The Life-worlds of Elite Young Athletes: A Lens on their School/Sport Balancing Act

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Abstract

This article takes steps toward illuminating, from an ecological perspective and social network theory stance, the life-worlds of elite young athletes in New Zealand secondary schools. Recent qualitative research about the lives of four elite female sportswomen foregrounds this article which seeks to inform and to enlighten New Zealand educators and government policy makers about the needs and issues surrounding exceptional athletes. These athletes are present but not always visible in Physical Education lessons and co-curricular sport in New Zealand schools. This article aims to shed light on the micro, meso and macro worlds of exceptional young athletes, and the influences, interactions, interrelations and interdependencies that affect their everyday lives. The educator’s role in support of these exceptional young athletes has been investigated with recommendations made for future improvements. The challenge now is to initiate further discourse and to reflect on current policies and practices so that the notion of providing comprehensive and enduring provision (Ministry of Education, 2000) for gifted and talented students, within a Physical Education and sporting context, is recognised and acted upon.

Introduction

Life as an elite young athlete is challenging on many levels. Balancing the expectations, requirements, pressures, and demands of national and international sporting competition with comparable expectations, requirements, pressures and demands in the classroom, is the ‘lived’ reality of talented athletes in secondary schools in New Zealand. The domain of international gymnastic apparatus or a single scull on the Waitemata Harbour during early morning trainings is a world apart from the English literature lesson or science experiment less than an hour later. On the surface the transition from gym shoes to gym slip appears to be made seamlessly and with minimal effort. However, on further investigation the life experiences of exceptional young performers in New Zealand secondary schools may reveal the real cost of sporting success at such a tender age.

In this paper my intention is to highlight the influences, interactions, interrelationships and interdependencies of elite young athletes’ everyday lives, and to draw evidence and supporting data from a recent study at the University of Auckland, The Identification of and Provision for Talented Female Athletes in New Zealand Secondary Schools (Godber, 2011). The research, using a collective case study approach and an interpretivist inquiry paradigm, investigated how elite performers are identified (process) and what provisions (policies and procedures) are in place to cater for their needs (as identified by the athletes, their parents and their educators), within the bounds of their secondary school. Emergent rather than pre-specified qualitative research methods were employed in this study, with the generation of common themes from a thematic approach.
Data collected, from the participants’ semi-structured interviews and cue card responses, employed a narrative strategy (co-constructed between the researcher and the participant), and was analysed using the Miles and Huberman’s (1994) framework of qualitative data analysis. The focus of the research was to gain insights and to develop an understanding of what Barab and Roth (2006) describe as the ‘life-worlds’ of talented female athletes in New Zealand secondary schools.

An exploration of the term gifted in the context of physical abilities and sports performance can provide a basis for understanding why some students are identified as talented while others may be overlooked. Once identified, how are these exceptional athletes catered for within an educational setting? According to Ellis, Riley and Gordon (2003), in their study on talented female athletes, the recognition of giftedness within a physical abilities context would require a “marriage” between Physical Education and Gifted and Talented Education. Ellis et al. viewed this as a contentious partnership due to the “imbalance” in the recognition given to athletic versus academic excellence within the education system and society at large. In Moltzen’s view (1996, p.52), gifted behaviour is displayed across a wide range of activities with the observable physical characteristics of excellent body control, excellent eye-hand coordination, ability to manipulate objects with ease, ability to learn new physical movements with ease, and a strong sense of rhythm, with the demonstration of these through the interaction of above-average ability, task commitment and creativity.

Other contemporary theories which have influenced New Zealand educators in the area of physically gifted include Gardner (1983) and Gagne (2000). Gardner describes the ability to use the body in performing certain tasks as bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence. On the other hand Gagne differentiates between giftedness as aptitude and talent as achievement, with the fruition of motor/perceptual abilities in to athletic talent. Gagne also claimed that intrapersonal catalysts such as motivation, personality, and health, or environmental catalysts such as ones surroundings, significant people, activities, and events can affect the transition from giftedness to talent, where talent is linked to excellence and outstanding performance. The identification of and provision for talented athletes in our schools is a challenging and important issue. Practitioners, educationalists, ministerial working parties and policy makers all have a role to play in meeting the needs of these exceptional young athletes.

