware of what was going on and supported the scheme totally. He also offered assistance and help. Other teachers who were not convinced of the benefits of the programme toed the line, as the principal was convinced.

George's father contributed that he would "absolutely" make the same decision again as a parent: "But the same committed mentor must be in place with the same support of the principal. Without this, other teachers will torpedo the idea surreptitiously."

Parents' suggestions of future provision for gifted students in schools.

The parents were in agreement that schools which offer acceleration need to have open channels of communication between the teachers and the administration so that accelerands are fully supported in the challenge. The parents commented on the benefits of single subject acceleration where a student was gifted in only one or two subject areas (Southern & Jones, 2004). One positive aspect related to the broader opportunities of a flexible vertical timetable. In general, however, the parents were sceptical about the long-term value of single subject acceleration for students like their own children. The exception was Glenn's father who responded: "Other children have been accelerated without moving school year and this is working more positively." The parents at the focus group commented on the difficulty students experienced when reaching final year at high school with the necessary grades in NCEA Level 3 in only two or three subjects. They were unable to progress to university and had to pick up subjects in Year 13 which they do not need or want, simply to fill a timetable for their final year at school. They also discussed the plight of some students who, through subject acceleration, have achieved the necessary credits to enter university after four years, but then have to make a decision to miss out their final year at school and all the associated social and leadership opportunities that year traditionally offers. The parents agreed that missing a junior year was preferable to skipping the final year at school.

The parents then discussed the possible reasons behind schools offering single subject, but not full-year, acceleration to their gifted students. Maxwell's father suggested: "I tend to think that system is more about schools big-noting..." as schools would then be able to advertise higher numbers of good grades from their more able students who had been forced to stay on another year at school. These grades would improve the school's position on the league table of results, which are published by the media annually.

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Conclusion

Academic.

The parents reported full-year acceleration led to increased engagement at high school by reducing the boredom for their children. Their statements echoed their children's in believing that the students excelled in subjects where teachers had high expectations of them, but settled back into 'cruise' mode in others. The parents commented on how the level of academic achievement lifted when the students reached university. Tom's mother reported that he had accelerated once more in the course of his conjoint degree and would now graduate in both Law and Marine Biology by the age of 21. The other parents concurred that their children were also on track to complete either an honours, a conjoint or a double degree by the same age as most students would expect to finish just one undergraduate degree.

One parent raised the issue of parental expectations. These varied within the group, ranging from Jane's mother to Richard's father. Jane's mother told the group that her experience with four older children who had not reached their academic potential was the impetus for her to be fully involved and take the lead in directing her daughter's academic path in junior high school until, as she put it, the student 'wakes up' and becomes self-motivated.

Richard's father held a different view; he acknowledged that others had high academic expectations of Richard, but that he and his wife had not felt the same way. As his father reported to the focus group, Richard's stated intention at this time was to experience what it was like to be poor. It was important to Richard's father that other people's high academic expectations were not imposed on Richard and that he be allowed "to experience and experiment with what he wants to do."

Leadership.

The parents in the focus group who also had non-accelerated children felt that they had not taken on any more leadership roles than their accelerated siblings. It was observed that possibly the accelerands had not pursued leadership roles at school, preferring to leave them to those who were older and had spent five years at high school, thinking that it was an honour earned by seniority.

Administering the Challenge.

The parents' views of their children's teachers varied. Most mentioned by name teachers who had contributed significantly to their children's success. Others mentioned individuals whose negativity affected the students while attending school. The administration was also complimented and criticised. While the mentoring was singled out as being one element in the success of the acceleration programme, other aspects, including the administration of the timetable, came in for criticism. It was noted and regretted by the parents present at the focus group, that full-year acceleration is not a common strategy at high schools in New Zealand and elsewhere. The parents felt that, for their children, it had been more than successful. Many of the parents commented on their children's poor behaviour prior to acceleration and believed that, without the challenge of full-year acceleration, they would have left school early without university entrance qualifications. It was acknowledged by the parents that personality and maturity in social skills of the individual had to be taken into account in the selection process, not simply the student's academic test scores.

The accelerands had suggested in their interviews that acceleration straight from intermediate school to the second year of high school would have been preferable, as they would only have had to make new friends once. The parents, however, disagreed; they wanted the high school to carry out its own testing and observations of the students in the high school environment, before discussing acceleration with the families.

For the parents, mentoring, which included short and long-term goal-setting and academic counselling of future career paths, had been an important, but not essential part of the programme. Should a school not be able to afford the time for individual mentoring, the parents agreed they would still want full-year acceleration to be available to their children. The parents would and could fulfill that role, either themselves or through their own networks. They saw the support and influence of the family to be the key to a child having the resilience to face the many challenges.

It is noted that the acceleration programme at Harrison High did not survive a change in principal. The participating parents in this study were vociferous in their regret that the challenges of full-year acceleration were not made available to the younger siblings of the accelerands. When asked if, with hindsight, they would make the same decision again to allow their 13 year-old child to be full-year accelerated, all but one said 'yes'. Glenn's father said that he would prefer single subject acceleration and for his son to be kept with age peers.

It is noteworthy that four of the parents of the 12 accelerands in this study believed their gifted children would have exited early from school without qualifications, if they had not been accelerated. It is speculation as to how many of those students who 'drop out' are at the gifted end of the ability spectrum. An interesting area for future research would therefore be in the rates at which gifted students in New Zealand and Australia drop out of their schooling.

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