

# **'Let's all hold hands and cross the line together!'**

## ***Competition and gifted learners***

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### **Abstract**

Competition appears to have become increasingly discouraged in educational settings in New Zealand in recent years, with a push towards 'protecting' our children from being constantly compared with others or experiencing failure. This article reports on a study that explored the lived experiences of gifted and talented young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These young people reflect on the role that competition and their competitive natures played in their talent development. A number of implications for practitioners are identified in relation to how competition might enhance or limit levels of motivation and the subsequent achievements of gifted and talented young people.

### **Key points**

- Gifted children might appear to be competitive because they are given more opportunities to compete as a result of their abilities.
- Competitiveness in gifted children may be more about performance enhancement than satisfying a need to win.
- The nature of school and classroom environments has an influence on how competitiveness is catered for.
- Supporting gifted children to manage competitiveness is crucial to talent development.

### **Introduction**

A conversation had not long ago with a friend, whose son is a very talented ten-year-old soccer player, was somewhat disturbing. Because of his skill, Jayden<sup>1</sup> had been 'side-lined' during lunchtime soccer matches, not by his peers, but by well-meaning teachers. Jayden's ability meant that the games he played were mismatched and uneven, and some of his peers' parents had complained that their children were not getting the chance to develop in the game as Jayden's skill and competitive nature was so dominating. To appease the complainants, Jayden was restricted to being able to play soccer with his peers in break times,

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<sup>1</sup> The real names of people who feature in this article have not been used.

only at certain times of the week, as this was 'fairer' for all involved. Most days, talented young Jayden stood wistfully on the edge of the soccer field, holding his ball as a compliant bystander.

The notion of competition is complicated when considered in the school environment with a diverse range of learners. This aspect of school life has increasingly become discouraged in New Zealand educational settings over recent years, with a push towards 'protecting' children from being explicitly compared with others or experiencing failure, as Jayden's story illustrates. Cooperation, working together, relating well to others, and similar phrases are now emphasised in school settings and policy documents (e.g. Ministry of Education, 2007). However, cooperation has traditionally been postulated in literature as 'the opposite' to competition (Udvari & Schneider, 2000) and emphasis has been on competitive or cooperative situations rather than on what motivates individual children. There is more agreement now that there is a fine line between the two (Kao, 2011; Maholtra, 2010). Maholtra (2010) suggests that competitive behaviour might be better understood if the focus is placed less on individual children as specifically competitive or cooperative 'types', and more on the conditions in the school and classroom settings that allow these different motivations to emerge.

## **Competition and competitiveness**

Competition can be viewed or understood as a physical situation, such as formally organised or less formal contests, or a personal trait, competitiveness. Kao (2011) and Udvari and Schneider (2000) describe competition as either structural or intentional. Structural competition refers to the dynamics of the situation, where intentional competition is about the attitude or personality trait of the individual. There are proven benefits of structural competitions and several researchers have explored the role of these in learning and achievement in general and more specifically (see for example, Bicknell & Riley, 2012; Kao, 2011; Riley & Karnes, 2005, 2009; Riley, 2011). However, there has been less research undertaken in relation to intentional competition. According to Riley (2011), research related to how effective competitions are in meeting the social and emotional or intellectual needs of gifted and talented children is scarce. Udvari and Schneider (2000) also indicate that there is a lack of research related to intellectually gifted children's attitudes towards, experiences with, and opportunities for competition.

This article focuses more on intentional competition, or the personal attribute of competitiveness. Again, this trait is complex in that it is generally outlined as having two different motivations. Riley (2011) talks about performance excellence, where winning is a measure of excellence, and personal excellence, where the way in which one performs is the measure of excellence. These have also been described as other-referenced, where the ultimate goal is to win or out-do others, and task-oriented, where the focus is on improving performance (Udvari & Schneider, 2000). The way in which a child is motivated influences their behaviour in competitive situations and their relationships with their peers

(Kao, 2011). For example, a child who is motivated towards performance excellence may be more inclined to engage in situations where the opponent or task poses very little challenge, giving them more chance of achieving 'the win'. A child motivated towards personal excellence may be more likely to choose an opponent or task that will challenge them and stretch their already existing capabilities.