To further clarify the concept of giftedness, Renzulli and Reis (1986) claimed that gifted and talented children, “……are those possessing or capable of developing a composite of traits (above-average intelligence, a high level of task commitment, a high level of creativity), and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance” (p.28). They concluded that the important implication for educationalists was that such children “……require a wide variety of educational opportunities and services that are not ordinarily provided through regular instructional programmes” (p.28). In a bid to “provide comprehensive and enduring provision for gifted and talented students,” the Ministry of Education Handbook for Schools (2000) provides guidelines for identification; classroom provision; evaluation; and review of approaches for gifted and talented students in New Zealand. This policy document addresses ‘gifted and talented’ as a multi-category concept which is also influenced by multicultural perspectives such as beliefs, values, attitudes and customs. Physical abilities are stated as one of the range of special abilities that relate to the concept of gifted and talented (Ministry of Education, 2007).
So, what pressures and expectations do physically talented athletes encounter as they live their double life? What impact does this dual role have on their family and friends, on their personal health and well being, and on their academic pathway and future career? What effect and influence can their school have on the balancing act that they juggle daily, and what factors within their socio-cultural environment help to tip the balance towards ongoing success and achievement? Do their personal aspirations and goals drive their dedication, or are they bound in what Barab and Roth (2006) describe as an ‘affordance network’ in which each athlete’s ‘life-world’ results from the specific combination of properties in their everyday environment, and the match the environment has with each athlete’s individual reciprocal skills? Can each athlete balance the expectations, pressures, requirements and demands of their school life-world with the equivalent expectations, pressures, requirements and demands of their sporting environment?

To answer these important questions and to gain insights about how elite young athletes achieve success in their sport whilst still at school, the concepts of complexity thinking and social network theory will be explored against the back-drop of an ecological perspective. These theoretical underpinnings aim to shed light on exceptional achievement within a sporting context through the “interdependence of individuals and their environments” (Barab & Roth, 2006), that is through their social connectivity. A thorough and thoughtful argument will be put forward regarding the need to understand better the ‘life-worlds’ of elite young athletes, with emerging justifications as to why educational procedures and policies should match the athlete’s unique and individual circumstances and needs.

As researchers focused on the influences, interactions, interrelationships and interdependencies of elite young athletes, can we capture and convey, in a holistic and comprehensive manner, the full picture of what it means for these secondary school students to balance their school/sport life-worlds? What shape is our lens, and how distorted or true is our view? A snapshot of one elite young athlete’s typical day, through a micro lens, may shed some light on our cognizance. Tania is a Year 13 student at a large co-educational secondary school in Auckland. Her school has a reputation for excellence in sport, in particular, water sports. Last year Tania won the girls’ single scull at the Mardi Cup, the pinnacle of secondary school rowing in New Zealand. This year Tania is no longer training with her school squad because her goal is to be selected to row for New Zealand at the next Olympics.

**Tania’s typical day**

4:30am: My alarm goes off. I roll out of bed, throw my training gear on, grab my sports bag (packed the night before), and tip toe to the kitchen. I used to wake my older sister Meg but she’s not training anymore, so now I go on my own.

4:45am: My pre-training energy shake and nutella on toast go down well (without using the blender, too noisy). Jandals on and I’m out the door.

5:00am: I usually don’t remember much about the thirty minute drive to the Waitemata each morning, but I do remember what mum says, “Don’t forget to drive carefully T, because you’re still half asleep!”

5:30am: Go, go, go! I need to find the energy, help to get the gear out, get my focus. I go through the checklist in my head – check programme, memorise sets, hat, shades, hand guards, stretch my back. I’m ready to launch, check the conditions – cool, light southerly, pretty flat. Coach fires his final comments and off I go. I try to breathe through the aches, focus my mind and remind myself why I’m doing this – Olympic glory, one day!

7:00am: I feel whacked, it was a hard one today with a lot of sprint work and when coach is right there in the inflatable there’s no easing up. Phew, I’m glad to land the scull and be able to stretch my back again. A quick chat to my rowing mates as we carry the boats to the shed, and then I’m in the car and heading home. I’m desperate for a drink so slug down my water bottle and munch through a banana and a snack bar. That feels better.

