

Broadening The Horizon: Creating Spaces for Positive Self-Efficacy Development

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Abstract

The area of accelerated education has interested psychologists, sociologists, and practitioners for decades. Accelerated learning programs enable educators to redefine policies that stigmatize learners who exceed age-based curricular expectations. Rigid learning spaces marginalize students' opportunities to develop self-efficacy beliefs that are conducive to their growth. In the context of accelerated education, the area of self-efficacy has remained largely unexplored. There is a need for more research about students whose self-efficacy development may be at risk in standardized education models that mandate age-based education pathways. The results of such a study would not be designed to provide generalized principles of learning, rather they would be intended to assist educators, administrators, and teachers who are interested in providing a learning environment that maximizes the development of students, who are unable to achieve their full potential, in the current education system.

1. Introduction

All students need a positive, nurturing, and stimulating learning environment. There is a vast collection of studies that have outlined how learning environments impact the social and academic development of students [1], [2], [3], [4]. Constructivist teaching approaches centred around encouraging creativity, curiosity, and questioning create a space where students feel empowered to engage in challenging educational goals. When teachers facilitate a learning space for students to embrace their autonomy, learners are more likely to engage with content in an immersive and positive manner [1]. Curricular policies are typically designed with the goal of stimulating students' creativity and desire to achieve high levels of growth. However, a one-size-fits-all standard lowers students' confidence and results in controlling learning environments that prevent students from exploring their academic capacity [1]. Students need democratic and collaborative learning spaces that encourage inquiry and experimentation. Research on the impact of learning environments indicates a need for giving

students a more independent and agentic role in their education [2]. In the context of accelerated learning, this is a need that has been emphasized in several studies [2], [5], [6], [16], [17]. Accelerated programs provide students with the option to complete educational requirements at a *faster pace* and are different from enriched programs which provide students with the opportunity to study subject content in more depth, without reducing course completion time [7]. Some scholars have proposed using the term "optimum pacing" as a more accurate reflection of the tenets of acceleration, as accelerative interventions place students in an optimal zone of development [16]. Students typically enrol in accelerative programs due to their need for an additional challenge and higher-level engagement. Lev Vygotsky, a well-known Russian psychologist, conceptualized the idea of a zone of proximal development (ZPT), to illustrate how educators could support the learning of students. According to Vygotsky's theory [16]:

"...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" (p.244).

The ZPT consists of goals that are difficult for a learner to complete independently, but achievable through the encouragement, guidance and support from a peer or educator. For instance, it may be difficult for a child to learn how to ride a bicycle independently. However, through facilitation and support, the child can gain a high level of mastery in cycling. If students are not provided with opportunities to reach goals in their ZPT, they may encounter behavioural challenges due to the lack of stimulation in their learning space [16]. Each learner has a different zone of proximal development. Precocious students require acceleration but need the support of educators to gain access to accelerative programs. Many learners would thrive in an accelerated learning model but are unable to find mentors who can support their educational pathway. Successful completion of accelerated education

programs increases students' confidence and self-esteem, while the absence of a suitable learning environment can have a devastating effect [2]. Educators need to identify the goals that students have in their ZPT to ensure that learners are empowered, motivated, and engaged in their education.

Researchers have highlighted the importance of creating learning programs that allow students to inculcate positive self-efficacy beliefs [2], [17]. Self-efficacy refers to the confidence that an individual holds in relation to their ability to complete a task [8]. Self-efficacy impacts students' understanding of their capacity and learning potential. Flexible, student-centered learning environments that address the individual needs of learners, create a space for positive self-efficacy development [1], [13], [16]. In the current education system, there are a variety of resources available to support students who are at risk of academic regression in the form of individualized education plans, extra classes, and differentiated learning. However, the needs of accelerated students are often ignored due to their strong academic performance [2], [9]. Learners who are unable to strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs in a particular learning environment, need to be provided with alternate options for completing educational goals. In recent years, the field of accelerated education has been characterized by debates on the academic, behavioural, and social impact of accelerated programs [2], [5], [9], [10]. Existing defenses of accelerated learning have been strong but have not succeeded in directing educational policy and planning. As a result, many educators do not have access to adequate resources to support the needs of precocious learners. Some students require an accelerated learning environment for their positive well-being. The absence of accelerative program options jeopardizes the future of students who need to learn at a faster pace to develop positive self-efficacy beliefs.

