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## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS OF GIFTEDNESS

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# Insiders or Outsiders: The Role of Social Context in the Peer Relations of Gifted Students

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This phenomenological study explored the lifeworlds of 27 academically advanced elementary students in three very different schools that endeavored to meet their diverse needs. Schools that had established formal social and emotional structures were found to have student populations far more accepting of diversity. As a result, academically advanced students at these schools who participated in the study were able to form positive relationships with peers without resorting to maladaptive types of social coping strategies. The findings of this study illustrate that the social and emotional support and development provided for gifted students in school settings are likely to be as important as their academics.

Keywords: elementary school, gender, gifted, peer relations, phenomenological, social and emotional, social context, social coping strategies

In most school environments, gifted children spend several hours each day with teachers and a large group of mixed-ability students. Gifted children's academic and affective needs in the school environment have been found to be qualitatively different from the average child's, due to their atypical academic and affective characteristics (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Gross, 2000, 2004). These differences can impact the gifted child's peer relationships and learning in the school environment (Cross, 2001, 2004; Gross, 2001, 2002, 2004; Swiatek, 2001). Gifted children often perceive being different from peers negatively, as they believe it impacts their social relations in the school environment (Gross, 2002, 2004). As a result, they may engage in a variety of negative coping strategies in an effort to manage their gifted identity (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Swiatek, 2001, 2002). For example, in order to gain "insider" status they may choose to hide their ability in order to avoid "outsider" status.

Research has suggested that gifted students are prepared to use a variety of coping strategies in social contexts that

they believe are unaccepting of difference. Coleman and Cross's (2005) research proposed that social coping strategies range across a broad spectrum from maintaining a high-visibility position in the school environment—for example, taking the role of class clown—to purposefully distancing from the gifted label, such as by dropping out of school. Swiatek's (2001, 2002) findings were analogous to Coleman and Cross's research in that she also found that gifted students were prepared to put into effect various strategies in order to mask their difference from peers, ranging from the use of humor to denial of giftedness.

Gender expectations have been shown to impact the type of coping strategy selected by the gifted child. For example, gifted boys have been found to hide their academic abilities purposely and demonstrate instead their athletic prowess as a form of image management (Hébert, 2001, 2004; Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Gender research demonstrates that athletic rather than academic capability is a major contributor to boys' social success because it is generally perceived by peers to be part of the masculine identity (Kerr & Foley Nicpon, 2003; Swain, 2005).

Unfortunately, the type of social context created in many traditional school environments has not often been reported in the research as conducive to acceptance of

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difference (Coleman, 2005; Cross, 2004). Gifted children, with their atypical academic development, therefore, have often emerged in the research as being at a distinct disadvantage in this type of school environment (Gross, 2004).

Several gifted-education researchers have theorized that schools that provide advanced courses and group academically advanced students together for instruction offer gifted students learning environments in which their differences are accepted and abilities developed (Coleman, 2005; Neihart, 2007). The gifted child in this type of setting does not have to suffer stigmatization due to the labeling process and therefore has no need to employ negative coping strategies. Indeed, several researchers, as well as educators in the field, have suggested that the affective outcomes of these types of school settings may be a more powerful argument for gifted programming than their well-known cognitive results (Coleman, 2005; Cross, 2004; McHugh, 2006).

Coleman's (2001, 2005) ethnographic and phenomenological research at a residential high school and Cross, Stewart, and Coleman's (2003) phenomenological study of an elementary magnet school provide good examples of schools with academic advanced programs that have created optimal social contexts for gifted students. Gifted students in both environments believed that their differences were accepted and that they were free to follow and respond to academic challenge without the fear of being teased by peers. One of the students in the residential high school used the metaphor of a rag quilt to describe how student differences were positively acknowledged and joined together to form the school's unique social system (Coleman, 2001, 2005).

Cross et al. (2003) found that gifted elementary students attending a magnet school also perceived that they were more accepted in the specialized school environment. Some of the gifted students interviewed had experienced their gifted label as stigmatizing at past schools and believed that at the magnet school they were able to be themselves. An important finding of this study was that gifted children who had always attended the magnet school did not feel different from others, whereas students who had attended other schools had felt stigmatized and different.

