Talented and Living on the Wrong Side of the Tracks

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Abstract

Gifted young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs in New Zealand schools (Ministry of Education, 2000) and in recent years this has been highlighted as an area of concern. The aim of this paper is to indicate the extent to which giftedness and financially challenging circumstances influence the identities of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This study investigates the lived experiences of 93 survey participants and eight interviewees aged between 17 and 27 years, who grew up in financially challenging situations in New Zealand. The research indicates that socioeconomic adversity can actually contribute significantly to adaptive outcomes for gifted young people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, socioeconomic adversity is intrinsically valuable in relation to aspects of identity. This study also suggests that the limitations of giftedness can have more detrimental effects on an individual's sense of identity than limitations associated with their socioeconomic circumstances.

Introduction

Imagine experiencing the highs and lows of being gifted; the euphoria felt with each success, the weight of expectations, or the intense focus required to reach heights that others may only ever yearn for. Then imagine managing this talent within the context of financial constraints. This paper reports on preliminary findings of a study, which explored the lived experiences of gifted and talented young people who have grown up in low socioeconomic circumstances in New Zealand. The key purpose of the project was to investigate the personal and environmental features that enabled these resilient individuals to excel, despite the specific challenges they faced. A common perception of individuals who live in low socioeconomic situations may be that these people experience substantial disadvantage. The personal voices of the young people in this research project provide a valuable glimpse into how challenges associated with financial hardship in interaction with the wealth of considerable talent, may actually result in remarkable resilience.

Background

Gifted and talented education in New Zealand

New Zealand education takes a multicategorical approach to giftedness (Ministry of Education, 2000), which acknowledges that gifted and talented students are not solely those with academic intelligence. Instead, a broad range of special abilities, including creative, leadership, and physical abilities, amongst others, are also recognised as legitimate areas of talent. There is no set national definition in New Zealand for gifted and talented education. As an alternative, schools are encouraged to develop their own programs to meet the needs of their gifted students based on guidelines which have been designed to help facilitate their implementation (Ministry of Education, 2000). This allows schools a degree of autonomy, and it also enables them to approach the identification and nurturing of gifted students in diverse ways, according to the students and communities they are catering for. While this can be an advantage, there are suggestions that the lack of a national definition may also serve to broaden and generalise conceptions of giftedness so that considerations for this group of students can be weakened (Moltzen, 2004a).

Young people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are one group of students who are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs in New Zealand schools (Ministry of Education, 2000).[1] In recent years the Ministry of Education has recognised this underrepresentation as an issue that requires attention. As a result, various measures have been taken in an attempt to address general gifted and talented education issues. These include an addition to the National Administration Guidelines (NAG) 1 (iii) (Ministry of Education, 2008a), a guideline for schools (Ministry of Education, 2000), and a handbook for parents and teachers of gifted children (Ministry of Education, 2008b). Until recently, a national coordinator and school advisers were appointed throughout the country, and funding was provided for in school and ICT programs, pre-service teacher training, and the professional development of current educators (Ministry of Education, 2008c).

Despite these initiatives, specific groups of gifted New Zealand young people remain unidentified. Issues associated with the identification of gifted and talented young people include perceptions of disadvantage, egalitarian attitudes, and mixed expectations. Deficit or stereotypic thinking diminishes the ability and willingness of some educators to recognise the potential in their students (Alton-Lee, 2003) and this is particularly relevant for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The presence of underachievement amongst the gifted and talented is a significant issue, as it results in the loss to society of unfulfilled potential (Moltzen, 2004b). As well, gifted young people who underachieve represent an unrealised fulfilment of personal potential (Siegle & McCoach, 2002). Combine the increased likelihood of underachievement with the added pressures of socioeconomic strain, and young people who are already perceived to be disadvantaged are faced with quite specific challenges.

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[1] According to the Ministry of Education (2000), the largest proportion of 'hidden gifted' in New Zealand schools include students who are gifted but underachieving, children from diverse cultures, those with learning difficulties or disabilities, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Socioeconomic trends in New Zealand

An alarming persistence of child poverty exists in New Zealand and, according to recent reports, the socioeconomic gap continues to widen (Ministry of Social Development, 2008; St John & Wynd, 2008). In 2007, 22% of all New Zealand children were reported to be living in poverty (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008), and this is likely to impact on their health, development, and educational opportunities (Friesen, Woodward, Fergusson, Horwood, & Chesney, 2008; St John & Wynd, 2008). As well, childhood disadvantage increases the chances of poor outcomes later in life (Perry, 2004). Young people who are gifted from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to experience disadvantage simply because they have been denied access to opportunities or are deprived due to the nature and quality of their assets (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).

