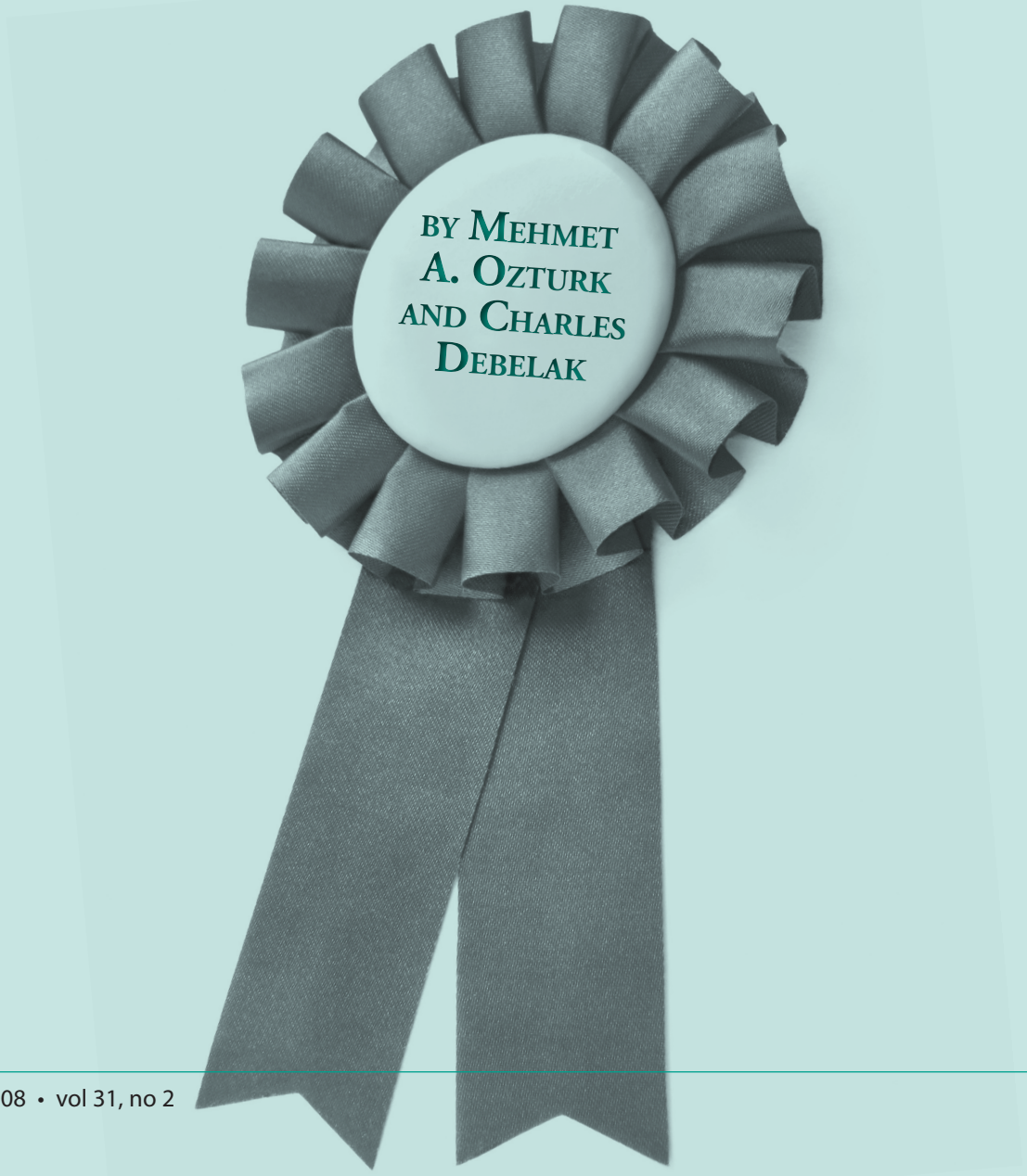
Affective Benefits *From* Academic Competitions

for Middle School Gifted Students



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Academic competitions have long been an aspect of programming for the gifted. Based on our experience with a variety of these contests for the middle grades, we believe that they can provide middle school gifted students with excellent opportunities to develop in many different ways.