2. Accelerated Learning

The concept of accelerated learning was first popularized in the 1970s by Bulgarian scientist and educator Georgi Lozanov. Lozanov argued that social norms limit the abilities of students due to a universalized understanding of human capacity [6]. Social norms push students to internalize the idea that their abilities are limited and cannot exceed socially acceptable standards of educational achievement [6]. These social norms are strengthened through pedagogical approaches that convey content in small and gradual sections – training students to believe that such a method is the only way to progress through material [6]. These teaching methodologies are critical for the development of some learners, but they are limited in addressing individual needs. Students

may be discouraged from reading content ahead of their classmates or completing assessments in advance. Educational policies and standards homogenize the needs of learners and structure practices that encourage conformity over individuality. Lozanov believed that educators could play a formative role in helping students overcome a defeatist attitude and develop the confidence to achieve their full potential [6]. Educators could help students overcome their perceived understanding about their inability to learn at a faster pace, by creating a learning environment that challenges students to explore alternative educational pathways. Students are at risk of feeling anxiety, frustration, and a lack of motivation to develop their self-efficacy beliefs, if they are told that their wish to complete their education at a faster pace does not have a place in the school system [2], [5], [16], [17].

It is critical for educators to focus on developing inclusive learning spaces that welcome diverse learning paces. There is a collection of literature that strongly demonstrates how the traditional schooling model stifles the growth of learners through standards that correlate age with intellectual capacity [2], [5], [9]. Smedsrud [11] conducted a study in Norway to understand the experiences of 11 accelerated students. Many of the students struggled to develop high levels of motivation and engagement in classes due to the absence of resources that catered to their pace of learning. Students were unable to progress through material at their own speed and identified the lack of challenging enrichment or acceleration in their formative schooling years as a barrier to their development [11]. The students felt isolated due to the pedagogical techniques that were adopted in the classroom and were unable to develop a collaborative relationship with their teachers. The difficulties faced by the learners in Smedsrud's [11] study is also indicative of a much greater challenge related to the breakdown of the formative relationship between an accelerated learner and teacher in a regular classroom setting. When students do not receive academic support from their teachers in the form of engaging and challenging material, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to view their teachers as a vital partner in their journey to success [2], [11]. It is difficult for teachers, who have not been trained about accelerated learners, to support the self-efficacy development of these students. Several researchers have reported on the struggles that teachers face in trying to cater to the needs of accelerated students without adequate resources and guidance [2], [11]. Academic institutions do not provide enough professional development opportunities to support teachers who engage with students who would like to accelerate. Many teachers are unfamiliar with the results of longitudinal empirical studies in the field of accelerated education which address common misconceptions regarding the socio-behavioural

impact of acceleration [18]. As a result, educators may resort to preventing students from accelerating to protect them from harm. However, non-acceleration can be a consequential intervention with significant repercussions for the development of some learners. Smedsrud [11] also argued that the lack of support provided to accelerated students was a result of policy decisions and socio-political conceptions of students' achievement capacity.

Researchers have identified a similar issue with resistance to acceleration in countries like Israel and Australia [5]. Some educators believe that students should maximize their potential but prefer supporting the needs of learners through enrichment programs instead of accelerative models [5]. Such an approach places a greater emphasis on students' conformity to social norms instead of students' individual learning needs. However, countries like China and Taiwan have governmental assistance programs to support the development of accelerated learners and social attitudes towards acceleration are dominantly positive [5]. Governments support academic institutions with resources for curriculum revisions, professional development, and research to ensure that the needs of accelerated learners are not ignored. Attitudes towards acceleration influence funding allocations and program options for accelerated learners [2], [5].