Some researchers in the field, however, do not perceive the selective school as an optimum environment for the education of gifted students (Marsh, 2005; Marsh & Craven, 2005; Marsh & Hau, 2003, 2004). Much of the argument against this type of grouping option rests on the finding that, due to social comparison processes, gifted students' academic self-concepts (while still at the average level) have been found in many studies to dip when they are placed in the more competitive environment of the selective school (Goetz, Prekel, Zeidner, & Schleyer, 2008; Marsh & Hau, 2003). For example, Marsh and Hau's (2003) study of 100,000 high-school students in 26 countries found that gifted students involved in selective academic programs had lower academic self-concepts than those placed in regular

classrooms, known also as the *big-fish–little-pond effect*. These researchers therefore concluded that selective academic schools and programs are not a positive setting for all gifted students because they perceive positive academic self-concept to be correlated with successful academic achievement (Marsh, 2005; Marsh & Craven, 2006; Marsh & Hau, 2003). Several other researchers, however, have suggested that a slight drop in academic self-concept was not necessarily a negative ramification of the specialized educational environment but rather could be viewed as positively preparing gifted students for the competitive academic programs they might seek entrance to in the future (Greenspon, 2002; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Rogers, 2002, 2007).

A review of the literature found that studies that have negatively appraised the need for selective schools have generally concentrated on one affective outcome; that is, academic self-concept. These studies also were generally carried out quantitatively at the high-school level. It is hoped that this research can increase educators' understanding of the types of social contexts that specialized schools create. Knowing more about these school environments and their affective outcomes is important for an understanding of what schools with advanced programming provide. This includes the types of social contexts that they create as well as the potential link between the affective outcomes they produce and the learning process.

## METHOD

Phenomenology was the chosen method for this investigation because the intent was to describe the lifeworlds of academically advanced students placed in schools that actively catered to their advanced intellectual needs. The understanding of the *lifeworld*, or meaning of everyday experiences to individuals, is an important characteristic of the phenomenological approach. The phenomenological method of setting aside one's preconceived opinion, known as *bracketing*, allowed the participants' attitudes and thoughts about life in the specialized school to be presented from their perspective, without the researcher's preconceived ideas influencing the data.

### Research Questions

In this phenomenological study the lead researcher sought to investigate the lifeworlds of academically advanced students placed in schools that actively sought to cater to their atypical academic needs. The following questions were formed in an attempt to explore this phenomenon:

1. How do elementary-aged gifted students experience the social contexts of schools that actively cater to their advanced intellectual needs?

2. What differences exist in the ways in which gifted girls and boys experience the social context of schools that provide them with advanced classes?
3. What are the affective outcomes for this type of school environment and how do they relate to gifted children's experiences of being gifted in a school that actively caters to their academic needs?

## Participants

Twenty-seven elementary-aged gifted students placed in three schools' academically advanced programs participated in this study. All participants were randomly selected from their schools' advanced class lists. Nine girls and 9 boys were selected from each single-sex school and 5 girls and 4 boys were selected from a coeducational school. The students selected were in Grade 3 (aged between 8 and 9), Grade 4 (aged between 9 and 10), Grade 5 (aged 11 and 12), and Grade 6 (aged 12 and 13). Criteria for participation were willingness to take part in the study and involvement in the schools advanced program. There were no selected students who decided not to take part in this study.

## Settings

St. Agnes School is an established private school for girls with over 900 students. Both the elementary and high schools are set on a 2-hectare campus, which consists of well-maintained gardens and a sea view. Old and new buildings sit side by side, reflecting the school's long educational history in Australia, spanning 150 years. The school offers a wide range of facilities, such as tennis courts, a swimming pool, computer rooms, two libraries, and a recording, drama, and dance studio. St. Agnes's gifted program offered a school-wide flexible math program whereby students moved grades aligned to their ability level as new topics were introduced. Full grade acceleration, as well as an extended classroom curriculum were also important components of the school's gifted program. The extended curriculum allowed all students to take the high-level task option during class time.

Burkeston School, like St. Agnes, is a single-gender private school with a long educational history in Australia. Evidence of its 150-year history is found throughout the high-school campus, such as its memorial to students who died serving Australia in the First World War and its main school building that dates back to 1861. The school also has many modern-day facilities. Most of these facilities, however, are sports orientated, offering students rugby union, soccer, swimming, water polo, volleyball, basketball, athletics, cricket, cross country, rowing, and fencing. Burkeston School consists of three large campuses, made up of two elementary schools and a high school that is a few minutes walk from one of the elementary schools. It has the largest school population of the three schools involved in this study, with 1,500 boys attending the school. Its gifted program

consisted of a weekly pull-out program in both mathematics and English. The entrance criterion for these programs was an IQ in the highly gifted range.

Though Willowdale School is a private school, it differs from St. Agnes School and Burkeston School in that it is coeducational. It also has a much shorter educational history and smaller student population, with 700 students attending the school. The school has one campus that houses both the elementary and high schools. It does not have enough land to provide the sporting facilities that a school like Burkeston School provides. The school does have a basketball court, but students need to walk to a nearby park for all other sporting activities. There is, however, a theater on campus, a large library, and a computer room that serve both the elementary and high schools. The school has two programs not offered by the other two schools in this study, namely, a laptop program and self-contained classes that are available to students from Grade 5. It also offers a pull-out program for students who have not reached the Grade 5 level, as well as subject and whole-grade acceleration.

## Procedures

Data were collected following the phenomenological tradition of individual in-depth interviews. All participants and their parents signed consent forms before the interview process. Interviews were tape recorded and carried out in the individual schools. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Field notes were also collected through observations both on the playground and in the participants' individual classrooms. The interviewer was careful to bracket her own prejudices and assumptions during the interview process to ensure that the participants' perceptions took precedence. Bracketing is a phenomenological tool whereby the researcher purposefully sets aside any preconceived knowledge or everyday beliefs that he or she thinks might be used to explain the phenomena being investigated. This allows the researcher to listen and record the participant's description of an experience in an open and naïve manner.

Finally, a follow-up interview was conducted for the purpose of meaning clarification and member checking, whereby students were given the opportunity to comment and expand on the researcher's interpretations.

The following interview question was devised to guide the initial interview, "Can you describe for me what it is like to attend [name of school] from the minute you arrive until the time you leave?" Follow-up questions included: "Can you tell me more about that?" and "Can you recall another time that happened and describe it to me?" The interview was concluded with the participants being asked whether there was anything else they would like to add that they had not covered. Open-ended questions were deliberately formulated in order to allow the participants the freedom to express their individual perceptions.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a series of steps adapted from Moustakas's (1994) interpretation of phenomenological data. Interviews were transcribed and then read through several times, with key phrases being underlined. These statements, or horizons, were then listed separately and examined for overlap and repetitive statements, as well as those that did not correspond to the phenomenon being studied, all of which were deleted at this point. The remaining statements became the invariant constituents and were clustered into similar meaning units or themes. At this point, these statements were checked to ensure accuracy against the original transcript. Individual textural descriptions were then written, using the invariant constituents and themes for each participant. These descriptions described what the participants experienced from their viewpoints and contained verbatim examples from the transcripts. Composite textural descriptions were then written, which integrated all the individual themes into a group textural description.

The individual structural descriptions were then written for each participant and universal structures were used in an attempt to explain what each participant experienced. The individual structural descriptions were then written founded on the textural descriptions of each participant.

Common themes were then amalgamated to form composite descriptions for each school. The essential structures of the phenomenon described by the participants in the composite descriptions were then transformed into educational language, which was analyzed in order to address the research questions. Finally, the essences or the invariant structures of the experience were presented, which defined the common essences of the phenomenon studied.

## RESULTS

Three common themes emerged from analyzing the results of this study: peer relations, challenging instruction, and power. The theme of peer relations is the focus of this article and was the most potent theme that emerged from the experiences of the participants in this study. All participants sought acceptance from their peer groups, whether it was easily achieved or hard to gain. The different social contexts of the three schools in this study, however, impacted on whether they felt the need to resort to social coping strategies that hid their academic ability or not. The ways in which the three schools organized their gifted programs also seem to have impacted social relations, because it structured the amount of time that academically advanced students spent together. Additionally, school gender expectations played a key role in the participants' perceptions of what made a child popular or how they should behave on the playground. Finally, the emotional issue of stress was found to vary from school to school and was strongly related to the formation of formal social and emotional and support systems.