These competitions can facilitate a learning environment that presents gifted students the academic challenge that often is difficult to create in a single classroom or school. They can offer the types of experiences that foster the development of productive attitudes and work habits. They also can nurture emotional and psychological growth. Some of these benefits can be defined within the framework of differentiation and would need a separate article to explain. However, academic competitions also hold potential for a number of affective benefits that cannot be subsumed under differentiation. In this article, drawing upon our experience and related research, we will elaborate on these affective outcomes: motivation, a healthy self-concept, coping with subjectivity, dealing with a competitive world, and interacting with supportive role models.

Academic Competitions as Motivators

There is no doubt that academic competitions can serve as strong motivators for students by providing an incentive to study and work hard so they can be ready to compete at a certain level. On the other hand, they can be criticized as extrinsic motivators that could undermine intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation—originating from outside the person—versus intrinsic motivation—originating from within the person—has its own voluminous controversial literature (Cameron, 2001; Deci, Ryan, & Koestner, 2001; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005).

Are academic competitions merely extrinsic motivators? We believe that depending on the nature of the competition, the duration of the preparation for the final event, and the age/maturity of the participants, academic competitions can be a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation at varying rates. It can be argued that a competition that involves only one gathering of students and requires very little or no preparation will serve almost only as extrinsic motivation. However, it is difficult to say that a competition that demands continuous and rigorous work throughout a 5-month preparation period only offers extrinsic motivation.

As an example, one can look at students' preparation for MathCounts (a national middle-grades mathematics competition requiring strong problem-solving skills; http://www.mathcounts.org). To do well at the regional or state level, students must begin preparation early in the school year. Although it would seem that their efforts would be driven by the competition that takes place sometime in February or March, they often express their excitement at the challenge of a complex problem much earlier in the preparation period. They cannot hide their delight when they find the answer to a difficult question or learn a new problem-solving strategy. The same thing occurs during student preparation for National History Day (a national history competition for grades 6–12 where students are expected to research, analyze, and synthesize historical material; http://www.nationalhistoryday.org). Recently, after a 4-month research process, a student studying the Cuban Missile Crisis came galloping into the school one morning and darted toward his history teacher. The student explained that the previous night, he had obtained an interview with Sergei Khrushchev, son of Nikita Khrushchev, who was the Soviet leader with a central role in the crisis.

We have identified three ways in which academic competitions can function as useful extrinsic motivators. First, these contests should not serve only as extrinsic motivators, but they should also facilitate the development of intrinsic motivation. In general, intrinsic motivation alone is not enough to push children through the drudgery and frustrations that precede success (Damon, 1995). Use of extrinsic motivators is unavoidable up to a certain level of maturity. The ideal progress is the gradual reduction in children's dependence on extrinsic motivation. Only relying on intrinsic motivation for children who have not reached that level of maturity would risk their achievement. On the other hand, children should learn to develop and trigger intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Lepper's (1983) minimal sufficiency principle suggests the use of just enough extrinsic motivation to activate intrinsic motivation. In this sense, children need experi-

ences that would facilitate this transition. Academic competitions, with the ultimate objective of having students develop sufficient intrinsic motivation, can help children experience a smooth transition and acquire the work habits for sustained accomplishment. Adams and Pasch (1987) wrote that when students were immersed in National History Day work—collecting, organizing, and analyzing data—and when they were given positive feedback on their work, their enthusiasm soared. The competitive aspect provides the initial motivation that can be a catalyst for students to discover the enjoyment and excitement of being deeply involved in history. It could be said that academic competitions can help develop "internalized motivation—those originally external motives that have over time become incorporated into one's personal goal or value systems" (Lepper et al., 2005, p. 193).