As mentioned earlier, there are a number of advantages and disadvantages of competition for children. Kao (2011) describes competition as a 'two-edged sword'; in positive terms, it leads to skill development, encourages good work habits and enhances self-concept, amongst other things. On the other hand it can cause stress, increase feelings of inadequacy and teach children to avoid challenge. Riley (2011) discusses how the benefits of competition closely align with characteristics of creative children, and include aspects such as risk-taking, divergent thinking and the "enjoyment of playing with ideas" (p. 64). This author also issues a warning, indicating that, without careful management, competition can lead to feelings of failure and an unhealthy striving for perfectionism (Riley & Karnes, 2009). Amongst gifted children, this can sometimes lead to underachievement (Rimm, 2003).

Despite some of the reported detrimental effects of competition, there is general agreement that it is a necessary part of the educational setting and plays an integral role in learning. Riley and Karnes (2009) posit three reasons why competition is a necessary component in the classroom. The first is that children naturally compete. There is a natural propensity for children to compare themselves to those around them to judge whether their performance is adequate (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). Second, adult life is full of competitive situations and children need to be prepared for this by learning how to win and lose. A third reason for competition having a place in the classroom is that this develops talent and innovative thinking in children that will directly benefit wider society in a number of ways.

Udvari and Schneider (2000) suggest that gifted and talented children are potentially more competitive because they may have more opportunities and be encouraged more to compete simply because they are talented. They might also have experienced a high level of success in competitive situations because of their capabilities, and are therefore more ready and willing to engage in competitive behaviour. For gifted and talented students, exposure to appropriate levels of competition may be crucial for talent development because, in everyday situations, these young people might seldom encounter challenge or experience failure. Claxton (2007) contends that a potentiating environment, where there is opportunity to get confused, become frustrated or face setbacks is vital for developing abilities. Phillips and Lindsay (2006) suggest that these situations can be motivating for gifted children, something they describe as the "x factor" in high levels of performance and achievement (p. 58).

## **Outline of study**

The data presented and discussed in this article comes from a wider research project that investigated the lived experiences of gifted and talented young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Ballam, 2013). The young people who participated in this study were aged between 17 and 27, and were reflecting on their home, school and general life experiences. All of the participants had been identified by their secondary schools as academically gifted and had been awarded scholarships accordingly. Most of the participants were also talented in other areas, specifically sport, creative arts and leadership. One of the aims of the study was to explore risk and protective factors and processes, in an attempt to ascertain what aspects had benefited and limited their talent development. These factors and processes included personal characteristics as well as environmental elements.

The data from this study came from an anonymous electronic survey to which 93 young people responded (26 male and 67 female). A range of ethnicities was represented in the study, with participants identifying predominantly as New Zealand European (n=38), Pacific Islander <sup>2</sup> (n=29) and New Zealand Māori (n=15). Other ethnicities represented in the study included young people of Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Australian and Latin American origin. Some participants identified with more than one ethnicity. A further eight young people (four male and four female) were invited to share their stories more fully, in semi-structured interviews. These interview participants represented a range of talent areas (including academia, sport, creative arts and leadership) and had also been recognised for their achievements beyond the school setting, at national or regional levels (for a more comprehensive explanation of the selection criteria for interview participants, including limitations of the selection process, see Ballam, 2013). Some additional data were also collected from references and documentation attached to the scholarships that these gifted young people had been awarded.

Three major themes arose from the analysis of data: identity, drive and opportunities. Beneath these themes sat a number of personal and environmental elements that the participants had highlighted as most important in their lives. Personal characteristics mentioned by participants included aspects such as opportunism and having a strong work ethic. Environmental factors included supportive relationships with family members and teachers in particular, stimulating home and school environments, and having an outlet for their abilities (for a more extensive explanation of these elements, see Ballam, 2013). Amongst the elements that emerged from their stories was the presence of competition and challenge, particularly in the school setting, but also in other contexts. It was also evident in the participants' accounts that competitiveness was a personal attribute that many of them shared, and the following section highlights some of their reflections on these.

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<sup>2</sup> A number of Pacific nations were represented in the survey, which included Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Fijian, and Niuean young people.

