

Enrichment and acceleration – 2 main strategies in the education of gifted students

Most school systems recognize the **need to offer more challenging programming** for high achieving students, and many offer some form of higher level activities for gifted students. Without proper stimulation, these students can become disengaged in class and miss opportunities to thrive. When administrators work to find and implement appropriate programs for gifted learners, they often hear about “**enrichment**” and “**acceleration**” approaches.

How do enrichment and acceleration programs contribute to equitable outcomes?

We often think about equity in terms of race, class, and household income. These factors certainly affect students’ academic performance and long term outcomes; however, it is also important to consider students’ natural learning abilities. Without defined pathways for gifted students, teachers are often faced with the choice of directing their focus on supporting low performing students or giving attention to high achievers. Additionally, many general education teachers are not prepared to provide more challenging activities to their brightest students.

Fortunately, **compilation of research** by the National Association for Gifted Children confirms that gifted programs significantly increase a student’s likelihood to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees, perform well in their careers, and achieve creative accomplishments such as obtaining new patents and publishing books.

What is the difference between enrichment and acceleration programs?

At the root, enrichment programs focus on horizontal or lateral development, while acceleration programs focus on vertical development. Experts agree that the most successful gifted programs incorporate both approaches.

Enrichment activities build upon the regular curriculum to offer greater context and a deeper dive into the subject matter. These can be easily implemented in the classroom because students with similar abilities can be grouped together to complete activities at their learning levels. For example, students can be grouped together by reading level to read books at various difficulty levels.

Acceleration programs move high performing students into a higher grade level which is most appropriate for their grasp of educational subject matter. For example, if a kindergartner has surpassed the rest of their class in reading level, this student may join a reading group of first graders.

Are acceleration programs more harmful to students than enrichment activities?

Often, parents and teachers express concerns about acceleration potentially harming students' social and emotional development. Will their student be able to fit in with older peers? Will he feel isolated, ostracized, or inferior? Despite these understandable concerns, **studies have not found** any negative social-emotional effects on students. In fact, the majority of students who report dissatisfaction with acceleration programs expressed a desire to have been allowed *more* acceleration opportunities.

How can acceleration programs be implemented into a gifted program?

Educators and researchers have identified **several methods** of incorporating the acceleration approach into effective gifted programs. Here are some examples:

- **Early entrance** — Students are allowed to enter primary school or higher education programs ahead of peers of the same age.
- **Curriculum compacting** — The curriculum is condensed or moves at a faster pace so students can complete a course quicker than usual.
- **Subject acceleration or “pull-out” programs** — Students remain in the same grade as their age peers, but move ahead into higher grade levels for the specific subjects where they exhibit advanced abilities.
- **Full-year acceleration** — Students move ahead one or more grade levels in all subject areas.
- **Dual enrollment** — Students take classes which allow them to earn credit for high school and college courses simultaneously.
- **Extracurricular programs** — Students participate in extracurricular activities outside of school to learn more about the subjects where they excel.

Before an acceleration program is implemented, it is vital for teachers to be **properly trained** for serving gifted students. Additionally, the school should have a process for **identifying gifted students**. An equitable gifted program should recognize high achievers across all racial, ethnic, and class groups. The program should also recognize that students are all unique and learn best in different ways.