7:45am: Mum’s up. I head for the shower, put on my school uniform, shove my homework in to my school bag and curse. I should have finished my Bio assignment. Maybe I can get another extension, but this weekend is full on too, so when can I get it done……? Need to eat.

8:30am: Mum has packed my lunch. I insist on a note so we have the same conversation again – “They [your school] know what you’re doing, they know how far you have to go everyday, why can’t they be flexible on what time you get to school in the mornings?” “Mum, I get sent to the Dean if I’m late without a note. Just do it, please!”

8:45am: Tutor time and time to catch up with my school mates, but I’m still thinking about today’s training and whether I’ve done enough to place in the regatta this weekend. Party? No sorry, not this weekend, I have a big one coming up, need to impress the NZ selectors. What subject have I got next? Oh no, not Bio.

12:30pm: I hate this bit even though I know it’s what I need. I have a catch-up tutorial for English Lit. today. I struggle in most of my academic classes because of my mild dyslexia and the tutorials help but I really need to do more at home, and somehow there doesn’t seem to be enough time. The best part of my day is Elite Sports Academy lessons. I have been a mentor to the Y9 girls who are thinking about choosing PE as an option next year, and I love it when we go out to a community gym or have a guest speaker in. I have learnt a lot more about what I need to eat to support my training and how important my mental focus is if I want to go all the way, to the top. The Director of the Sports Institute talks to me on my own once a term to check how my studies are going and he always suggests ways for me to manage my time better. The truth is that I find school quite hard and all I really want to do is row, actually not just to row, but to row for New Zealand at the Olympics.

3:30pm: Yeah, another day over and time to get ready for my land-based training.

4:00pm: Homework. Can I be bothered? I don’t feel like it. I’ll do it after I’ve had a little rest and another snack.

5:00pm: “Bye Mum, I have a 40 minute run and then I’m on the erg at the gym until 6.30pm. I’ll be home about 7pm. What’s for tea tonight, I’m starving.”

7:15pm: I burst in demanding food, throw down my gear bag and then stomp off to the shower. The training was tough and I feel exhausted. In the kitchen mum frowns and sighs because she worries about the amount of training I have committed to, and the effect it has on my physical, mental and social health. Sometimes mum worries so much that she suggests that I should have a day off, or just rest instead of going to training. When she asks me to miss a training I just say, Don’t even say that mum, don’t even go there because I have to keep going and I am happy to keep going and I’m okay, so don’t say anything negative at all……Do not do that, because at this level the other rowers in it are just as determined

because otherwise they wouldn’t be there because it’s the next level up and it’s hard and they would not be there unless they had a real drive (semi-structured interview).

8:00pm: I feel pretty good now that I have eaten and have a chance to catch up with my parents and sister, because it feels as though I haven’t spoken to them at all today. But a nagging thought keeps coming in to my head as we are talking, so I finish the conversation and say, “I’d better get some homework done.” I take a deep breath and head to my room.

9:30pm: Phew! Time to pack my sports bag and to set my alarm.

Tania trains six days a week. She has not had a family holiday out of Auckland since she started rowing in Year 9.

Tania’s school/sport balancing act, while individual and unique, is also indicative of similar experiences expounded by the three other athletes in the Auckland study (Godber, 2011). International gymnast Sophia confirmed that she trained for six hours six days per week but still managed to achieve above average grades because she had a network of friends who provided lesson notes for her. New Zealand basketball representative Mary, however, struggled to commit to her gruelling training regime because she wanted more personal time for socializing, but still achieved age group selection each year. Trans Tasman netballer Emily had endured multiple injuries and had sacrificed co-curricular and leadership opportunities to focus on achieving her netball goals, but her ongoing health issues and numerous absences from school had had a detrimental effect on her academic achievement.

All four female participants had displayed exceptional physical prowess and attainment in their chosen sport. Their success in their respective sporting arenas was due not only to the prevalence of personal attributes (natural ability, drive and mental toughness, goal expectations, competitiveness, dedication, enjoyment of physical activity, resilience and determination, team work), but also to the influence of key people within and outside of the athlete’s social networks. Appropriate opportunities and support from the athletes’ school and sporting environments were also significant factors in accelerating each athlete to a high performance level.