The students in Smedsrud's study were actively seeking and awaiting opportunities that would contribute to their self-efficacy development. These students were determined to work hard to achieve their goals, however, their thirst and passion for a higher challenge were ignored. Educators, practitioners, and researchers need to re-conceptualize exclusionary practices which do not address the needs of learners who exceed age-based curricular expectations [16].

3. Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a term that was first coined by American-Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura. A self-efficacy expectation refers to the understanding that an individual holds regarding their ability to complete a set of behaviours [12]. People who have low levels of self-efficacy tend to experience feelings of self-doubt and anxiety in the presence of difficult circumstances or obstacles. As a result, individuals with low self-efficacy engage in avoidance behaviour to cope with negative thoughts related to their understanding of their self-concept [12]. Bandura provided an example of a snake phobic (an individual who is terrified of snakes) to illustrate the practical implications of avoidance behaviour. Some snake phobics refuse to go to an area where they may be in close proximity with a snake, regardless of the safety precautions that may be put in place. They feel that they will not be able to defend themselves if the snake escapes the cage [12]. An expert may show a snake

phobic how to grasp a snake in a safe manner, but the phobic is unlikely to be convinced. The phobic would doubt their ability to sustain control over the snake. As a result, the 'perceived inefficacy' of the snake phobic prevents them from completing an action that they are capable of doing [12]. Perceived inefficacy lowers self-confidence and may cause an individual to experience toxic negative thoughts. For instance, a driver who doubts their ability to drive in a rural area may visualize scenes of an accident or loss of control when they are driving [12]. The driver fears an accident and their fear occupies their mind with thoughts about accidents as they are driving. As a result, the driver is a lot more likely to cause an accident that stems from their inability to navigate thoughts about their inefficacy as a driver. Similarly, in an educational context, students' perceived inefficacy can create an unfound fear of failure that prevents learners from reaching standards that they can achieve [12], [2]. Students who have low levels of self-efficacy struggle to see the agentic role they hold in relation to educational outcomes like academic achievement. The belief that the student cannot exert any form of control over their educational pathway creates a learning environment that is not conducive to their growth. It is critical for educators to focus on the positive self-efficacy development of students to ensure that perceived inefficacy does not limit learners from achieving their full potential.

Bandura [12] argued that people inculcate strong or weak levels of self-efficacy based on the information they receive from four areas. One of the areas is mastery experiences, which refer to the influence of past accomplishments and interactions [12]. Successful experiences result in positive self-efficacy beliefs, while unsuccessful experiences lower confidence and may stagnate future growth. Self-efficacy is also formed through the observations that people make of other individuals. Bandura [12] referred to these observations as vicarious experiences. In a classroom setting, learners may experience increased levels of self-efficacy if they are surrounded by successful peers that they feel pressured to model. By observing the success of high achievers, students may feel motivated to reach a similar level [12]. Students are more likely to challenge themselves and develop the motivation to strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs if they are placed with peers of a similar mindset [2]. It is difficult for students to attain high levels of self-efficacy if their learning potential and individual needs are suppressed [16]. Bandura [12] outlined the third and fourth source of self-efficacy to be social persuasion and physiological responses. There are a variety of studies that strongly demonstrate the positive impact of encouragement from parents and teachers on students [12], [8]. Positive feedback strengthens and increases self-efficacy, while negative and unconstructive criticism limits development. Many accelerated

