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Thornburg, J. (2004) Saving the Smart Kids. Time (September) 56-61.

Thornburg wrote this article with the intent of bringing to light the population of exceptional students that is often overlooked—the gifted and talented. He shows some of the concerns and the benefits to accelerated learning, as well as how students who were pushed ahead responded to their advanced education.

The article points out that while Americans as a society are very willing to accept students who show incredible ability in sports, they are not so sure what to do with students who show the same kind of ability when it comes to academics. They are hesitant to allow students to skip grades, since it is sometimes a reflection of parents trying to win glory for their child.

There is a legitimate problem though. Students who are gifted—the top 3-5% of scorers on the IQ and other standardized tests (p.56)—quickly plow through homework and are not challenged enough to remain interested. The number of gifted students who drop out of high school is almost as high as the number of non-gifted students. Why? Because they feel that school is a waste of their time and they are not allowed to learn at their ability level.

The fear is that skipping grades will endanger the children socially and academically. Because they will be suddenly thrust into an environment where everyone is older and perhaps more mature than they are, some fear that the gifted students will not be able to adjust socially to the new climate. However, studies have shown that “most kids who are accelerated—even radically—turn out fine.” (p. 58) Often within a year they are adjusted to the new social atmosphere, and it has even been suggested that it is often healthier for the egos of gifted students to be set in a situation where they are not always the brightest and best. In the long term, also, more than 70% of adults who had skipped grades as children had no regrets about the experience, and most of them had better paying jobs.

The author concludes by saying that there are some students who do not respond well to skipping grades or accelerating their learning, but that does not mean that it should be avoided or feared altogether. The majority of students who are accelerated do better and are more satisfied with school. During a time when a major discussion in education is how to bring remedial students up to a satisfactory level, it is important not to forget the needs of high-ability students.

This article was helpful in bringing to light a lot of the arguments surrounding accelerated learning. If a student in my classroom seems disengaged or is misbehaving, it may not be because of a behavior or learning disorder or some other discipline issue. It may just be that he is bored. Knowing the concerns that are aroused by this issue is also helpful, as I may have an accelerated child in my classroom and have to deal with parent’s concerns or doubts. I know that personally I am all for accelerated learning, but it is good to know both sides of the issue to determine whether or not it is the best course of action.