

# **Gifted and growing up in a low income family: Mindsets, resilience, and interventions**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Exploring the lived experiences of young people who are gifted and who come from financially challenging backgrounds may provide insights that lead to effective interventions which enable the potential of this group of individuals to be fully realised. This paper describes the author's personal experience as a child identified as gifted at school and growing up in a low income family. It illustrates the impact of a specific and damaging mindset on achievement, attitudes, and actions. Aspects of risk and resilience are briefly explored and, finally, three significant implications for educators and other professionals are identified.*

## **Introduction**

It has long been recognised that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are amongst one of the groups that are underrepresented in gifted and talented programmes in New Zealand schools (Ministry of Education, 2000). Despite acknowledgement of this problem, the identification of students who are gifted and living in financially strained circumstances has proved difficult, and underrepresentation persists. This may be due to a number of reasons and it can be usefully conceptualised that this group of students have fewer assets, or advantages, in their ecologies than others (Masten, 2002; St John & Wynd, 2008; Thrupp, 2008). The effects of poverty on wellbeing, ability, and achievement have been increasingly noted, and an array of factors associated with poverty is inclined to exacerbate these effects (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008). However, what is lacking in New Zealand literature is the examination of the actual lived experiences of this group of gifted individuals, and the internal emotional or psychological pressures that they may face. The effects of personal views that may be specific to this group can be unobservable and immeasurable, yet the persistence of such inner turmoil can be equally as impacting on achievement. Investigating some of the personal challenges faced by young people who have already been identified as gifted and who live in low socioeconomic circumstances may enhance the ability of educators to more readily recognise giftedness in other individuals from similar backgrounds.

In 2007, 22 percent of all New Zealand children were considered to be living in poverty (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008). Low income has been shown to impact on ability and

achievement. In addition, conditions associated with poverty can also have a significant impact on the realisation of potential. Some individuals are born into poverty, while others find themselves in financially challenging circumstances through events such as divorce, death, or unemployment, which alter their economic and social position (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). Regardless of which situation applies, the combination of aspects such as timing, persistence, depth, and duration of poverty are what contribute to educational outcomes (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008; McLoyd, 1998). Lower income families experience a greater degree of stress, both externally and psychologically (Friedman, 1994). For example, these families may have a lack of financial and other resources, live in inadequate housing and challenging neighbourhoods, and have a perceived lack of control over their circumstances. High stress levels related to financial pressures can affect the quality of interaction between parents and their children, despite the good intentions of parents. This, in turn, may lead to behavioural issues and low self esteem in the child (McLoyd, 1998).

### **Personal experience**

In my own experience, the death of a parent was the catalyst for both emotional upheaval and financial challenges in my family. This premature loss reduced the family to three, with my mother and her two very young children battling to adjust to significant changes. Both my sister and I experienced recurring nightmares that caused ongoing distress for the whole family. Although we were unable to fully comprehend the turn of events, my sister and I sensed that life was now 'different'. As well as dealing with her own grief, mum was required to focus her attention on helping us to cope. The loss of our family's major source of income generated a series of stressors that impacted on each of us. My mother suddenly became burdened with the necessity to provide for her two young children. My sister and I sensed her constant struggle to achieve a balance between her roles as a mother and sole wage earner. In short, the nature and quality of our relationships and interactions was altered, and the change in circumstances set our family on a different course in the quest for financial and socioemotional survival.

From my first day at school, however, I displayed academic promise, excelled in my schoolwork, and was placed in the top streams for most subjects. I was a classic perfectionist and I was hard on myself when I did not perform to my own satisfaction. I also had an innate sense of what I could and could not accomplish, and I stubbornly refused to attempt things that I was convinced I would not do well in. Perhaps ambitiously, I viewed myself as 'one step ahead' of many of my peers and could often foresee the consequences and outcomes of situations before they occurred. On reflection, growing up in my particular home situation had both positive and negative effects on what and how I achieved. I was lucky enough to have a parent who, despite her own set of challenges, endeavoured to support and provide for me as best she could. I was also able to develop tenacity and determination as a result of some of the challenges I faced that were related to my family circumstances. On the other

hand, some of the added emotional and psychological pressures that came with our socioeconomic status acted as significant obstacles in the development of my talents.

