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Strategies for inclusion: Learning from students' perspectives on acceleration in inclusive education

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Ingrained misconceptions may restrict access to educational acceleration.
- Our study found students support acceleration for high-ability peers.
- Notions of equity and fairness emerged as important considerations.
- Students may need instruction in the difference between equal treatment and equity.
- Inclusion of accelerants may be promoted through classmate and teacher strategies.

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1. Introduction

In an ideal world, school is a place where every student feels comfortable and learns at a suitable pace. In pursuit of this ideal learning environment, schools around the world have adopted inclusive approaches to education (Ainscow, 2007). Inclusive teachers value diversity and foster the development of caring, respectful learning communities. At the same time, teachers aim to help all students fulfill their potential (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). In inclusive environments that support diversity, teachers must provide individualized support to students with unique learning needs, and this includes students who have special needs due to exceptionally high intellectual ability. One evidence-based intervention to support students with exceptional ability who are not reaching their full potential is *acceleration* (Assouline, Colangelo, & VanTassel-Baska, 2015; Gross, 2010; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011), or allowing a student to proceed through educational material at a faster rate or at a younger age than conventional (Pressey, 1949). In addition to providing academic challenge, acceleration can help students with exceptional intellectual abilities establish new friendships (Gross, 2010; Gross, Urquhart, Doyle, Juratowitch, & Matheson, 2011). Despite research evidence showing positive academic and socio-emotional outcomes, access to accelerative interventions is sometimes denied due to teachers' concerns about social adjustment and acceptance (McCoach & Siegle, 2007; Rambo & McCoach, 2012; Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989; Wood, Portman, Cigrand, & Colangelo, 2010). However, little is known about how students in inclusive classes perceive acceleration, despite the critical role that students play in the social inclusion of exceptional peers.

Most often, the discussion around inclusion has centred on how teachers can promote inclusion of students with disabilities (e.g., Berry, 2008; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014; Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009; Tiwari, Das, & Sharma, 2015). Although Saloviita (2015) opined that "inclusion is now used to refer to full learner diversity, including gender, sexual orientation, ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious background, socio-economic status, disability and special educational need" (p. 67), this list of *full diversity* excludes mention of diverse age. In response to evidence demonstrating positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes of acceleration (Assouline et al., 2015; Gross, 2010; McClarty, 2015a; Rogers, 2007; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011; Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016), educational acceleration has been recommended as exemplary practice "to match high level student general ability and specific talent with optimal learning opportunities" (National Association for Gifted Children, 2004; para.1). However, if teachers are to confidently implement this intervention in practice, they must understand how accelerated students who are younger than their classmates can be included in today's diverse classrooms. To fully understand the complex dynamics of inclusion, we must explore and examine students'

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perspectives.

Through our study, elementary school students in inclusive classes in Grades 6, 7 and 8 shared their thoughts on acceleration. Our overarching research question was "What do students in Grade 6, 7, and 8 inclusive classes think about grade-based acceleration for high-ability students?" Within our enquiry, we also considered the following three sub-questions: "Do students perceive differences in how quickly students learn?" "What are students' perspectives on placing high-ability learners with older students?" "What strategies generated by students might support the inclusion of accelerated students in inclusive classes?"

1.1. Terminology

The National Association for Gifted Children (2004) defines *acceleration* as an approach to education that allows high-ability students "to move through traditional educational organizations more rapidly, based on readiness and motivation" (para. 2). *High-ability* refers to students who are capable of high academic performance. While acceleration is sometimes viewed as an intervention for students identified as gifted, the term high-ability is more appropriate in the context of acceleration because it emphasizes ability and de-emphasizes restrictive definitions of giftedness which rely on intelligence test scores (Dare & Nowicki, 2015; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011). Moreover, this term implies a continuum of abilities, rather than an "absolutist conception of giftedness that emphasizes a relatively stable category to which an individual does or does not belong" (Porath, 2004, p. 154). Because earlier research reported students' beliefs that "some people learn faster than others" (Nowicki, Brown, & Stepien, 2014), we used the term *fast learner* when discussing high-ability students with participants in this study. We chose the term *fast learner* because it is in the language of elementary-aged students and avoids formal identification terms such as *gifted* or *talented*, which may have been unfamiliar to participants.