An ecological perspective

The reliance of individuals on their environments and of environments on their individual members forms the basis of an ecological perspective. Barab and Roth’s (2006) definition, “recognition of the interdependence of individuals and their environments where the belief that individuals are firmly seated within a context that co-determines their perspectives and understandings” is helpful because it emphasizes the connections, interrelations and interactions between the athlete and her various life-worlds – school, sport, family, and friends. The participants in this study exhibited an advanced ability to access what Barab and Roth term ‘affordances networks’ or “functionally bound potentials extended in time that can be acted upon to realize particular goals.” Participants who could access extended possibilities for action, such as receiving mentoring, having an association with a coach who could facilitate player selections, gaining entry to national and international levels of competition, or making the decision to play competitively at a club level
while still at school, were observed as actions which assisted the athlete to achieve and progress at an unprecedented rate within their specific sport.

The environment within which the affordance networks operated was also significant. As part of an ecosystem within the context of education and sport, each participant, working in her mutually compatible environment was able to assemble specific combinations of properties to allow for the dynamic actualization of a possibility for action (Shaw & Turvey, 1981). Barab and Roth (2006) supported the view that the realization of goals could only be achieved when there was a match between the individual’s reciprocal skills (effectivity set) and the specific combination of properties of an environment that can be acted on (life-world). In the context of this study the four elite female athletes had a range of conducive properties (personal attributes, key people, appropriate opportunities and support) from which to actualize their goals but a successful outcome could not be guaranteed unless according to Gibson (1986), “the environment includes qualitative regions of functional significance (affordances) that are visible to the individual with reciprocal skills effectivities), and whether the individual has the intention to act.” It was clear that the four elite athletes had different ‘life-worlds’ and ‘affordances’ within their individual environments, however their ability to recognize a match between their effectivity set and their affordances, and the desire and drive to act upon this reciprocity was common to the participants in this study.

**Affordance networks**

Functionally defined, an effectivity set constitutes the behaviours that an individual can produce so as to realize and even generate affordance networks (Barab & Roth, 2006)). Therefore, the behaviour each athlete chose to exhibit could have an enabling or disabling effect on her desired outcomes. Extended possibilities for action and the recognition of reciprocal effectivities, could generate new networks and affordances, often with key people and in conducive situations, so that the athlete was able to attain her set goal, for example, of achieving New Zealand selection. The following quote illustrates how cognizant Tania, the 16 year old national rower, was of the importance of her ‘affordance networks’, when she stated:

> Surround yourself with the right people I think, and choosing your friends wisely and people you associate with ..... not being around so much or reliant on your friends who might say, “come on, just miss one training,” you know. (semi-structured interview)

Tania also recognized the value of her training environment and the impact interactions and interrelations with her fellow rowers and coaches could have on the realization of her short and long term goals. She explained this awareness succinctly when she said, “Training with people of similar ability I find it’s always good to push myself, to push off and have a competitive environment going. It also makes it fun as well because a lot of the time they become your friends, and it motivates you to train” (cue card response).

The influence of particular networks on each athlete’s ‘life-world’ raises the question as to which interactions are crucial, which are helpful, which are detrimental, and which are inconsequential?
The athletes in this study were all aged 16 or 17 years. They had all experienced competitive sport at a national or international level, and had actively chosen to continue to pursue excellence in the sport of their choice. Their pathway to success was individual and unique but along the way, key decisions and choices were made which affected the actualization of their dreams. A combination of factors which included the influence of parents, siblings, extended family, educators, coaches and others who may have had a direct or indirect connection with the athlete, may all be significant in understanding the ‘life-worlds’ of an elite performer in sport.

The balancing act

The balancing act is an intricate blend. On one hand each athlete had an unprecedented focus on attaining her childhood dream of Commonwealth or Olympic glory, and on the other hand she and her parents understood implicitly the need for her to achieve academic success as well. The parent of New Zealand age group basketball rep Mary encapsulated this point when he said:

Mary has actually got to be striving for excellence and merits in her NCEAs because that will help her options of colleges in the States..... they want top performing athletes but they have a choice of those, so if you are a top performing athlete and a scholar..... so she has to stay in the national programme every year for her age group and keep her grades going strongly (cue card response).