**“Don’t get involved in that...it’s too expensive and mum’s under enough financial pressure as it is...”**

Probably the largest barrier throughout childhood and adolescence was a strong mindset that reflected the concern of not exacerbating the family’s financial pressures. Although this was never explicitly communicated within the family, the intuitive awareness of a finely balanced budget that was based primarily around necessity developed an enduring way of thinking that impacted on everything I did. As a young child in primary school, when preparations were being made for my first class camp, I plucked up the courage to respectfully inform my teacher that I would be unable to attend. Much to my embarrassment and dismay, this sparked discussion with my mother, the very person I was trying to look after, and arrangements were made for my attendance at the camp. Intermediate school presented the marvel of weekly electives, an array of activity choices designed to extend students and expose them to what might possibly become long term pursuits. My excitement elevated as I pondered my first choices on the list, ranging from rock climbing, abseiling, and archery, to ten pin bowling, kayaking, and other outdoor pursuits. My excitement waned as I read the requirements for each – a weekly outlay in the form of travel expenses and admission fees, or costs associated with equipment that each student must have. Consequently, I opted for ping pong, which would be played in the school recreation room, and chess, both of which would cost mum nothing. My emotions were fragile as I battled with the choices I had made, while enviously watching my friends disappearing to activities I considered far more exciting.

Fees, uniforms, and other expenses mounted as my sister and I moved into college. By this time I had established myself as a representative hockey player, displayed above average academic ability, and showed creative promise in a selection of school and outside bands. There were several opportunities available to extend my abilities, with enticing options such as photography classes, saxophone lessons, and skiing field trips high on my ‘wish list’ of interests. However, mindful of the costs involved, I ensured that my interest in these endeavours remained concealed. My final years of secondary school were spent struggling with a growing resentment and, after having shown much promise, I left school with no real qualifications. Despite my ability to cope with the academic demands of tertiary study, the worry of meeting associated costs outweighed my desire to journey down this particular path.

‘Lost’ opportunities such as those described above may not prevent students from low socioeconomic situations excelling in other areas; however awareness of mindsets that might limit opportunities for this group of students is essential. The power of the psyche can deny gifted students who have developed entrenched mindsets the option of reaching their potential due to circumstances that are essentially beyond their control. As well, financial expectations placed on parents have increased, as schools today offer a much broader range of opportunities for their students and some team or individual excursions have extended to

global destinations. Students who have considerable potential or talent but experience constant internal burdens related to the family's financial circumstances may develop attitudes of envy or disdain as a result of their frustration. If left for long enough, these attitudes and frustrations may well manifest as behavioural disorders and underachievement in the school context (Friedman, 1994).

Many parents of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may have good intentions in terms of supporting their gifted child to flourish; however stressors associated with financial pressures can easily become the focus of attention and impact on family interactions. Nevertheless, irrespective of financial circumstances, families play an important role in the realisation of promise and potential. Aside from providing money, parents can offer their time, and promote values conducive to talent development, such as the importance of developing abilities and aspiring to achieve (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2008). They can also model a love of learning and skills such as risk taking, problem solving, and coping with setbacks, which can be essential to talent development (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Arnold, 2003).

### **Risk factors, protective factors, and resilience**

The risk and resilience framework has become prominent in contemporary human development theorising (e.g. Luthar, 2006), and this framework adds to our understanding of resilience. Resilience is conceptualised as the ability to adapt in the face of adversity or significant challenges to achieve adaptive outcomes (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Although the risk and resilience framework is extensive in its entirety, in general terms, resilience is developed as a result of the complex interactions of risk and protective factors and processes. In short, risk factors encompass the elements that drive an individual towards a less productive outcome, while protective factors move the individual toward adaptive outcomes (Masten, 2002). Each factor on its own can impact an individual, but it is a combination of both internal and external factors and processes that interact to build resilience. Conditions associated with poverty are considered the most significant risk factor (Gallagher, 2008; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Pungello, Kupersmidt, Burchinal & Patterson, 1996); however the resources that come with giftedness have been identified as a major protective factor (Bland & Sowa, 1994; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). When personal or environmental features pose a risk to positive outcomes for the individual, gifts and talents can serve as protective factors that build resilience and counteract the likelihood of maladaptive outcomes (Seeley, 2003).

Masten and Coatsworth (1998) suggest that two of the most important protective factors are good intellectual capacity and a caring adult, for example, a parent or other mentor. In my own experience, both of these factors were present and served to counteract elements in my personal life and environments that put me at risk of a maladaptive outcome. The involvement of parents and family interactions can act as a form of social capital that reduces the impact of economic disadvantage on educational outcomes (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). A lack of financial and other resources can be offset by parents stressing the value of

education and using what they can to support the development of their children. In the absence of a supportive parent, teachers and other significant adults can provide a buffer in the form of an encouraging mentor or role model (Werner & Smith, 1982). When combined with good intellectual capacity, a recognised gift, or a developing talent, parental support or the presence of another caring adult is likely to set the child on course for positive outcomes.