## Findings and discussion

### Competition as a personal trait

One of the key aspects of competition that emerged from this study was the number of participants who talked about having competitive natures. Some of these young people explicitly described themselves as competitive, while others described themselves in ways that implied a competitive streak. What became evident from participants' comments was that, for many, the motivation for their competitiveness was not performance excellence (Riley, 2011) or other-referenced (Udvari & Schneider, 2000) competition. Rather, as Laura's comment illustrates, their competitiveness tended to be motivated by needing to gauge and improve their own performance:

I want to be good, but not for good's sake. I want to do as well as I can and know that I couldn't have done anything more. I don't want to do well at the expense of other people doing well also, or not out of a competitive need to be top, it's just about my internal competition with myself. My ambition is fuelled by my big ideas. It just seems that the things I want and want to do are big and I don't let that daunt me. Instead, the difficulty of achieving big spurs me on. I like the challenge and the risk-taking side – the chance of failure ensures my commitment.

Perhaps not surprisingly, competitiveness seemed to be particularly evident in those academically gifted participants who also excelled in sport. Niu, a young male who participated in a range of sports, talked about the need for competition to develop his athletic talent, and that his friends had the biggest influence on what he endeavoured to achieve:

If one of my mates is playing basketball and he can do a hook shot, you know, *I* want to do a hook shot...I'm pretty competitive but to a point...I'm not competitive enough to go out and just wipe the floors and you know, train 24/7 just to make sure I can beat them.

An interesting issue that arises from these participants' comments, which are representative of many more that were shared by the young people in this study, is how competitive streaks are perceived and interpreted by the gifted individual themselves and by others. To many, the perception of more heightened competitive behaviour in gifted children than other children in the same context might well be interpreted as an intense and aggressive desire to win, whatever the cost. However, the quite innocent motive of many gifted individuals could simply be just to validate their own ability and to better themselves by engaging in high levels of challenge, sometimes self-created. Returning to the example of Jayden, his dominating presence in soccer games might have been perceived as an intentional 'showing up' of his peers. However, in Jayden's ten-year old mind, perhaps amongst grandiose plans of being the next football world great,

dominating the game might just have been a way of proving to himself that he had skill and making sure he got every opportunity to develop it.

Drive emerged as a key theme in this study and it is a characteristic that has repeatedly been reported in research related to gifted individuals (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Moltzen, 2005; Morales, 2010; Van Tassel-Baska, 1989). While the participants in this study referred to competition as being a source of drive, or intense motivation, it is possible that others sometimes interpret this intensity as unnecessary competitiveness. A question that arises from this is whether the competitive nature leads to this motivation, or whether drive brings out the competitive nature. Either way, if not managed well, there is potential for competitiveness to be misinterpreted and to impact on relationships with teachers and peers (Udvari & Schneider, 2000).

### **Competition in the school environment**

As has been outlined earlier in this article, schools provide many opportunities for children to take part in organised competitions, both school-wide and beyond. However, the participants in this study spoke less about formally organised competitive activities and more about the nature of the school environment and culture. One survey participant stated that “I attended a decile one school so I felt I had no competition”, and this reflected the comments of some other survey respondents. Sarah indicated that a lack of competition in the school environment had made her doubt her academic ability and impacted her motivation. She felt that the reason she was perceived to be academically gifted was because she was compared to other students who were much less academically inclined: “I don't have competition at this school. Well, I do have competition, but I feel as if they [peers] don't try hard enough for it to be called competition.” In contrast to this, one participant mentioned:

My time at intermediate school allowed me to grow up in an environment where nothing but the best was accepted. This made all the students want to step up and stand out from the crowd...whether it be academically or socially.

In this study, the participants were all from low socioeconomic backgrounds and attended low decile schools, and it was evident that many had encountered stereotypical attitudes related to both. In relation to their competitive natures, this translated for some into the belief that higher decile schools may have provided them with the competition they needed. In some of the participants' accounts, it seemed that these beliefs existed even within their school environments. Amongst the issues associated with the identification of gifted and talented young people are perceptions of disadvantage, egalitarian attitudes, and mixed expectations. Deficit or stereotyped thinking diminishes the ability and willingness of some educators to recognise the potential in their students (Alton-Lee, 2003). It would seem logical to suggest that when stereotypic thinking persists, the outcome may well be underachievement.