If current trends continue, an increasing number of gifted New Zealand young people will find themselves living in financially challenging situations throughout their childhoods and the crucial talent development years. The Ministry of Education (2008c) has highlighted future areas of focus for gifted education policy development, and amongst these is the call to address the particular needs of low decile schools. Some researchers have also recommended that exploration in the area of gifted and talented individuals includes the need for sampling from lower socioeconomic families (e.g. Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Gallagher, 2008; Riley, 2004; Versteynen, 2001). While there has been extensive international research undertaken with socioeconomically disadvantaged gifted groups, relatively few studies have emerged from New Zealand. There may be some comparisons that can be made with international research; however, it is important that New Zealand's unique cultural context is considered in relation to the experiences of gifted individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, rather than making weak correlations with other cultural contexts.

Risk and resilience, giftedness, and socioeconomic adversity

Resilience is conceptualised as the ability to adapt in the face of adversity or significant challenges to achieve adaptive outcomes (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Risk and resilience literature indicates that the resources that come with giftedness are considered to be a significant 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 counteract the likelihood of maladaptive outcomes (Seeley, 2003). Some of the resources cited as being associated with high abilities include cognitive ability, self confidence, positive aspirations for the future, and motivation to succeed (Schoon, Parsons, & Sacker, 2004). Research in the area of resilience also indicates that good intellectual capacity and the presence of a caring adult, for example a parent or mentor, are two of the most important protective factors and predictors of resilience (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 1987).

Socioeconomic status can impact on the nature and quality of interactions and transactions that occur within and between the environments of gifted individuals.

Risk and resilience literature reports that the conditions associated with poverty are considered to be a significant risk factor (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008; Gallagher, 2008; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Pungello, Kupersmidt, Burchinal, & Patterson, 1996). In other words, these conditions increase the likelihood of adverse outcomes. Environmental and personal characteristics that are believed to be specific to individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds have been identified (e.g. Luthar, 2006; Rutter, 2007). In the New Zealand context, environmental characteristics may include inadequate or overcrowded home environments and neighbourhoods that are characterised by high crime rates and higher rates of substance abuse (Ministry of Social Development, 2008; Wynd & Johnson, 2008). Deprived neighbourhoods also tend to have fewer accessible services and amenities, low education and employment levels, and high levels of transience (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008; Krishnan, Jensen, & Rochford, 2002). Personal impacts of low socioeconomic status may include poor physical or mental health (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008; Ministry of Social Development, 2008), reduced aspirations, and loss of confidence (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008; McLoyd, 1998). High stress levels related to financial pressures can also impact on the quality of interactions between parents and their children (Evans, 2004) and in more extreme cases, this can result in physical abuse, neglect, or violence (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008).

Not all gifted young people who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds flounder, as is evident in this study. According to Rutter (2007), the experience of adversity may present opportunities that actually promote resilience. Leading theorists (e.g. Gagné, 2003; Renzulli, 2002; Tannenbaum, 2003) have identified that key ingredients for the realisation of exceptional potential lie within the individual and their environments, and the interactions and transactions that occur between both. Conditions associated with socioeconomic adversity are experienced in different ways by individuals. Some individuals are 'born into' generational poverty, and these people are more likely to experience the effects of socioeconomic adversity to a greater extent (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008; St. John & Wynd, 2008). Others are 'thrust' into poverty through situations such as divorce or the death of a parent, or sudden unemployment. Regardless of the situation, it is the interplay between the risks associated with conditions of socioeconomic adversity and the protective elements of giftedness that are what ultimately lead to resilience or to vulnerability in these gifted young people.

Methods and data sources

This paper reports on the reflective experiences of 93 survey participants and eight interviewees who are gifted and who grew up in low socioeconomic situations in New Zealand. Participants were sourced from First Foundation (www.firstfoundation. co.nz), an organisation that was formed in 1998 as a means of providing a "hand up" rather than a "hand out" to talented young New Zealanders from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. The scholarships provided by First Foundation provide an opportunity for recipients to pursue tertiary education where they may otherwise not have been able to due to socioeconomic limitations.