students encounter resistance and discouraging attitudes when they vocalize their desire to learn at a faster pace. Often, their requests to accelerate are rejected without an opportunity for dialogue or discussion [2], [16]. It is critical for educators to reflect on the socio-emotional consequences of subjecting students to disparaging comments about their learning goals or desires. Students are vulnerable due to their position in the hierarchical relationship between an educator and learner. Educators are figures of authority and trust, that students rely on for guidance. If educators remove accelerative options and provide students with derogatory comments about acceleration, they may contribute towards creating a learning space that causes students to inculcate negative self-efficacy beliefs. People also make personal evaluations of their self-efficacy levels on the basis of their physiological and emotional states in particular situations [12]. Students who feel anxiety or stress may experience lower levels of self-efficacy while those who feel settled before tasks, experience positive self-efficacy. All four sources of self-efficacy are interconnected, and each can serve to strengthen or weaken learning capacity. For instance, a student may perform poorly on a test due to a weak physiological state which would reaffirm their belief in their inability to do well on academic assessments. It is critical for educators to ensure that students receive various opportunities to develop their self-efficacy through a positive and stimulating class culture. Unfortunately, the resistance that many accelerated learners face, discourages them from seeking opportunities for growth.

Colangelo et al [2] highlighted this issue in their national report titled, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*. The researchers' provocative piece is summarized in their opening argument:

"Teachers and principals disregard students' desires to learn more—much more—than they are being taught. Instead of praise and encouragement, these students hear one word—no. When they ask for a challenge, they are held back. When they want to fly, they are told to stay in their seats. Stay in your grade. Know your place. It's a national scandal. And the price may be the slow but steady erosion of American excellence" (p.01).

In the lengthy report, the researchers countered a variety of myths related to accelerated learning. Resistance to acceleration is often grounded in misconceptions about the impact of accelerative programs and reflect personal opinions instead of empirical evidence. The dominant concern about acceleration is centered on social development and behavioural maturity, however, the literature is overwhelmingly positive about the social benefits of acceleration [2], [16], [17]. Over the last couple of

years, researchers have published longitudinal studies that attest to the effectiveness of accelerated education programs and address socio-behavioural concerns. Recently, researchers at Vanderbilt University published the results of a 35-year qualitative study which tracked the long-term effects of acceleration.

The researchers found that participants did not encounter any psychological challenges because of their choice to accelerate, and many participants felt that their enrolment in an accelerative program was a positive developmental experience [18]. Unfortunately, many educators remain vehemently against allowing any student to accelerate. Accelerated students may receive high grades, but experience social isolation and loneliness through exclusionary practices that prevent them from achieving the strongest levels of self-efficacy [13]. Expecting students to achieve standards without strengthening their academic self-efficacy is an ineffective pedagogical technique. Supporting students' positive self-efficacy development is a major determinant of academic achievement [8], [12]. If some learners need an accelerated learning space to strengthen their self-efficacy, how would the absence of such a program impact their self-efficacy development? Researchers like Colangelo et al [2] argue that the absence of accelerated learning options has a devastating impact on students who require an accelerated learning environment for their development and positive well-being.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, researchers have published various empirical studies that attest to the effectiveness of accelerated learning programs [2], [7], [15], [16]. Unfortunately, many students do not have access to accelerated learning options and are unable to progress through the education system at a pace that matches their learning needs. Acceleration is not conducive to the growth of all students, but there are learners who need accelerated programs to reach their potential. As educators strive to implement pedagogical strategies that support the development of all learners, the field of self-efficacy scholarship also continues to grow. Educators need to support the positive self-efficacy development of students by creating a flexible, nurturing, and learner-centred environment. Academic institutions need to be spaces of inclusion that support varying learning pathways. Rigid learning spaces that undermine or devalue students' desire to learn at a faster pace contribute towards creating an unsafe educational culture that discourages students from voicing their needs. Flexible learning spaces that allow students to explore alternative paths for development and achievement provide learners with the autonomy and confidence to pursue their passions at a pace that is right for them.

There is a need for work that further delineates the needs of learners whose self-efficacy development is stifled in standardized learning models. Such research would provide educators with the tools to create a bright, promising, and more inclusive future for all students.

5. References

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