The time, commitment and effort required by each athlete to produce exceptional performances in both worlds begs the question as to whether outstanding achievements in sport and in academia are possible for adolescent girls, within the current structure and organization of New Zealand educational and sporting environments. There is little doubt that the role of the school and its educational policies and procedures are of direct relevance in this study. The talented female athletes were students at a secondary school and were at a critical point in their education, striving to achieve nationally, and in some cases internationally recognized academic qualifications.

Within their educational life-worlds the Auckland athletes experienced a range of issues. These were comprehensively described by the educator interviewees as; time management, meeting deadlines for homework and assignments, the impact of sporting events and training on schoolwork and homework, extended absences to attend overseas events, subject choice due to conflicts between assessments and sporting competitions/camps, fatigue, mental stress due to expectations imposed by self and others, injury and it’s impact on practical assessments (NCEA PE), lack of recognition, competing in an adult world, and dealing with disappointments and failure. However, the level of provision available to assist the athletes to maintain a ‘balanced’ life varied enormously, both within and between each school in the study. Support for the athletes ranged from no documented or defined policies or procedures in one large girls’ secondary school to a three tier system with clear parameters for ongoing inclusion and extension at a comparable co-educational school in the study. In between these two extremes, provision included academies in specific codes, IT and online assistance with forward planning, tutorials, assignment extensions, video conferencing, and peer mentoring. However the lack of consistent and robust identification

measures, and subsequent appropriate provision, was startling. So whose responsibility is it to meet the individual and unique educational needs of elite young athletes? I propose that in the first place it is their individual school’s responsibility but to assist educators in this role clear directives and requirements at a ministerial level would ensure that all identified gifted and talented athletes receive provision that is “comprehensive and enduring” (MOE handbook for Schools, 2000).

**Educational policy and support providers**

The refracted school provision evident in the Auckland study was a concern to the researcher because in 2003, the Ministry of Education commissioned an investigation of the ‘identification and provisions for gifted and talented students in New Zealand schools’ (MOE, 2003). This research resulted in a change to the National Administrative Guidelines NAG I (iii):

> From term 1 2005, all state and state-integrated schools must be able to show how they are meeting the needs of their gifted and talented learners. This new requirement matches the obligations already in place for schools to meet the needs of students who are not achieving, who are at risk of not achieving, and who have special needs.

While the new NAG could be interpreted as pertaining only to ‘academic’ subjects, the focus and intent of the guideline is clear, and must be implemented in all schools, for all students. Do talented young athletes have special needs, are they at risk of not achieving, and are their needs recognized and being met by their schools?

The answer is yes in some cases, and definitely no in others, as indicated by the Auckland study on ‘the identification of and provision for talented female athletes in New Zealand secondary schools.’ From the athlete’s perspective, her need and desire to continue to strive for national and international accolades far outweighed any of the obstacles and barriers which were part of her everyday life. Tania shed light on this aspect of her mental approach when she commented, “I put myself because you have to make the decision to do it and to commit. No-one else can help you with that and if you don’t, if you mentally don’t push yourself no-one else can do it for you, and no matter what anyone else says if you haven’t made the decision, ‘Yes I am going to do this. Yes, I am going to do this well’, then everything else is irrelevant” (cue card response).

The athletes’ parents on the other hand, often struggled with the role they played in their daughter’s affordance network. Challenges, such as managing appropriate nutrition for training and competition, meeting the costs of high level sport, coping with the emotional and physical health of their daughter, and dealing with the very real possibility of her not achieving her dream, were clearly documented by the parent of each young athlete. Parental support featured as the most influential factor in each athlete’s success, both in her sporting world and in her academic studies. Each parent invested an extreme level of time, money and organization to support their daughter’s dream of sporting excellence while still at school. Providing key people and opportunities plus resolving issues and problems were identified by the parent group as critical in
their daughter’s success. Sophia’s mum reported that she drove 700Km per week for a period of five and a half years, and that Wednesday was the worst day of the week because she usually clocked up five hours of driving to and from gymnastics, and to and from school. This level of support and dedication produced a reflection of equal commitment and sacrifice from the ingratiated athlete. To magnify our view and to gain further insights about the influences, interactions, interrelationships and interdependencies of the life-worlds of elite young athletes, we will change to a meso lens and consider the impact of social network theory and Granovetter’s (1973) interpersonal ties.