Students from partnership schools are invited to apply for the First Foundation scholarships once they reach year 12, which is the second to last year of secondary schooling in New Zealand. Partnership schools range mainly from deciles one to three, and this means that the bulk of their students are drawn from low socioeconomic areas. If successful, scholarship recipients are linked with partnership businesses, which partly fund the students' tertiary studies. These businesses also provide the recipients with part time work over the course of their studies, and a portion of the students' income is also paid into their scholarship funds. As well, scholarship recipients are partnered with a mentor who provides additional support during the scholarship period.

Participants for this project were drawn from current and past First Foundation scholarship recipients and, at the time of research, most of these individuals were aged between 17 and 27 years. From a potential 181 participants, 93 young people responded to the survey, and this included 26 males and 67 females. Most of the survey respondents had completed the majority of their schooling in New Zealand, with 79 participants having spent at least 10 years in New Zealand schools. Survey respondents represented a range of cultures, with 15 young people identifying themselves as being New Zealand Maori, 38 as New Zealand European, and 29 as coming from various Pasifika backgrounds. The remaining 41 participants predominantly identified themselves as being New Zealand born Asian or Indian. Each of these young people was identified as academically gifted at some stage during their schooling, but most also had talents in a range of other areas. Additional talents tended to be those that are perhaps more evident within school settings, and these included leadership, creative arts, and sporting talents in particular.

Eight First Foundation scholarship recipients were invited to participate in interviews and these individuals were selected based on an extensive analysis of their profile information. Efforts were made to ensure that interview participants included a mix of genders, cultures, and talent areas. Four male and four female participants who had completed all of their schooling in New Zealand took part in the interviews. A range of cultures was represented by these eight individuals. Participants included Matiu and Aroha (New Zealand Maori), Laura and Jennae (New Zealand European), Ben (Samoan), Sarah (New Zealand born Asian), Kris (Maori/European) and Niu (Niuean/European).[2]

The interview participants also represented a range of talent areas. All of the eight participants had been identified as gifted and talented by their schools based on their academic strengths. Matiu and Aroha had shown particular strengths in leadership also, and both had played pivotal roles in kapa haka[3] as well as representing their schools as head boy and head girl[4] respectively. At the time of research, Matiu had recently been awarded a national Maori business award, and Aroha was embarking on a law degree at university. Laura and Jennae showed particular promise in the arts. Laura had pursued a fine arts degree at university and has recently been

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[2] Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants.
[3] Kapa haka is the term used for traditional Maori performing arts.
[4] In New Zealand, a head boy and a head girl are appointed to be the student leaders of their schools in Year 13, their final year of high school.

awarded a national award for her work. Jennae demonstrated exceptional ability as a dancer and, at the time of interview, was highly regarded for her skills both as a dancer and also a choreographer in the community where she lived.

Ben presented as having high abilities in a range of areas, and these included leadership, creative, and sporting talent. At the young age of nineteen, he had a significant leadership role at his university and was also on a government advisory committee. As well, Ben was a talented musician and had been recognised by his community for his service in this area. He had also won a championship award for his sporting abilities. Along with being academically able, Kris and Niu had played their respective sports at regional and national levels. During his interview, Kris revealed that he had made the difficult decision to decline a position in the development squad for a national sports team so that he could pursue a business career. Niu had played representative sport for a number of codes, despite a hereditary disability that had threatened to impact on his athletic ability as he was growing up. Sarah, the youngest of the interview participants, was about to begin her final year at school as head girl. Along with her academic and leadership abilities, she indicated that she had a particular passion for service to others, and was hoping to pursue a career with the United Nations.

The collection of data for this study occurred in three phases. Phase one involved an online survey that was sent anonymously to all current and past recipients of First Foundation scholarships. This survey included 27 questions that were divided into sections about themselves, their gifts and talents, their childhood and school experiences, their relationships, and their socioeconomic circumstances. The second phase of data collection involved in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were informed by responses to the survey questions, with the aim of eliciting more rich and contextualised details of the participants' life experiences. Following the interviews, email contact was maintained so that these individuals could add information if they desired, and also for the purpose of clarification on behalf of the researcher. In the third phase of data collection, the First Foundation scholarship application files of each of the eight interview participants were accessed and reviewed. This enabled the researcher to verify and validate information given by interview participants, and additional insights from supporting references were gleaned as part of this process.