Second, abundant meaningful, positive feedback should be provided throughout the competitive process. Extrinsic motivation enhances interest and involvement, particularly when students are given positive, informative feedback on their work. Quality of feedback largely determines the degree to which extrinsic motivation successfully stimulates intrinsic motivation; no feedback on student work undermines interest and task commitment (Butler & Nisan, 1986). Our experience of training students to participate in Power of the Pen (a middle-grades writing competition in the state of Ohio; http://www.powerofthepen.org) is a good example of how quality feedback can cultivate intrinsic motivation. Before the district competition sometime in February, we require our students to write 12–15 compositions (approximately 500 words each), focusing on the competition's rubric: adherence to the prompt; creativity; a tight, logical structure or storyline; thoughtful word choice and word pictures; and other important literary criteria. We begin in September, and like any group of middle school students, they are reluctant if not resistant. We are careful, however, to make great use of their first composition. We give thoughtful, careful, and positive feedback, highlighting strengths in their first piece and encouraging them toward their next effort. During this little feedback session, students cannot hide their delight and pride when we acknowledge their emerging writing skills. As we follow this same procedure for the next three or four compositions, student resistance gradually gives way to enthusiasm. They discover their own voice and style. They take pride in their word choice or use of a meaningful metaphor. By the sixth or seventh composition, sometime in December, many students brim with enthusiasm, asking what the next prompt will be, or asking if they could read their piece to the class. Some students cannot wait for the class time; they want to tell us about some clever ending they devised for the current writing prompt. We have participated in Power of the Pen for more than 15 years using the same teaching procedure. We continue to be amazed at how children's motivation toward writing can be nurtured. When children receive positive, meaningful feedback, little by little, they internalize their successful writing experience and find themselves motivated toward the next opportunity to display their writing talent.

Third, rewards in academic competitions should be directly relevant to the nature of work. This nourishes continued interest and motivation in the student. It also helps students make the connection in their minds and get motivated to pursue long-term achievement in similar activities or fields. What can be a greater reward for students than to have their work appreciated by professionals or professional institutions in the field of study? For example, many of our writers have seen their work published in journals or magazines. Local history museums, military history museums, libraries, or public historical sites have recognized the quality of student National History Day projects, papers, or documentaries, and requested that they be donated for permanent display. Furthermore, local governments have solved some of their city problems using our students' proposals in Future Problem Solving (an international competition involving teams of students in finding solutions to contemporary issues; http://www.fpsp.org).

Academic Competitions to Nurture a Healthy Self-Concept

Children's emotional health, much like that of adults, is related to the development of their innate potential. The process in which children strive to realize their intellectual or talent potential is an important part of gathering self-confidence and self-awareness (Rogers, 1959). Damon (1995) noted that there is a drive for competence in children. While trying to achieve competence, children constantly engage in self-evaluations and draw conclusions about their abilities. Self-esteem and self-respect are, in part, the result of accomplishments. Children, like adults, learn to live rich lives when they continually hold internal conversations about who they are, what they want to achieve, where they are successful, and where they are falling short. In this way, they form and affirm their identity (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001).

Therefore, children need the kinds of challenges and accomplishments that expect, demand, and nurture their best effort. Through these experiences, they assess what they can and cannot do. A healthy and honest view of self evolves.

The above thought processes are likely to take place in academic competitions. When gifted learners observe the superior work of other gifted children, they tend to draw healthy perspectives toward themselves and their competitors. They learn to respect the quality of work by other children and to accurately assess their own performance in light of the performance of their intellectual peers. They achieve an accurate assessment of where their level of performance stands in the world of their intellectual capacity and, in turn, develop a more wholesome self-concept (Damon, 1995).

We remember with amusement the time we took a group of highly gifted writers and their parents to Power of the Pen. In the context of our school, their work was unrivaled. They developed a bit of a superiority complex. However, at the competition, not one of them won an award. During the awards ceremony, as some of the winning entries were read to the audience, one of these writers with an IQ score of 160 leaned over to his mother sitting next to him and said, "Mommy, there are a lot of smart kids out there." Ah-h-h, lesson learned.

