

Affective benefits from academic competitions for middle school gifted students: 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 ways.

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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 experiences 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](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.