Claxton (2007) suggests that some educators may innocently be attentive to fixed labels that students have been given, and this might make them less perceptive to the learning capacity of their children. According to this author, challenge needs to be provided to children to enable them opportunity to expand their learning capacity, and this should involve confusion, frustration and the feeling of being 'stuck'. In these situations, it is more likely that children will be encouraged to engage with problem-solving and innovative thinking to satisfy their competitive natures, and to be focused on personal achievement rather than the necessity to win.

### **Competition, like-minded friends and peers**

A third aspect of competition mentioned by the participants in this study was their relationships with peers. Comments made by these young people reflected their desire to be around people who stimulated their competitive natures. When asked what had helped him to develop his talents, one young man stated: "Having high achieving peers and wanting to match them", again illustrating the desire not just to win, but to gauge where he was at in terms of ability and rise to the challenge. Kris also mentioned in his interview that he had thrived on the challenge of reaching his personal goals, and this extended to being competitive with others. He explained, "Even just in anything, like with my friends, I always try to beat them – not for an egotistical reason, just for the point of proving to myself that I can do it."

Interestingly, several young people talked about being grateful for having been placed in advanced classes, or indeed wishing they had been. As one survey respondent pointed out:

In high school I was placed in the top stream class. Being around people of the same ability made it great to strive for goals. My best friend and I would always subconsciously compete for the best projects – healthy competition that made me push myself.

Another stated:

My school had streaming, which meant that students were put in classes according to their academic ability. Being put in the top class meant that I was with students who had the same ability as I did and this meant that I was pushed since the competition was obvious.

The preferred method for catering for gifted and talented children in New Zealand schools has traditionally been enrichment (providing learning activities in the regular classroom that offer depth and breadth in line with students' learning needs) rather than acceleration (exposure to content at an earlier age than other children) (Ministry of Education, 2000). More recent gifted education guidelines encourage a balance between these two approaches (Ministry of Education, 2012), however Townsend (2011) argues that New Zealand's history in the use of acceleration practices is weak. Streamed or advanced classes

(ability grouping) tended to be looked upon most favourably by the participants in this study, although this is also a method of extension that some educators are apprehensive about. With the New Zealand education system's current emphasis on inclusion for all students, many would prefer that gifted students remain in mixed ability classrooms and that enrichment is provided within this context. According to these participants' accounts, class placement clearly has implications for how the competitiveness of gifted individuals is catered for.

### **The 'flipside' of competition**

As outlined earlier, competition and competitiveness has a flipside and Riley and Karnes (2009) caution that these need to be carefully managed in order to avoid fears of failure and unhealthy striving to perform to expectations. While none of the participants in this study directly attributed their competitive natures to any of these, they did talk about the link between their competitiveness and motivation, and the disadvantages of being so driven. For many, being motivated to achieve meant that they had high expectations for themselves. Sarah regularly found her driven nature to be overwhelming:

It kind of gets too much at times, not being able to just settle for okay. I'm so used to just crashing and burning and just breaking down, that it's become kind of like a monthly, weekly kind of habit. But yeah, I guess that's a weakness of mine – like, the downfall of the obsessive drive.

When she was asked if she felt this may become easier to manage as she gets older, Sarah laughed and replied "Yes – but that's the scary bit 'cause if I can manage that, then I'll probably push myself even more."

Being so motivated also meant that others expected them to constantly perform to high levels. This comment, made by a survey respondent, reflected the sentiments of many others:

Everyone has such high expectations of you. It can put quite a lot of pressure on you. I have never failed anything in my life and would like to get it out of the way, because now I am afraid that when I finally do fail something I will find it hard to deal with.

### **Implications for educators**

While competition and competitiveness were not explicitly investigated in this research project, it is significant that these emerged amongst several aspects that the participants considered to benefit or limit their talent development. From their accounts, three specific aspects of competition were evident. First, a significant number of these gifted young people regarded their competitiveness as a means to enhance performance rather than satisfy a need to win. Second, the participants were less concerned with formally organised competitions than they were with the nature of the school environment and how it generally

provided for their competitive natures. Finally, the need to interact with like-minded peers who could stimulate and provide challenge was important to these young people.

