

# **‘Defying the odds’: Gifted and talented young people from poor and minority backgrounds.**

**Nadine Ballam**

**University of Waikato at Tauranga, New Zealand**

## **ABSTRACT**

*Gifted young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds are underrepresented in gifted and talented programmes in schools around the world. Along with other western countries, this is a concern in New Zealand. The present research project explores the lived experiences of young people in New Zealand who have achieved to a significant level despite having grown up in financially challenging circumstances. Included in the participants’ stories are insights into personal and environmental aspects that have enabled these resilient individuals to excel. The preliminary findings indicate that socioeconomic adversity can contribute significantly to adaptive outcomes for gifted young people from financially challenging backgrounds. This study also suggests that aspects of giftedness can have a detrimental effect on their identity and wellbeing. The personal voices of the young people in this research project provide a valuable glimpse into the challenges of financial hardship in interaction with the wealth of considerable talent.*

## **Introduction**

### **Nita’s story**

Nita had recently completed high school at the time of her interview. The eldest of five siblings, she and her younger sister lived with her father and his partner after her parents separated when she was a child. Nita referred to a “chain of unemployment” around her family and described her home life as having been characterised by violence, ongoing parties, and drugs and alcohol: “There was *always* something happening at home. My father used to really party hard...everyone was over and there were always drugs around. But it was *after* the party he used to always beat up my mum.”

Living with financial challenges and coping with an unstable home environment had been difficult for Nita. She outlined that her father would “take all the money on pay day so that I couldn’t go to school” and “we’d have nothing to eat for three days. My mum was always trying to get as much money as she could and then he’d come home and take it off her.” Nita went on to reflect that her mother never liked other people to know they were struggling and consequently this had impacted on her ability to achieve at school:

There was always an issue...you miss out on school trips, you fall behind in school work because you haven’t been to school for the last term because you don’t have a uniform, and then for another term, you don’t have stationery. So you don’t have the resources that you need for study...it *starts* at the beginning of the year, and it drags you right through to the end of the year, and you’re still trying to catch up with everything because you didn’t have the money to get the things that you needed.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Nita believes that “passing school” has been one of her greatest achievements. She referred to a period during early secondary school, where she and her peer group were frequently in trouble at school and in the community, and she believes that her behaviour was “highly influenced” by her home life: “I remember that me and my friends were into drinking during school, smoking drugs, [gang] bandanas...” Nita was not well regarded by her teachers or peers and, in relation to her gifts and talents during this time Nita believes that “there was nothing to recognise in me...absolutely *nothing*.” One evening during her second year of high school, Nita and a friend got into trouble with another local gang and ended up being badly beaten. During this incident, Nita remembers thinking “if I keep going this way, this is what it’s gonna be for me.”

## **Background**

### **Gifted and talented education in New Zealand**

Young people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are one group of students who are underrepresented in gifted and talented programmes in New Zealand schools (Ministry of Education, 2000).<sup>1</sup> 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. Despite these initiatives, specific groups of gifted New Zealand young people remain unidentified. Underachievement amongst the gifted and talented is a significant issue, as it results in the loss to society of unfulfilled potential (Moltzen, 2004). As well, gifted young people who

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

underachieve represent an unrealised fulfillment 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.

### **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, 2010; St John & Wynd, 2008). Currently, 22% of all New Zealand children are reported to be living in poverty (Fletcher & Dwyer, 2008; Ministry of Social Development, 2010), 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.

### **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, 2010; 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, 2010), 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. Gagne, 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; Ministry of Social Development, 2010; 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](http://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 awarded 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. Applicants for First Foundation scholarships come predominantly from schools that range between deciles one to three, and this means that the majority of their students are drawn from low socioeconomic areas.

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 an electronic survey, and a further eight participated in more in depth interviews. There were 30 males and 71 females who participated in the study. These young people represented a range of cultures which included New Zealand Maori, New Zealand European, various Pasifika backgrounds, and New Zealand born Asian and 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.

Qualitative data was transcribed and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). 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.

## **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. This was confirmed by another survey question which 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. The most influential family members tended to be a parent or caregiver.

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, 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**

'Identity' was the first of three key themes that emerged from this research. 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, encompassing self awareness, self confidence, self belief, and a sense of belonging. 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 fulfillment. 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!"

Giftedness also had negative impacts on some participants' sense of wellbeing 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 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...

Another young person summed up the pressures associated with high expectations and the impact of these on his feelings of self worth. He stated: “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.”

While socioeconomic adversity presented definite disadvantages for participants, most of these disadvantages were external or tangible limitations rather than impacts on their personal wellbeing. 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 aspects such as humiliation, frustration, and a feeling of not belonging were cited 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.

## **Drive**

Interestingly, three quarters of participants in this study revealed that socioeconomic adversity had impacted positively on their sense of identity and this linked with ‘Drive’, a second dominant theme that emerged from the research. When asked to describe how financial constraints had contributed to the development of their talents, 50% of participants indicated that financial constraints had resulted in them developing a personal desire and determination to change their circumstances. These young people 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 young woman 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." 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 of their socioeconomic circumstances also.