Though there were many differences among the three schools, generally all of the participants perceived that it was easy to make friends within their school's gifted or advanced programs. They discovered that they generally shared similarities that did not only relate to academic pursuits but included other interests not always perceived as "cool" by their same-aged peers. This led some of the participants to feel that they were understood and accepted for the first time in their school lives by their class peers: "They are like me a lot, they like the same thing as me" (David, Grade 5, Willowdale School). The students also appreciated the time the advanced class gave them to work with peers who thought as they did and shared a passion for learning. The amount of time participants actually spent with like-ability peers seems to have impacted the participants' attitudes to school. Those who spent the least time together had the most negative perceptions, and those who spent the most time together expressed the most positive perceptions of their school day.

I think, like, my other friends they don't have the same level of enjoyment of learning as me, but the people in the OC<sup>1</sup> they do, so it is better in subjects. I have people that understand me in subjects because sometimes when I say things with a high vocabulary to my other friends they just go "What?" (Julie, Grade 5, Willowdale School)

Despite Willowdale School participants placed in the full-time ability classroom having the most favorable attitudes to their school day, they also reported that they did not spend enough time with their mixed-ability peers:

The negative would be we don't do everything with the other classes . . . we're just by ourselves, but they mix with other classes and we don't mix as much with the other classes in school work as much as they do. (Josh, Grade 5, Willowdale school)

Though the male participants at Willowdale School generally missed interaction with peers in the mixed-ability classes, the female participants felt strongly about being separated from friends that they had known, in many cases, since kindergarten: "I was a bit upset about being away from friends, like we've all been here from grade K. It's just like we've grown up together and they're all together still" (Julie, Grade 5, Willowdale School). The participants in Grades 5 and 6 would have only recently been separated from peers in the mixed-ability classroom, because full-time ability grouping commenced at Willowdale School in Grade 5.

Though the majority of the Willowdale School participants wished for more time with peers in the mixed-ability class, most participants at the other schools desired a more advanced academic program than they were offered in their mixed-ability classrooms. Willowdale School had



endeavoured to address the issue of peer separation by organizing students in the mixed-ability and gifted classes to spend time together in less academic subjects such as physical education, art, and drama lessons. Participants, however, perceived that the school's method of division of students for these classes was flawed, because it arranged students alphabetically, which meant that long-standing friendships with less gifted classmates were often ignored.

In sports and music we share with one class and another class. And then in drama we're split between classes by our last names. The only thing is I'm not with my friends in drama and that's one of the main things that I don't like about the OC class, I don't like being so separate. Like, the learning is much better, so that is a really good part of it. But the school experience is kind of social skills as well as learning how to do things much better. (Anna, Grade 6, Willowdale School)

It seems that all schools in this study, despite their diverse accommodations for their academically advanced student population, found it difficult to achieve a balance that satisfied their gifted students' needs to spend time with like-ability and mixed-ability peers.

Despite many of the Willowdale School participants' perceptions that they did not spend enough time with their mixed-ability classmates during their school day, they described their peer interactions both on the playground and in the classroom more positively than students in the other two schools. They described the social context of the gifted self-contained classroom as being supportive and caring, with peers working easily together in a team-like manner. Willowdale School participants generally perceived that this community-like atmosphere extended onto the school playground when engaging with their mixed-ability peers:

We're just all one big community; it's really good because we all know each other. Most people, they just sit down with a friend and then everybody starts sitting around them. (Ella, Grade 5, Willowdale School)

Indeed, playground behavior at Willowdale School was described in very different terms than at the other schools. For example, playground groups and games were seen as being open and accepting of peers, no matter what their age, interest, or gender. Participants at Burkeston School and St. Anges's school, on the other hand, perceived that group structure on their playgrounds tended to be hierarchical in nature, with a dominant peer group presiding over the playground:

It would be easy to get into the nice, but unpopular, group and it would be medium to get into the crazy hyper, but it would be quite hard to get into the popular, but mean, because they are popular but mean. (Alex, Grade 5, St. Anges School)

The various playground groups were seen by several of these participants as having set entrance criteria and were given specific labels by participants. Though similar interests generally denoted the types of peer groups that students selected at both of these schools, the Burkeston School participants described group selection in a far more arbitrary manner. They perceived that it was not always individually decided, because "non-sporty" boys were not invited to join the basketball, soccer, or cricket groups. Rather, they were expected to play handball, and only the athletic boys had the freedom to move from group to group:

If you are good at sports you are usually friends with the sporty guys. If you are not that good you usually play with the handball people; they are the people who are quite smart, they study a lot, but they are really good at handball, all of them. (James, Grade 6, Burkeston School)

Lack of athletic ability on the playground was generally perceived by the Burkeston School participants to be equated with high academic ability. It was therefore perceived by interviewees that academic ability should be hidden until classmates had been assured of a boy's athletic ability. Shane, in Grade 5, aptly described this process when he related what had happened to a newcomer who had not had the opportunity to follow this advice:

Jason was left out of lots of things, because he was the smartest kid in the school . . . because he came in when the testing was on and he would get really high marks and that's when they would tag him as a nerd. Because he didn't really get much time to make friends with them before the testings were on. And yeah, no one really liked him, they thought he was a nerd and that stuff. They always kept being mean to him and they would never let him play games. (Shane, Grade 5, Burkeston School)

This finding correlates with past research that demonstrated the need for gifted males to demonstrate their athletic abilities or risk peer rejection (Hérbert, 2001, 2004; Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Of the three schools, peers at Burkeston School generally were described as holding the most negative attitudes toward gifted students. It seems that the traditional masculine culture that was ensconced at that school allowed for only one type of male identity to be accepted by boys at this school. It is interesting to note that half of the participants interviewed at Burkeston School were confined to the handball group, with Kane only being accepted by the other groups when peers became aware that he played cricket at the state level. The nonacceptance of boys with other types of masculine identities may have provoked competitive behavior on the playground, because boys tried to outdo peers in cementing their social status. Participants described how the competitive nature of these sports games sometimes led peers to resort to aggressive behavior in order to win a game:

“Everyone wants to win at sport and it is just really, really competitive outside” (Billy, Grade 6, Burkeston School).

Though the male participants at Willowdale School also perceived that their social relations centered largely on sport, they, unlike their counterparts at Burkeston School, perceived that their playground sports games were generally nonaggressive and open to nonathletic boys, as well as to female peers. Ella, a newcomer to the school, described this phenomenon as follows: “My old school, the boys and girls they didn’t really interact, but here the girls play soccer and the boys play handball and we interact heaps. Here it’s just all open” (Ella, Grade 5, Willowdale School).

This perception was echoed by the majority of participants new to Willowdale School, who believed that they no longer had to measure up to “hard criteria” to get into a group because no one group at Willowdale School was perceived as “cooler” or more powerful than another. On the other hand, their counterparts at St. Anges School, despite the perception that the majority of playground groups were generally open and friendly at their school, perceived that there was a group of girls who tried to dominate the choices of their peers. This group was labeled the popular group by many of the participants but did not appear to be well liked and was generally described in negative terms:

There’s fake popular groups who think they’re really popular but they’re actually really mean . . . they wear their hair really cool, and they’re a bit of dare-devils, like they swear a lot and they just do things that will be beneficial for themselves. Like, they’re just a bit nasty. (Anna, Grade 6, St. Anges School)

Though this group of girls seems to have tried to influence the extracurricular and fashion choices of their peers, none of the participants described them as having any influence over academic choices or performance. Indeed, participants at St. Anges and Willowdale Schools perceived that their school cultures were very accepting of diverse levels of academic ability and, unlike the Burkeston School participants, neither group believed that they had to hide their academic ability in order to be accepted by their classmates. St. Anges School participants believed that girls who attended advanced classes were not teased but instead were supportive of each other when anyone was promoted up or dropped down a group: “The girls are very good about that, they are sad when someone leaves their level. There is never any teasing or anything like that” (Sasha, Grade 6, St. Anges School).