### **Implications for educators and other professionals**

The persistence of underrepresentation amongst students who are gifted and who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds is not likely to decrease unless intentional interventions are made. Many schools have improved their efforts to identify and cater for gifted students and this is to be commended. Regardless of initiatives by the school as a whole, however, educators and other professionals who interact with children on a daily basis can be individually effective in their efforts to identify and nurture gifted students who face challenges associated with low socioeconomic circumstances. Three suggestions for practice are outlined below:

- 1. Be aware of mindsets that gifted or potentially gifted students from financially challenging backgrounds might have that may restrict them from displaying or developing their talents.*

Aside from the mindset outlined in the earlier part of this paper, there are many others that may plague the student who is gifted and experiencing financial challenges. Mindsets associated with relationships with peers, the expectations of others, and self identity, amongst others, can affect whether an individual chooses to display their talents. This, in turn, impacts on whether their talents are recognised in the school context. Taking the time to consider what some of these damaging mindsets may include could explain the attitudes and actions of some children and, better still, lead to identifying hidden talents. Gifted children sometimes experience heightened sensitivities (Dabrowski, 1972; Piechowski, 1991) and these might well become more intense when they are also coping with emotional and psychological challenges related to their socioeconomic circumstances.

- 2. Consider the risk and protective factors operating in the lives of gifted students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and assist the student where possible towards adaptive outcomes.*

Risk factors can be clearly evident in the lives of students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The challenge for educators and other professionals is to seek to introduce protective factors that may counteract the negative effects of these risks. A further challenge is for the educator to understand that what *they* may consider to be a

risk factor may actually be working as a protective factor for the child. For example, a peer group that is considered to be undesirable may actually be a support for the student when family relationships have deteriorated due to adverse circumstances. Despite the complex nature of risk and protective factors, interventions can be made, particularly in the form of a caring adult, role model, or mentor who takes a genuine interest in the student.

3. *Look beyond your own interests and experiences and build relationship with the gifted student to determine the values, expectations, and knowledge that characterise their backgrounds.*

Gonzalez & Moll (2002) point out that learning is a social process that is impacted by larger ideological frameworks that impact students' lives. They suggest that what we see or notice is coloured by our own interests and experiences, which have developed our knowledge system. One issue associated with identifying and working with gifted students from low socioeconomic backgrounds is deficit or stereotypic thinking, which diminishes the willingness and ability of educators to recognise the strengths and promise of this group of students (Ford & Whiting, 2008). Thrupp (2008) maintains that educators are largely from the middle class population and that, consequently, schools recognise and value middle class values and behaviour. Educators and other professionals who can look beyond their own beliefs, ideals, and values, in an attempt to identify with students from other backgrounds, are more likely to develop an understanding of relevant behaviours and attitudes.

## **Current research**

As mentioned earlier, there is a significant lack of research into the experiences of young people who are gifted and who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds in New Zealand literature. This may be because of difficulties associated with identification, underachievement, and sensitivities surrounding socioeconomic status. In response, a research project that aims to explore the lived experiences of young people who are gifted and talented and who come from financially challenging circumstances has been initiated. The study, which is still in its early stages, aims to examine the interactions between the personal and environmental features that are characteristic of this group of young people. The investigation will explore the participants' perceptions of their lived experiences and how they make meaning of these experiences, while also being a celebration of their personal achievements.

The research process involves interviews with a number of participants who have been identified as gifted and talented, and as coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is anticipated that this research will result in detailed understandings of what it means to be highly competent and resilient while experiencing the potential challenges of low

socioeconomic circumstances. It is also expected that this research will provide some insight into the nature of specific challenges faced by young people who come from low socioeconomic situations. Hopefully, interventions that might reverse unfavourable impacts for these young people may be identified. As well, significant lessons for both educational and social policy and practice may arise as a result of this investigation.

## **Conclusion**

A widening socioeconomic gap (Ministry of Social Development, 2008; St John & Wynd, 2008), intensified by the unstable global economic climate of late, will increasingly force more New Zealanders into financially strained situations. Inevitably, educators and other professionals will have greater exposure to children who are facing the specific challenges that come with financial hardship. Amongst these children will be those who are already gifted and those who are yet to have their potential realised. Gonzalez & Moll (2002) suggest that educators need to gain an empirical understanding of the lived experiences of their students. This includes gaining awareness of both tangible, external barriers, as well as the less observable internal or psychological pressures that are experienced by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Rather than allowing these young people to develop poverty mindsets that can undermine their concepts of ability and beliefs in themselves, interventions that foster self esteem and self efficacy should be sought. These interventions may be the catalysts for breaking down damaging mindsets, building resilience, and seeing latent potential fulfilled.

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