Social network theory

Defined as a social structure made up of individuals (or organizations) which are tied together (connected) by one or more specific types of interdependency, ‘social networks’ exist as a result of friendships, common interest, or through a relationship of beliefs, knowledge or prestige. Whatever the connection, whether it be parent/daughter, coach/athlete, educator/student, athlete/athlete, etc., social network analysis refers to nodes and ties, where nodes represent individuals or organizations, and ties represent edges, links or connections between nodes (Scott, 2000). Consequently, a diagrammatic representation of an individual’s social network is very complex, and the various types of ties between nodes can play a critical role in determining the way problems are solved, how organizations (such as schools or clubs) are run, and the degree to which individuals succeed in achieving their goals. The nodes to which an individual is connected are the social contacts of that individual. The network can also be used to measure social capital – the value that an individual gains from their social network (Bourdieu, 1986).

In the current study, the shape of the social network for each athlete helped to determine how useful the network as to the individual. Smaller, tighter networks are regarded as being less useful than networks with lots of loose connections (called ‘weak ties’), and more open networks with many weak ties and social connections were more likely to produce new ideas and opportunities than closed networks with redundant ties. The participants in this study had connections to a range of other social worlds (club competitions, regional and national training camps and tournaments, international travel, elite international events) and therefore had a number of useful weak ties in their social networks. They also had excellent support from their immediate families (strong tie) and to some degree a mixture of strong and weak ties with their schools. From Tania’s perspective, her decision to change from her school rowing squad (strong tie) to a club training environment (weak tie) had proved to be very useful. “My current coach JS is really beneficial and supportive in making the step from school to club rowing……because it’s going to be critical to get my first season at club right if I want to be recognized, otherwise competition is much harder and it’s going to be more difficult to get recognized by the selectors” (semi-structured interview).

Interpersonal ties

Strong and weak ties can also be termed ‘interpersonal ties’ and are defined as information carrying connections between people (Granovetter, 1973). Granovetter’s interpersonal ties
generally come in three varieties; strong, weak or absent, their strength being determined by a linear combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (or mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services of the connection. Weak interpersonal ties, Granovetter argued, are responsible for the majority of the embeddedness and structure of social networks in society, as well as for the transmission of information through networks. Granovetter proposed that individuals with only a few weak ties in their social network were at a disadvantage compared to individuals with multiple weak ties, because the scarcity of weak interpersonal links disconnected them from other parts of the network.

The pathway to success for the talented athletes in this study was dependent in part on key people and opportunities at various points in their sporting careers and educational circumstances. The impact of parents, siblings, extended family, sports coaches, teachers, Year level deans, Sport coordinators and peers was identified as significant for all participants. These strong interpersonal ties afforded the athlete easy access to complex information over an extended period of time. Strong interpersonal ties also provided a sense of continuity and security which assisted the athletes' overall health and well being. Weak ties however, which were instrumental in facilitating fast progress and new opportunities, were also important for each athlete’s attainment within her chosen sport and educational setting. An example of Granovetter’s ‘strength of a weak tie’ was evident when Tania, our rowing athlete, won a National title. Although previously unknown to New Zealand selectors she was suddenly on their ‘list’ and was also approached by a local club who offered her top level coaching. The decision to change to a community-based rowing club was based on a weak interpersonal tie (not previously affiliated to this club) but proved to be highly advantageous for the athlete’s long term success.

Interpersonal ties, as an underlying concept, may have a significant influence on an athlete’s ability to recognize and to access the affordance networks present in his/her educational and sporting life-worlds. The challenge for educationalists is to ascertain whether the interpersonal ties that currently exist and those which are yet to be created, are conducive to maximizing academic and sporting attainment for physically gifted students. Finally, with our macro lens in place, the concept of complexity thinking may engender more diverse reflections and insights about the balancing act elite young athletes perform, who concurrently compete at national and international levels, whilst still attending a secondary school in New Zealand.