Qualitative data were transcribed and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA analysis follows the established pattern of qualitative methods with cumulative and integrative coding. Where IPA is distinctive as a methodology is in the importance of the individual case (Smith, 2004). This methodology allows the researcher to gain an 'inside view' (Willig, 2001) of each participant's lived experiences. It is reliant on how the participant articulates their experiences and how the investigator analyses this information, through careful interviewing and examination of the participant's perceptions. This methodology is consistent with the intention of the project, which was to capture the voices of the young people themselves, and to explore the perceptions, evaluations and attributions that they hold in relation to their talents and personal circumstances.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is largely a phenomenological approach, but it also shares some of the theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1995). Phenomenological research is concerned with clarifying situations as they are directly experienced by individuals in the contexts of their lives (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Symbolic interactionism focuses on how meanings are constructed through the activities and interactions within the social and personal worlds of individuals (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2006). Smith and Osborn (2008) argue that IPA is concerned with underlying cognitions which the individual uses to make sense of their world, and that what participants disclose gives insight into their cognitions and emotions. The relevance of this approach to the present study is apparent, as the participants' reflections and interpretations of their lived experiences as gifted young people from financially challenging backgrounds were being sought.

Results

The survey and interview data aligned with current ideas from risk and resilience literature. This was evident from responses to a question that asked participants to indicate what it was they felt had helped them to develop their gifts or talents. Participants revealed that the most significant influences on their talent development had been self confidence and self belief, which are reported to be resources associated with high abilities (Schoon, Parsons, & Sacker, 2004). The other significant influence was a supportive family member. Another survey question asked participants to indicate who they felt had been most influential in the development of their talents, and 81.7% of participants revealed that this had been a family member. Additional comments made by participants indicated that the most influential family members tended to be a parent or caregiver rather than siblings or extended family.

Data about socioeconomic adversity from the present study also confirmed findings from risk and resilience research. Participants were asked to comment on challenges they had faced that had impacted on the development of their gifts or talents as they grew up. The difficulties most commonly cited by these young people were financial difficulties and family struggles or challenges, which are reported by resilience literature to be significant risk factors (Gallagher, 2008; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Pungello, Kupersmidt, Burchinal, & Patterson, 1996). These two major challenges featured significantly higher than other aspects that were mentioned, clearly indicating that participants felt that their socioeconomic circumstances had presented quite definite challenges. Comments made by participants in response to this question reflected some of the conditions outlined in resilience literature as being characteristic of individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The following explanation provides an example of this:

> Financial difficulties were [a] biggie, because I come from a single parent family. As well as having to cope with a 'part time' step dad who had a gambling problem. Money was always tight. I remember many a day coming home to no power or phone.

Identity and giftedness

'Identity' was one of three key themes that emerged from this research, and the remainder of this paper reports on accounts of how the participants' giftedness, combined with growing up in low socioeconomic situations, impacted on their sense of identity. For the purpose of this research, identity has been conceptualised as a sense of personal wellbeing, which follows Erikson's (1968) ideas about identity formation. Erikson proposed that an individual's identity was developed through their interactions with and within their social environments. It encompasses self awareness, self confidence, self belief, and a sense of belonging. The perception that one is valued by those who are important to them is also a major component of the formation of a strong identity. In this study, ninety three survey respondents and 8 interview participants elaborated on how they perceived and developed themselves and their gifts and talents within the context of their challenging personal circumstances.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the data indicated that giftedness had impacted positively on the participants' sense of identity and self worth. When survey participants were asked to describe what they felt was the best thing about being gifted and talented, 64% of respondents revealed that their giftedness had had a positive personal impact as they grew up. The majority of these responses referred to feelings of self worth, confidence, and a sense of fulfilment. One participant outlined that the greatest benefit of her giftedness was "Having something that I'm passionate about and good at, that gives me pride and a sense of self worth." Another stated that "It's a big 'eye-opener' to you and your world. You realise that you have something unique that you can give to others. It's something that no one can take from you because it's embedded in you forever. It's awesome!" In terms of her self worth, one survey respondent expressed that "Knowing there is something that you can do well makes you feel useful. You have value whether you are gifted or not but being useful is a satisfying feeling."