Certainly, there are potential dangers in failure and disappointment that can result from competition. But, even so, research shows that children can develop new strengths in the wake of an emotionally difficult experience, especially when they have access to a caring adult's support and guidance (Damon, 1995). Academic competitions can teach children how to succeed and also how to fail, that is, how to face their failure, learn from their failure, and, subsequently, grow as a person and improve in performance. Self-esteem is directly related to real-life experiences of success and failure. It cannot be handed out by groundless compliments and accolades. Every year, we are amazed at the attitude of our young historians after the local, state, or national level competition in National History Day. Students pour nearly 6 months of work into their research and product, and a loss at any level is devastating. One would think that, after a loss, no child would wish to go through the difficulties of this contest again. Yet, without fail, even as our school van exits the parking lot of the contest site, the students who were just crying and consoling one another because they did not win a place in the competition are the same students who are talking about what they will do better next year. It is a testament to the resilience of youth, as well as their proclivity toward challenge, that stimulates the sense of productivity and growth.

Academic Competitions to Teach How to Cope With Subjectivity

Occasions of perceived unfairness in judging can be good opportunities for teaching valuable lessons to students. Although judging is highly objective in some contests, it can be subjective in others. For example, the answer is either right or wrong in Math Olympiads (an international team-based mathematics competition for elementary and middle school students; http://www.moems.org). There is no room for argument; therefore, fairness is not an issue. But, in competitions like National History Day, there is room for subjectivity. Therefore, students can perceive judging as unfair, even if the judges have taken great pains to be as objective as possible. This situation can lend itself as a teaching tool for a wise coach. After all, actual or perceived unfairness is a part of life. Students can be helped to realize that subjectivity will be an inevitable part of many decisions they will have to face, and that it will not always be "on their side."

Students also can develop another form of resilience in the face of actual or perceived unfairness. They can learn to assess the outcome calmly, trying not to favor themselves. They can be asked to get others' honest opinions on the outcome to have a more objective evaluation. If the students realize that the judging was, in fact, fair, they should be directed to make use of the feedback by the judges or to figure out the aspects in which they can improve themselves or their work for the next time around. If the judging is found to be unfair even after others' careful and more objective evaluations, then students should be encouraged and helped to go after their rights and pursue a course of redress according to competition guidelines. Whether they admit it or not, students, in most cases, will have strong feelings in the face of actual or perceived unfairness. These strong feelings of being or seeing themselves as "victims" of unfairness are an excellent opportunity to enhance students' appreciation for justice. In the hands of a wise coach, this firsthand experience accompanied by strong feelings about a matter of extreme importance to the students can turn into a timeless lesson for the value of justice.

Academic Competitions as Places for "Soft Competition"

No one would deny that competition is an inevitable and integral part of life in the United States. It exists

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at every level of education and every stage of adult life. At times, competition can be harmful. Researchers list a number of negative side effects of extreme competitiveness, including excessive anxiety and stress (Davis & Rimm, 2004). But, it also can inspire outstanding achievement and productivity, and can earn the competitor desirable attributes such as resilience (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Certainly, competition will continue to exist in the foreseeable future. Our job, then, is to educate our children to function successfully in this real world, maximizing the benefits of competition and minimizing its harm. If we just thrust our children into a competitive world without preparation, we do them a disservice. On their own, they may not muster the emotional and psychological wherewithal to be resilient in defeat and humble in victory. Nor may they master the skills to cope with the psychological challenges in competition, such as anxiety and pressure. Therefore, the educator should introduce students to competition while carefully overseeing their psychological and emotional experience. This is what we would call "soft competition." Soft competition does not mean easy competition. Rather, it describes a process in which the child is encouraged to engage in the competition with its entire rigor, yet this engagement is under the supervision of a caring adult who guides the child through emotional and psychological challenges. This adult—be it a teacher, coach, or parent—continually gauges the child's stress level and always keeps the pressure manageable. Sometimes, this adult may inspire the perseverance and inner resolve necessary to overcome difficulties along the way. But he or she also should know when the pressure is becoming overwhelming for the child and should encourage the child to "pull back." Such a controlled, cushioned transition would ease the introduction of children to competition that is likely to become harsher as they grow up. We believe that academic competitions can be supportive settings to provide this opportunity to gifted students.