There are several implications that arise from this study for educators and other professionals who work with gifted children, and these could well extend to any learners who may be competitive in nature. The first suggestion is that the way in which others perceive the gifted child's competitiveness can make a difference to how they are consequently treated and, ultimately, how they might behave. The implication for adults in this situation is to recognise that competitive situations may be a major source of motivation for the gifted individual, and therefore a necessary part of the learning process. Another way of looking at it is that drive, a characteristic reported to be common amongst gifted individuals, could actually be what instigates competitive behaviours. Regardless, the impetus is on educators to carefully manage competitive situations so that the importance of achievement is the focus rather than winning (Udvari & Schneider, 2000). This may help to ensure that gifted learners are catered for adequately, their relationships with others remain intact, and that other children are not damaged by unhealthy competitive behaviours in the process.

Formally organised competitions undoubtedly provide necessary opportunities for gifted children to extend their abilities however, equally as important is the general school and classroom milieu and whether or not this caters for competitive needs. Claxton (2007) claims that developing abilities requires being stretched into areas that are difficult, and he stresses that gifted and talented students who 'glide' through school are simply wasting their time. This writer uses the analogy of an athlete who sets up a training session in which they never break sweat or raise their heartbeat to illustrate how worthless activity without challenge can be. Again, the notion of competition is complicated when considered in the school environment with a diverse range of learners. However, it could well be that in our efforts to create a more egalitarian society we have become so concerned about potential damage to self-esteem that we have removed elements that might actually enhance achievement.

Another factor for educators to consider is the way in which gifted children are grouped in schools and what opportunities are being provided for gifted children to participate in competitive activities, even in classrooms with students of mixed ability. There is no doubt that gifted and talented young people require some sort of enrichment and challenge in order to develop their potential, but just which type of intervention is most suitable is a hotly debated issue. Interestingly, the young people in this study tended to discuss the academic benefits of being in advanced classes with like-minded peers above any detrimental social issues related to being apart from 'regular' students. What seemed to be important for the participants in relation to how their learning needs were catered for was a focus on the development of their academic abilities and other talents over and above their socioemotional needs. This resonates with Townsend's (2011) suggestion that a more positive attitude towards both enrichment and acceleration practices in New Zealand schools, rather than an approach based on the apprehension of teachers and parents, will

ensure that the individual needs of gifted and talented learners are more effectively met.

Finally, the flipside of competitiveness cannot be ignored, and this is perhaps the most complex of considerations. How does one assist the gifted learner to 'balance' their need for competitive interaction with their vulnerabilities around performance and meeting expectations? Udvari and Schneider (2000) suggest that educators continue to maintain the emphasis on improvement and achievement rather than comparison with others.

## **Conclusion**

There were several limitations with the wider research project from which the data presented in this article were drawn (Ballam, 2013). First, the anonymity of the electronic survey probably meant that more young people were willing to respond. However, the result of this was that information provided by these participants was unable to be followed up on, and having further opportunity to explore comments made about competition and competitiveness may have been useful. The diverse mix of cultural groups represented in New Zealand schools influences strategies used by educators to support learners, and further exploration of the element of competition with participants from different cultural groups may have allowed for some interesting contrasts and comparisons. Another limitation of this research was that the participants had all been recognised as high achievers and were perhaps viewing their experiences with competition through a much more positive lens than what other children might have. Competition and competitive behaviour as perceived by a range of educators and learners would be an interesting point for further consideration, as would the relation of these to the key competencies in the current New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007).

It is highly likely that, as they grow older, gifted children will be more exposed to competitive situations simply due to their abilities. Despite a tendency towards protecting children in New Zealand schools from situations that are competitive in nature, these should be seen as important to development for all children. What is vital is the way in which these situations are managed by educators and how children are supported to engage with these. For the competitive gifted child, this may mean explicitly encouraging a shift in thinking that enables them to focus more on their own performance and achievement and less on the sole outcome of winning. Competitiveness as a well-managed personal attribute is crucial to allowing some gifted learners to develop their potential. Most importantly, enabling this characteristic to thrive amongst gifted learners in the classroom is being attentive to a need that could well have long-lasting positive implications for society as a whole.

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