The interview accounts also reflected that giftedness had had positive intrinsic impacts on participants. Kris, a talented sportsman as well as being academically strong, described how having a talent meant that he was more confident all round. He stated that:

> you get to do things other people probably wouldn't be able to and it gives you more confidence…even if you're good in one area, I feel more confident even if I know I'm not very good at another area, that I could do it if I put my mind to it.

Similarly, Ben pointed out that an advantage of having high abilities is that "you're able to excel purely because you *do* have those talents and those gifts."

Matiu reflected on the personal significance of his successes, and described how these had strengthened his self belief. Reflecting on how he had felt after experiencing success at school, he stated that at the time he had thought, "if I can do this *now*, imagine what I *can* do." Matiu made reference to a top New Zealand award he had recently won and attributed this achievement to smaller successes that had boosted his confidence. He stated that "everyone would think why wouldn't *this* be your best

achievement, and it's like well…I wouldn't have got that…I wouldn't even have [had] the confidence to *go* for…something like that, if it wasn't for being head boy."

Giftedness also had negative intrinsic impacts on participants and this was evident from responses to a survey question that asked them to indicate what the worst thing was about being gifted and talented. In response to this question, 75% of participants referred to expectations from self and others, the resulting feelings of the pressure to perform, and the fear of failure. One survey participant explained that "I am too hard on myself which can make life difficult for me and those around me." Other comments reflected the perceived expectations that other people had for participants because of their talents, and the resulting intrinsic impacts. The following two quotes are examples of comments that were echoed throughout the survey responses:

> The expectation is the worst thing by far. People think that you're perfect all the time and therefore when you do make a mistake, they fall on top of you like a ton of bricks…people expect you to be on the ball all the time.

> 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.

Another response summed up the pressures associated with high expectations and the impact of these on his feelings of self worth. This participant said that, "You feel like a failure if you don't achieve what others expect you to, or if you don't do as well as what you hope, you feel like you are letting people down."

Interview participants gave more detailed accounts of the negative intrinsic impacts related to their giftedness. Kris described the high expectations he had for himself, stating that "[I] expect a lot from myself and I'm pretty harsh on myself…if I don't achieve what I want to achieve sometimes I get really – not down, but I get sort of, sort of angry." Jennae, a talented dancer, described herself as being "a perfectionist" and outlined that this had made her "critical of self." She explained that the high expectations she had for herself had placed her "on the edge, if not just over the edge of burnout" recently. Niu talked about pursuing a sport that his father had been involved in and how "there was a bit of pressure…to live up to [his] reputation." He described how "there was always – someone – who would *compare* us." Sarah, the youngest interview participant who was in her final year of high school at the time of research, pointed out that throughout high school her teachers had "expected me to get first in every school subject." Reflecting on her failure to meet these expectations, she outlined that "when they see your results and stuff, it makes you feel really bad." Sarah elaborated on these feelings, stating that "I used to beat myself over the head but now…I think of it as…I deserve what I get."

One consequence of Matiu's giftedness had been a fear of failure, which stemmed from other people's expectations of him and his identity as a Maori male. Referring to the reported rates of underachievement associated with Maori students in New Zealand schools, he described how his teachers had been encouraging: "It was *kinda* like a 'do it for your people' kind of thing." While these perceived expectations had

been a support for Matiu in one sense, he outlined that "what's hard is that...when you fail it seems like you fail – you fail on behalf of *everyone* that you represent." He went on to point out that "*you* can't stuff up because, you know, if you stuff up then...you'll just be like another statistic."

Laura's interview account described how the expectations of others had impacted significantly on who she had become as a young adult in relation to her creative talents. Going against many of her teachers' advice, Laura chose to follow her passion for visual arts rather than a more 'traditional' and 'stable' pathway with her strengths in science and maths. Laura described her initial reaction to the expectations of her teachers. "I didn't – want to disappoint people, I didn't want to let people down, I felt like maybe – I was smart so I *owed* – them. I owed them to be better than just being a selfish artist." Laura stated that "I gave in for awhile" but she eventually made the choice to focus on developing her artistic abilities. Describing herself as "stubborn", she said that "they never thought I should do art, and so I kind of did it maybe to prove them wrong in a way."