Academic Competitions for Role Modeling

In many academic competitions, students have the opportunity to get to know "real-world" scholars and scientists, some of whom are at the top of their career ladders. Even though schools try to introduce their students to various vocations during events such as Career Day, it is very difficult to arrange face-to-face interaction between students and professionals like scientists at research centers or anthropologists doing field work. Yet, in academic competitions, these people frequently serve as judges or even as mentors. Such role modeling is especially important for two groups of students. First are students from areas where the variety of jobs is limited, such as rural areas with agriculture or mining as almost the only source of income. Second are students who would aspire for a career in a profession in which there is underrepresentation of the student's race or gender, such as females or minorities in science (Meriweather & Karnes, 1986; Porta, 2002). Even for those students who have no shortage of role models, being appreciated for their work by "real" experts means a lot more than being appreciated by their teachers or parents only. For example, when Future Problem Solving participants studied the depletion of ocean species, a marine biologist lectured the group and complimented the children on their knowledge of the subject and the sophistication of their questions. When these same students studied healthcare access, they interacted with a nationally renowned research doctor who expressed his delight in the extent of students' interest in and knowledge of the subject matter.

Importance of Adult Supervision and Support

Academic competitions should not simply be relegated to a day or an event. They should not be used to show off raw talent and ability, exalting one child over another, or rewarding one school against another. These competitions should be an academically and psychologically enriching process. Any awards or recognition ceremony should represent a culminating activity. Most of the cognitive and affective benefits should have been reaped even before the awards ceremony begins. Yet, these benefits may not be realized unless the student is under the careful supervision of a caring adult. This adult—be it a coach, teacher, or parent—cannot merely take the position of an instructor who tells the child about an academic competition, provides the materials for preparation, and expects, some-

how miraculously, that the child will be prepared to compete. Nor should any teacher simply select the best students and plug them into the contest on the day of competition. There is almost no value to the students under such circumstances. Instead, if this adult wants children to gain the greatest benefit from the competition, he or she must become a companion to the students along the way. Students should be able to see this adult as their source of motivation and inspiration, as well as the one to rely on at times of difficulty during the competitive process. In essence, the supervising adult is the linchpin connecting the beneficial features of academic competitions and the children's experience.

Conclusion

Because most parents, teachers, and students have enough time to participate in a limited number of academic competitions, they should try to get the most out of this unique experience. In this respect, it is important to get involved in competitions that would maximally benefit our gifted students. It is equally important to turn every stage of the participation into an opportunity for students to learn and develop. While it would be unrealistic to expect any academic competition to satisfactorily provide all of the benefits mentioned, we believe that parents, teachers, and administrators of middle school gifted students could use the present article to select academic competitions for their students and to translate the entire process of participation into a rich experience of learning and development. It should be noted that the benefits from academic competitions also are conceivable for students who are not gifted. Therefore, we do not contend that only gifted students should participate in academic competitions.

This article also can be used to revisit and possibly revise the nature and format of the existing competitions in light of the desirable features explained. We should clarify that the examples given in this article focus on a limited number of competitions, and by no means imply that these are the best competitions or that they are the only ones we would recommend. Our intent to relate firsthand experiences has led us to include only those in which we have participated for a long time. We refer the reader to the book by Karnes and Riley (2005) for an extensive listing of competitions in almost any talent area, providing detailed information on each of them.

Finally, we would like to see more academic competitions with as many desirable features as possible at the local, state, and national level. Although these competitions should not be seen as a substitute for proper academic programming such as acceleration and enrichment, they can be great settings for gifted students to flourish. Organizing such competitions would cost much less money than many other events sponsored by educational administrations, organizations, and institutions at various levels. As a nation heavily relying on inventions, discoveries, and breakthroughs, we should not lose even the smallest opportunity to tap into and develop our pool of genius. GCT

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