## **Opportunities**

The final theme that emerged from this research was 'Opportunities'. Most participants believed that being gifted increased the quantity and quality of opportunities they received, and that these opportunities increased their level of talent. As one participant aptly pointed out, "I have had so many opportunities because I am bright and confident. Or perhaps I'm like this because of the opportunities." What was notable about many of the participants' stories was that it was not only their giftedness that afforded these young people opportunities to develop; participants also spoke extensively about opportunities they had had as a result of their low socioeconomic circumstances. When participants were asked to describe how they felt financial constraints had positively contributed to the development of their talents, all but two of the respondents outlined how their low socioeconomic circumstances had resulted in specific opportunities.

Supportive relationships stood out as being a significant source of opportunity in both the home and school contexts. When survey participants were asked who it was they felt had been the most influential in the development of their talents, 82% of respondents nominated a family member and their comments referred predominantly to their primary caregivers:

My mother is a significant support person in my life. My father passed away when I had just turned 4 and so she became a fulltime single parent. She raised my elder sister and I to believe that we could achieve whatever we wanted to in life and was always supportive. I don't ever remember her stating that whatever we chose to pursue would be a foolish idea or unrealistic achievement. She has always believed in me and my decisions.

Even those who had tense relationships with their parents acknowledged that they had been supportive in different ways, for example having high expectations of their children and providing structured home environments.

Individual teachers who had provided participants with opportunities to develop were fondly identified by name by several of the young people in this study. Participants were asked to

indicate what aspects of their schooling had contributed to their talent development and just over half of the respondents to this question signalled that this was supportive and encouraging teachers. High school teachers in particular had spent many hours of their own time helping participants to meet their full potential by extending them in various ways, spending time preparing them for extracurricular exams, and continuing supportive relationships once students had left school. Some teachers went so far as to fund or subsidise sports fees for promising athletes. Interestingly, responses to another question that asked participants to identify aspects of their education that had limited their talent development revealed that teachers who were discouraging or did not cater effectively for them were considered to be one of the most limiting factors. Other key opportunities that were significant for participants included the age at which their high abilities were recognised, eligibility for funding and scholarships, and extension or developmental opportunities.

It became increasingly evident through interactions with participants that they were largely opportunistic and that their successes could also be attributed to the ability to seek out, recognise, and make the most of opportunities that came their way. When asked what had helped develop his gifts or talents, one survey participant responded: “Being able to identify when someone is trying to help you and not being too proud to accept that help.” Another young woman stated that she had a “tendency to rely on myself to make things happen. I don’t want to sit and wait for the world to approach me. It’s not very often that fate falls out of the sky and lands on your lap.”

Throughout the participants’ accounts one opportunity that stood out as being most significant was the opportunity to share their gifts and talents with others. When participants were asked to identify the best thing about being gifted, over a third of the young people who responded to this survey question, along with six of the eight interview participants, felt that having the ability to share their gifts was a major benefit. Participants typically highlighted this as an opportunity that stemmed from their high abilities but was strengthened through their personal circumstances and several commented that their life experiences had strengthened their resolve to be role models for others.

## **Discussion**

Preliminary findings indicate that socioeconomic adversity contributed significantly to adaptive outcomes for the gifted young people in this study, and that some aspects of their giftedness had a detrimental effect on their identity and wellbeing. 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, 2010). Although participants did outline some of the negative impacts of socioeconomic adversity, most of these young people indicated that the outcome of their socioeconomic circumstances in combination with their high abilities had led to a strong sense of identity, the desire to change their personal circumstances, and the aspiration to share their gifts and talents with others.

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. 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 appeared to impact more on the participants' sense of identity than the limitations of socioeconomic adversity. The weight of expectations and 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.

One of the young people in this study aptly reflected 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*.”

## **Conclusion**

### **Nita’s story**

At the time of her interview, Nita was embarking on studying for a law degree at university. She describes the incident with the local gang as a turning point in her life and, following this incident, Nita made the conscious decision to change. At school, she had one particularly supportive teacher who she said “*really* pushed me when other teachers gave up on me.” Despite her struggle to convince her peers and teachers of her determination to change, Nita shifted from being a troubled teen to a leader and role model who achieved to high levels in her academic work. Nita’s high school principal mentioned that he had been impressed with the resiliency she had shown by overcoming adversity and developing a strong sense of

purpose and determination. In her final years of high school she had won awards for her abilities in public speaking and drama and her school principal described her as a “confident speaker” with “natural intelligence” and someone who was “looked up to with respect.” Nita’s academic achievements include being the top student in several of her classes at secondary school and she outlined that her particularly strong leadership abilities had allowed her to become a positive role model for many of her peers:

...you say my name round the school and people know who I am...it’s not a cocky sort of reputation but people know that she’s gone through hardship and *she* knows what it’s like to struggle...so if she can do it, *I* can do it.

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