1.2. Study background

Our study was conducted in Ontario, Canada. In Canada, provincial governments are responsible for providing education. Ontario is the most populated of Canada's provinces and has implemented several internationally recognized inclusive policies and strategies including the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016). Through this strategy, the Ontario government championed fundamental human rights in schools and pledged to support "a publicly funded education system that gives all students the opportunity to reach their highest potential" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). In 2012, the Ontario government legislated the Accepting Schools Act, requiring schools to "promote a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting of all pupils, including pupils of any race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, *age* [emphasis added], marital status, family status or disability" (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2012, p. 3). And even more recently, the Ontario Ministry of Education released a 98-page guideline document, *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (2014), to support the implementation of equitable and inclusive learning environments. In Ontario, all students must be "supported equitably through the identification and removal of discriminatory barriers that limit their ability to achieve to their full potential" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 15).

1.3. Acceleration

Although the term *acceleration* has been used extensively in the research literature on education for high-ability students (e.g., Culross, Jolly, & Winkler, 2013; Gross, 2010; Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008; Neihart, 2007; Siegle, Wilson, & Little, 2013; Wood et al., 2010), we contend that this intervention may be more accurately described as *optimal pacing*. Because high-ability students often already know—or quickly grasp—grade content (Peters, Rambo-Hernandez, Makel, Matthews, & Plucker, 2017), they need additional challenge to be engaged in inclusive classrooms (Kanevsky & Clelland, 2013). The need for students to learn in an optimal zone just beyond current knowledge can be understood in the context of Vygotskian developmental theory and the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), learning happens when students work beyond their actual development, as demonstrated by activities they can complete independently in a zone where they need assistance from adults or more capable peers to complete activities. This optimal zone is called the zone of proximal development. In the context of acceleration for high-ability students, providing educational material at a rate faster than prescribed by age-based curricula can create a better match between students' abilities and their pace of study (Kanevsky & Clelland, 2013). An important aspect of Vygotsky's socio-cultural perspective is that learning in the zone of proximal development happens in cooperation with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Applied to this study, exploring the beliefs of potential classmates may help teachers understand how accelerated students could be included in the social and academic environment of inclusive classes.

There are many ways in which students can accelerate; indeed, Southern and Jones (2015) listed twenty types. Accelerative options generally fall into two main categories: (a) content-based acceleration, where students access curricula from higher grades while remaining in classes with same-aged classmates, and (b) grade-based acceleration, where students are placed with older-age classmates (Southern & Jones, 2004).

Various forms of acceleration can be appropriate interventions for high-ability students with diverse backgrounds. For example, high-ability minority students (Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Peternel, 2010), high-ability students who have learning disabilities (Bees, 2009), and high-ability students in rural educational settings (Stambaugh & Wood, 2015) may all benefit from opportunities to accelerate.

Acceleration for high-ability students has been associated with various positive effects. For example, several quantitative studies have demonstrated that students who accelerate achieve higher academic success compared to non-accelerated ability-matched peers (Kulik & Kulik, 1984; McClarty, 2015b; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011) and qualitative studies have found that students who accelerate develop new friendships with older students (Dare, Smith, & Nowicki, 2016; Gross & Van Vliet, 2006).

1.4. Facets of inclusion

The notion of inclusion in education includes both academic and social inclusion. *Academic inclusion* includes educational practices which support students' access to core curricula (Fisher & Frey, 2001) through interactions with peers as "part of the life of the classroom" (Katz, Porath, Bendu, & Epp, 2012, p. 3). Acceleration enables high-ability students to access core curricula at a pace which may be faster than typical. *Social inclusion* refers to "the inclusion and acceptance of students in the school community" (Dare, Nowicki, & Felimban, 2017). Social inclusion may be perceived through healthy relationships with others, participation