In her final year at school, Laura had the highest grade point average, however, all of her papers were arts subjects. In the final assembly, the award was given to a male peer who had the second highest grade point average but who was pursuing 'more important' or 'valued' subjects, such as physics and maths. Laura described how "disappointed" she had been:

> I took all my arts subjects and that was kind of like "Look I've proved you wrong – I can do well in whatever I choose to do." And then that wasn't even acknowledged. But then...you have a little cry about it, and you get over it and pick yourself up and realise that [the teachers] didn't matter anyway. Because I did what I wanted to do...and I did well at it. I proved to myself that I could do it...and they *know.*

Laura's decision to pursue her own interests has paid off, as she has recently completed a fine arts degree and she also received a national award for her work.

Identity and socioeconomic adversity
Participants indicated that socioeconomic adversity presented definite disadvantages for them. A survey question asked participants to describe how they felt financial constraints had limited the development of their talents. In response to this question, 70% of participants identified extrinsic limitations such as attending "inadequate" schools and having limited access to resources and extracurricular activities. In contrast, only 30% of responses to this question referred to more personal impacts, and comments made by participants highlighted humiliation, frustration, and a feeling of not belonging as being most significant. One individual explained that the biggest limitation for him was "the constant pressure of knowing that your family is struggling financially. Feeling stressed and embarrassed at the fact that you can't afford this or that." Another participant revealed that there were specific frustrations related to her circumstances that had impacted on her sense of self worth:

> When you know you're good at something and you love to do it, there is nothing more frustrating than having to do something else, due to

circumstances, whatever they may be. The sense of frustration and pointlessness to life when it is like this can be overwhelming.

A sense of disarticulation or not belonging was also an issue for some participants. One young person pointed out that she "used to find it hard talking to people that I considered were from a 'higher class' than me and my family."

Interview participants also outlined how aspects of their socioeconomic circumstances had impacted on their sense of identity. Laura described that she had felt "undeserving" when her parents gave her things that would help her to develop her artistic talents because she knew that they could not really afford it. She also had younger siblings and she stated that "I couldn't reconcile myself with the fact that…by me having this, somebody else isn't." Ben referred to how people would just assume that things were "all good in the hood", or okay for him and his family, simply because he came across as talented, smart, and well adjusted. Jennae talked about the embarrassment of having to front up to school with notes saying that she couldn't afford to pay for something this week. Sarah described how "I didn't belong anywhere because…I had friends that had, like, multimillion dollar *houses* and *businesses* and stuff, and then I had mum who couldn't really afford to like, send me to…camps and stuff."

Aroha had experienced quite a turbulent home life as she was growing up, and she described how this had resulted in feelings of self doubt. Despite her obvious academic and leadership abilities, Aroha stated that one of the achievements she was most proud of was "finishing school". When asked why this was such a big achievement for her, Aroha explained that:

> I was in a really low place, year 9 and 10, so it was like…you think about three years later in your life and…you don't really…*know* if you're going to succeed or not, like the rest of the kids at school, you know. You *look* at people that are um, quite *successful* and highly *academic* and you *really* wanna *be* like them but you sort of *know* that you can't because…there's just all this stuff that's happening with you, yourself – whether it's in the home or, with your friends, you know…and um, coming from a broken family, *you* really can't see past that trauma. It's really hard, so *yeah,* that is a…*huge achievement* for me…just to finish school.

Not only had Aroha finished school, but she had successfully completed her final year as head girl. She is currently studying law at university and hopes to be a significant role model for her family and community. Aroha also has aspirations to be involved in Parliament at some point in her life. She recently had the opportunity to meet John Key, the current New Zealand Prime Minister, and cheekily informed him that "I'm coming after you!"

The research data revealed that financial constraints had also impacted positively on the participants' sense of identity. Three quarters of survey participants indicated that experiencing financial constraints as they were growing up had been intrinsically beneficial for them. One survey question asked participants to describe how financial constraints had contributed to the development of their talents. In response,

approximately 50% of participants revealed that these constraints had resulted in them developing a personal strength and determination to change their circumstances. Participants outlined that financial challenges had "made me strive harder for what I want for my future" and "strengthened my resolve to succeed beyond the constraints." One participant stated that "When you're surrounded by a less than positive environment and characterised by negative stereotypes, there's no shortage of motivation to better yourself by developing your talents and skills to break the mould and defy those narrow minded views." Another individual reflected on the source of her determination: "My father's constant struggle to put food on the table and trying to get us kids an education is one of the reasons why I am determined to change not only my life but also my family."

