Reviewer's report

Title: Big Fish in a Big Pond for Medical Students; a multimethod study.

Version: 1 Date: 24 November 2010

Reviewer: Kit-Tai Hau

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Big Fish Small Pond effect is an important educational issue widely studied across different countries and setting. It is a particularly relevant issue in elite training when the effect suggests equally capable elite would have lower self-concept when being trained (educated) in a competitive setting with peers of higher average competence. In previous BFLPE studies with selective schools, Olympic games, gift-education programs, etc., the universality of the effect has been demonstrated. In this study, the use of both quantitative (questionnaire surveys) and qualitative (in-depth interviews) methods is appropriate and brings rich information on the issue.

Some discussion points for the authors' consideration:

In Study 1, the survey was conducted in Semester 1 and 2. Please provide more details. At which point of time did the first survey take place? Assuming the biggest drop in self-concept (due to BFLPE) happens at the very beginning after entering the program (when they see how competitive their peers are), then the baseline has to be as close as possible to the beginning of the school term.

Otherwise, it is a possible explanation that a significant drop of self-concept was not observed in the present study (because the biggest drop in self-concept has already taken place when you collect the first baseline).

Another possible limitation to be added to the discussion is the effect of the short duration of the intervention. As the time gap (Semester 1 to Semester 2) is short, if we assume there is a (small but) continuous drop in self-concept in the whole program, then the effect due to a few month immersion in a competitive program may not be strong enough to be observable.

Of course, the authors have provided other more important factors (small sample size, short term reflected glory at the beginning of the school year) that explain the non-significant effect.

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests