

香港資優教育學苑  
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## RESEARCH BRIEF

### Positive Life Experiences of Gifted Youth in Hong Kong

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**Background.** Through exploring positive life experiences of gifted high school graduates in US, Peterson, Canady and Duncan (2012) suggests that “investment in academic work and extracurricular and community activities, with positive life experiences and a sense of accomplishment, can promote health and well-being (p.94).” Given the concept of intelligence is culture-bound and often dependent on the living environment (Sternberg, 2007), positive life experience among gifted youth in Hong Kong can differ dramatically from those of gifted youth in US. Inspired by Peterson et al. (2012), this study aims to explore the positive life experiences and sources of support of our gifted youth in Hong Kong.

**Method.** Participants were 60 Secondary Six student members of the Academy in one or multiple domains. The positive life experiences of participants were explored with three open-ended questions in a bilingual, online survey. The questions are equivalent to the ones used in Peterson et al. (2012). They are:

1. What have been your most positive, satisfying personal experiences during your school years?
2. What was (or has been) the impact of these experiences on you personally?
3. Who or what helped you to be successful and/or satisfied?

Data were analysed with content analysis, in which the author read all the data to obtain a first impression, then identified patterns, formulated categories, and themes emerged from the data. Frequencies were noted. Findings were cross-checked with Research Manager to reach consensus.

**Results.** Positive life experience identified by gifted youth in Hong Kong emerges from various aspects of school life, many of which are non-academic in nature (see Table 1 for detailed tabulation). The three most frequently mentioned categories, namely “academic work”, “extracurricular activities”, and “teachers and peers”, are further described below.

Table 1. Types of positive life experiences

Type	Frequency (by no. of individual)
Academic work	18
Extracurricular activities	18
Teachers and peers	17
Service	8
Balance between achievements	3
Daily events	2

**Academic work.** The element of recognition of academic talent is involved when academic work is the considered the most positive life experience by the gifted youth. Such recognition comes from sense of accomplishment, intellectual fulfillment, and opportunities for further developing talent:

- I can get no. 1 [in exam] almost every time. I can have more confidence.
- Whenever I learn a new concept that I thought was really scary before, I feel great pleasure and ecstasy, especially when I learnt eigenvalues and eigenvectors today. I was happy.
- Because I got the 1<sup>st</sup> in English in [my] form, I got school sponsorship and attended an exchange programme free-of-charge. It's my first time going abroad. It's been eye-opening and I'm determined to go [to] more places when I grow up.

**Extracurricular activities.** Further related to recognition and accomplishment, some gifted youth achieve in areas other than academics, including participating in non-academic competitions, and holding positions in student societies/ organisations/ associations in school:

- I was the head prefect in my school, in which I learnt many things like leadership skills. It enhanced many aspects of my abilities, such as leadership, and sense of responsibilities.
- Joining the Odyssey of Mind competition. It allowed me to apply what I learnt in every area of lives.

**Teachers and peers.** “Teachers and peers” is most commonly expressed in terms of offering a “safety net” to gifted youth. With a warm and safe environment, gifted youth are able to “aim high and achieve my goals and dreams”, and become “more motivated in studies”.

Those who regarded teachers’ assistance as their most positive life experience, made comments such as:

- Teachers are welcoming, they are willing to answer some questions, which are out of syllabus, so to fulfill my curiosity on science. This enriches my science knowledge and encourages me to have more in-depth discovery.

To these gifted youth, teachers’ responsiveness and respect to their learning is valued. Teachers are also their resource bank to equip gifted youth subject-content knowledge that necessitates exploring further in their interested domain.

**Source of support.** Many gifted youth mentioned teachers (mentioned by 37 students) as the source of support in helping them be successful and/or satisfied, followed by friends and peers (26 students), parents (22 students), self (5 students), sibling (1 student), and God (1 student).

**Discussion.** The present work adds to our understanding of positive life experiences of gifted youth in Hong Kong. In particular, their attention to non-academic aspects of school life is an awaking call to educators, that academic excellence is not everything to gifted youth in Hong Kong. It also reminds us the need to provide adequate opportunities for gifted youth to connect with other peers and the wider community.

The importance of the supportive role of teachers was highlighted in our data. There is evidence from the data that teachers are not merely a knowledge hub for disseminating advanced subject knowledge to gifted youth. They are also the mentors in supporting the growth of gifted youth through providing appropriate guidance and timely support. Both their supporting attitude and subject knowledge count. On the other hand, concerted effort among different sources of support is recommended, given that gifted youth points to different sources of support in helping them succeed or be satisfied.

Finally, the findings inform a connection between positive life experiences with innate psychological needs proposed in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the three innate psychological needs that are essential for our optimal functioning and well-being. In this study, the positive life experiences identified by gifted youth fulfill some of the innate psychological needs. Mastery of their learning signals a sense of autonomy. Academic and non-academic accomplishments are markers of competence. Support from teachers and peers demonstrates fulfillment of need for relatedness.

However, such connection is not warranted without further research. While we took the advantage of convenience to collect data through an online survey, the data are not rich enough for us to understand the context of their experiences in detail. To triangulate our findings, further research should make use of in-depth interviews to gain deeper understanding of students' experiences about positive events. Extrapolation to participants of different demographics, such as gifted students with learning disabilities, or those who underachieve in school, will also be helpful.

## References

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October 2013

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