Interview participants elaborated on how socioeconomic adversity had resulted in a strong motivation to change their personal circumstances. Kris outlined how he had been aware as he was growing up that the family's financial situation had been "tight" but that this had always been a "motivating tool" for him. As he said, "I've always thought well, you know, I can make something better than this later on." Two interviewees referred to the "poverty cycle" and the "cycle of unemployment" in their extended families. Matiu reflected on his upbringing, stating that, "I've witnessed and I've grown up in a life where...there is underachievement, there is a poverty cycle, there is violence, there is all of that." He pointed out that "if I didn't *see* that...I probably wouldn't have been as focused as I am." Matiu described how he was determined not to let his upbringing determine who he would be in the future, pointing out that "that's what made me want to be something else...and if I don't – if *I* don't *do* this then there's nothing stopping me from...getting back into that cycle." Referring to her home environment, Aroha described how it had made her "angry and upset that that's the way we have to live...and that became my motivation and my inspiration." She talked about her desire to "break that chain of unemployment around my family...I wanna be the first to sort of break through the ice, and then make a path for them." Aroha has already seen some of the benefits of her hard work. Another member of her family has "found inspiration to get out there and do something herself" as a result of Aroha's influence.

Participants related other intrinsic benefits of financial limitations to their sense of identity. As one survey respondent expressed, financially difficult circumstances had made her "realise that you should focus on the journey and not the destination, because it's the journey that determines the type of person you will become." Developing a strong work ethic and an appreciation for things that other young people perhaps did not place as much value on were cited as significant benefits also. One survey participant described how financial constraints had strengthened her self awareness:

> [financial constraints] made me appreciate things more and place more value on simple things...taught me the value of hard work...taught me that it is never a reason for failure, because success does not stem from money, but from other values...all of which do not have a dollar value.

Another participant reflected that experiencing socioeconomic adversity "makes you a stronger person as you have to fight for what you want." Self worth and confidence were also outcomes of socioeconomic adversity for one individual, who stated that:

> It [financial constraints] has served as a way for me to achieve things then look back upon them and realise that I have done them without huge amounts of money backing me. It is far more satisfying and makes me feel like money is not the 'be all and end all', and if you want to do it, you can.

In his interview, Ben conveyed that challenges associated with his personal circumstances had enabled him to develop a strong belief in himself. He outlined that:

> it *is* all up to you. If you wanna pass, *you* will pass. It doesn't matter if the – system is – or the structure is set up, you know, so that it – it actually pushes you towards failure, or [it] doesn't matter if that encouragement isn't there from teachers and peers. It doesn't matter if, um, you – you know, your mum isn't supportive, that sort of thing, it's all *you* – it's all *about* you.

Aroha also articulated that her self belief had been strengthened as a result of socioeconomic challenges, pointing out that hard times had actually contributed to "who I am." Referring to her rocky relationship with her father, she reflected that "through all the distress and hardship that he's *put* me through, *he's* made me who I am now." She continued on to say that "if he *didn't* put me through that stuff, then I wouldn't be as strong as I am now."

Matiu outlined how his sense of identity had been boosted by supportive teachers in the midst of personal and home challenges. Having to move out of his own unstable home environment to live alone during his high school years, Matiu explained that his school had become a "second home" for him. He pointed out that his teachers had allowed him to "be myself." Their encouragement and the fact that they had "put no constraints" on him had impacted positively on his confidence. Matiu stated quite definitely that being made head boy of his high school was the achievement that "means the most." When he was given this role, he said of his teachers, "it was like they actually just said 'Look, you can do it.' And from then on it was just like the world's my oyster from there…and everything's just bloomed since then."

Discussion

This study revealed that both giftedness and financial adversity contributed to a strong sense of identity in talented young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For the majority of participants, having a gift or talent impacted positively on their feelings of self worth and self confidence, and some individuals described the sense of fulfilment that had resulted from having high abilities. Socioeconomic adversity and associated challenges appeared to develop in many participants a strength of determination and belief in themselves. The intense desire to change their personal circumstances tended to manifest as a strong work ethic, and

participants reported that the challenges they had faced had become a specific source of personal motivation.