**Complexity thinking**

The identification procedures, educational provision and pastoral care afforded each elite athlete in the present study, would not, according to complexity thinking, generate the intended outcomes. Even when an issue which required change had been identified, for example extended absences from school, the impact on different individuals within the system varied greatly. Educators in all four schools provided a variety of innovative ways to address this educational concern including; audio conferencing, extra homework prior to the absence, student-teacher tutorials before or after the extended absence, setting schoolwork to complete while the athlete was away, and rescheduling assessments or assignment deadlines. One participant’s absences were not identified as significant, but the physical toll on her health from excessive training and playing were viewed as
major issues which impacted on her attendance at school. On the other hand, another participant conscientiously completed school work during flights and set up a network of friends to provide her with the notes she needed for each subject when she was away from school. Both participants had issues with extended absences from school but attention to the resources available varied from individual to individual, even though the systems the educators provided appeared to be robust.

Complexity thinking, in the context of this research study, has a core assumption of the importance of ontological depth, of levels that are linked within a system, and that the relationships in one level are not reducible in any simple manner to those in another level (Walby, 2003). As elite athletes, the participants had a certain ‘persona’. They were also a member of a ‘team’ or ‘club’ which was connected to and governed by a ‘sporting body.’ At each level the athletes were influenced by factors, often beyond their control, but nevertheless instrumental in producing certain outcomes. Within their school environments, each talented female athlete was a student, a member of a class, part of a year group, and a citizen in the larger organization of the school, as an educational institution.

The implication for the elite female performers in this research was that while each athlete was living within a highly individualized ‘micro’ environment (her sporting experience) she was also part of a ‘macro’ system, with its inherent school policies and procedures. Both ‘parts’ were also influenced and affected by external forces which facilitated the emergence of specific outcomes, whether these were initiated by the athlete (bottom up, Holland 1995) or from external decisions made by the sporting body or a government department (top down, Holland, 2000). For example, directives from the athlete’s sporting body re availability of funding, and the focus of talent ID and coaching expertise, could have a positive or negative impact on certain elite athletes. At the same time, the educational establishment the athlete attended could also be influenced and affected by political and economic decisions beyond their control. These micro-macro relations accentuate the simultaneous ‘existence’ of each level, with one level not necessarily more important than the other, but co-existing and being linked to each other interdependently (Walby, 2003). The level of attainment of the athlete’s in this study was therefore exceptional, given that each individual functioned within multiple systems which had, at any given time, the potential to unseat the actualization of their goals.

To conclude, the balancing act each athlete performed on a daily basis has been viewed through lenses of various theoretical perspectives. The resultant ‘picture’ represents a unique and individual life-world, which continues to evolve and emerge in response to a multitude of influences and factors. The researcher in this study gained a privileged view of each elite athlete’s educational and sporting worlds, including insights regarding a dual existence, the importance of each contributing environment from a socio-cultural perspective, the impact of social networks, the relationships within and between the athletes’ affordance networks, and the complexity of the micro and macro systems which made up each athlete’s life-world. This privileged view can be translated through recommendations for practitioners, and by further discourse and research in the area of elite young athletes, in New Zealand secondary schools.
Implications for Practice and Future Research

Recommendations:

- Each athlete’s school/sport balance needs to be tracked and monitored to ensure that their sporting commitments do not have an irreversible or detrimental effect on the student’s long term educational progress and prospects.
- Each athlete needs to be considered as individual and unique, with identification procedures and educational provision tailored to meet specific educational needs.
- Educators need to be aware of the additional pressures placed on elite performers who are not only coping with the demands of training and competing, regular national and international travel, and academic requirements, but are also dealing with being adolescent.
- Guidelines and policy documents for identifying and monitoring elite performers within an educational context, needed to be robust, appropriate and regularly reviewed to meet the needs of this small but diverse group.
- A register of gifted and talented athletes needs to be compiled by each educator with responsibility for elite performers in their school. This document needs to be visible and easily accessible by other staff and stakeholders.
- Academic expectations need to be realistic and agreed in collaboration with the athlete and his/her parents.
- Additional advice needs to be provided on time management, nutrition, interpersonal skills, and possible career pathways, for each young elite performer.
- A flexible, supportive approach is essential because the physical, mental, emotional and financial demands on each elite athlete are very real.
- Greater consistency regarding identification procedures and resultant provision is needed to ensure that every talented athlete in a New Zealand secondary school receives appropriate educational support and the resources that match their individual needs.
- The Ministry of Education commission a policy guideline to advise educators in New Zealand schools on how to identify and provide for gifted and talented students who excel in other fields apart from academia.

References


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