This finding contributes to the complexities surrounding the interactions and transactions that occur between individuals and their environments that are recognised in human development literature. As outlined earlier, literature suggests that giftedness is more likely to contribute to a positive sense of self (Schoon, Parsons, & Sacker, 2004), while socioeconomic adversity tends to increase stress levels and lower self esteem (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008; Ministry of Social Development, 2008). Although participants did outline some of the negative impacts of socioeconomic adversity, most of these young people indicated that the outcome of their circumstances had positively influenced how they perceived themselves in relation to other people and in the context of their challenging environments.

Socioeconomic adversity was found to be more intrinsically valuable than damaging in terms of talent development and self identity. This challenges stereotypic perceptions that may be commonly held about individuals who come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. It also broadens the picture of what has traditionally been suggested to be characteristic of people living in low socioeconomic situations. Participants reported that drive and determination, a strong work ethic, and an appreciation for things that may be less significant to more financially advantaged young people were the most intrinsically beneficial elements of their financial constraints. While many participants also experienced some negative impacts related to their socioeconomic circumstances, it appeared that their determination to change their situations tended to counteract any long lasting influence that these effects may have had.

Perhaps one of the more surprising findings of this research was that the limitations of having a gift or talent impacted more on the participants' sense of identity than the limitations of socioeconomic adversity. It was clear that the weight of expectations played a significant role in terms of hindering talent development, and participants noted that these expectations arose from themselves as well as others. The pressure to perform was seen as a major limitation of giftedness and this appeared to lead to a fear of failure for many of the research participants. The accumulation of expectations and pressures related to their high abilities were significantly damaging to the self worth and confidence of participants, and their belief in themselves and their abilities. The main intrinsic limitations of socioeconomic adversity were described by participants as being feelings of frustration, humiliation, and a sense of not belonging. However, participants in the study tended to view these as secondary to more extrinsic limitations, such as having limited access to finances and resources that would help them to develop their talents.

The notion that giftedness might be more intrinsically limiting for individuals than adverse socioeconomic circumstances may not necessarily oppose some of the ideas presented in risk and resilience literature, but rather add to these. While giftedness may be considered to be a major protective factor (Bland & Sowa, 1994; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), and socioeconomic adversity a significant risk (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008; Gallagher, 2008; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Pungello, Kupersmidt, Burchinal, & Patterson, 1996), the development of resilience and a strong sense of self is a result of

complex interactions. The number and combination of risk factors can influence identity development, and this is dependent on the processes or interactions that might occur between risk and protective factors (Pungello, Kupersmidt, Burchinal, & Patterson, 1996). Reporting on the risk and protective processes occurring in the lives of participants in this research falls beyond the scope of this paper, however, this would be useful to investigate in the context of the wider study.

It is clear that gifted young people who experience socioeconomic constraints face definite challenges in relation to developing their gifts and talents. However, these challenges tend to place more physical restrictions on the individual rather than impacting in personal or intrinsic ways. This raises a question about the support that these particular young people are given. Are parents, teachers, and other professionals associated with gifted and talented young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds focusing too much on trying to 'fix' the extrinsic or the physical limitations that they experience? Participants in this study clearly indicated that physical limitations of socioeconomic adversity are significant, and for this reason, these should not be overlooked. Further findings from this study revealed that physical assistance provided in the form of tangible resources and opportunities actually contributed to the participants' overall sense of wellbeing. However, it could well be that more focus is also required on the intrinsic aspects, and on supporting and empowering these young people to develop a strong and secure sense of their own identity, whatever this may mean for the individual within the context of their challenging situations.

Kris reflected aptly that "at the time, [physical limitations] seem like a big disadvantage but now it doesn't really seem to faze me anymore because you don't need that stuff at the end of the day." Instead, what seems to be more important to this particular group of young people is having personal strength and a firm sense of who they are. This was articulated clearly through the voices of participants in this study, who stressed that "learning to realise your own life in every aspect is something that is very significant." What was most important for these young people was "just knowing who you are and [that] no one can change that" and "knowing how much value you hold as a person…knowing who *you are.*"

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