These participants also perceived that, as they were tested each term for places in their school’s advanced programs, class makeup continually changed, so that no one group could be identified by peers as the clever group. The Willowdale School participants, on the other hand, perceived that though they were identified as being in the smart class by peers, they were generally not teased, because the school

promoted diversity in its school population. For Willowdale and St. Anges School the celebration of high academic achievement may have smoothed the social path for gifted learners. Achievements in the creative arts, outside sport, and academic competitions were equally valued. Participants at both of these schools did not believe that teasing or bullying was commonly experienced on their playgrounds. They believed this was generally due to classroom teachers incorporating the learning of effective peer-relation strategies into their teaching schedules. For example, friendship-making strategies were modeled by class teachers at Willowdale School:

They tell them, if you let people into the game like every day you’d eventually make friends with them or if you don’t like that person on the bus and you sit next to them you might just make friends with them by talking to them. It makes a very big difference—I’ve seen, like, there are some boys that used to be really, really rough and now they barely hurt a flea. (Sam, Grade 4, Willowdale School)

The teaching of these types of social strategies also seems to have impacted the experience of peer isolation on the St. Anges and Willowdale school playgrounds, with both groups of participants perceiving that it was rare for any child to sit alone during recess:

If someone is sitting by themselves we will just come up and say, “Hey do you want to sit with us?” So it is actually really good in this school, the way that happens, and if someone is sitting by themselves that generally means that they don’t want to sit with anybody else. It is not because they can’t. (Sasha, Grade 6, St. Anges School)

Isolation of peers was described, however, as a common occurrence on the Burkeston School playground, with boys who were new to the school or unathletic being left out of playground games:

When I first came to the school I much preferred my old school, because I didn’t know anyone and I couldn’t really join in any games . . . sometimes when I was walking around when I was new I was too afraid to ask, I was too afraid that they would have said, “No just go away,” . . . they let me join in a bit more, because sometimes if you’re good at something they let you play, I think I’m now settled and I can play in the playground and I am not lonely just walking around. (Kane, Grade 5 Burkeston School)

Even boys who had been at the school for several grades and had been accepted athletically were not sure of group inclusion, because “too many people” were judged “not good for the game” and would be told to “go away” (Billy, Grade 6, Burkeston School). This meant that boys rushed outside at recess to playground spots demarked for particular games

in the hope that the athletically talented boys chosen as team captains would select them:

We can't have too many people, because if you have too much people it will be too long to get them out. And then the people who do get out early get annoyed, because they have to wait long because we usually get three games in. (David, Grade 6, Burkeston School)

Acceptance of newcomers and openness among the grade levels on the playground appeared to be influenced by staff decisions and school social programs. For example, participants at Willowdale School and St. Anges School described how they were coached to make newcomers feel welcome. In addition, Willowdale School helped students to become familiar with their new school environment by inviting them to spend a day at the school before the commencement of the new school grade: "If you are coming into the school, they give you a day before, when you get to walk around the school and get greeted by people" (Josh, Grade 6 Willowdale School).

Participants at both St. Anges and Willowdale schools also described how they were encouraged by school staff to interact with the children in other grades through specific programs, such as cultural activities at Willowdale School and the Friday Friend Day at St. Anges School. Participants at these two schools generally believed that these types of programs fostered a sense of school community amongst their peers. For example, they described how students recognized each other and would greet each other. Ella, a newcomer to the Grade 5 class at Willowdale School, described this phenomenon: "At this school we do a lot of things with other grades. This school's got a lot about teamwork, it's all like one big team" (Ella, Grade 5, Willowdale School). This, many participants believed, also led to a culture of care, because students felt a responsibility to each other if they noticed a peer had been left out of a game or seemed upset. The school vice principal perceived that the sense of community at Willowdale School had been created partially due to the school being a small school, with all students on one campus, with many students spending up to 13 or 14 years there. He also believed that the "communal feel" was valued by the leadership and teaching staff, who went out of their way to seek and encourage it. For example, students were taught to value "communal responsibility, social action and encouraged to volunteer for worthy causes" (Dr. Harry Ellison, Vice Principal, personal communication, Willowdale School, June 28, 2008).

The Burkeston School participants did not share this experience; they believed that peer independence and separation of peers by age was encouraged by both teachers and students. Boys would receive punishments rather than encouragement if they crossed playgrounds or played with equipment from other grades. Participants described how the push for individual independence, rather than community, was encouraged

not only on the playground but in the classroom, where students were encouraged to work individually and solve their own problems. Perhaps the comparatively larger size of Burkeston School contributed to this difference, but previous research has also supported the view that individualism and independence are more likely to be emphasized in all-boy educational settings (Luscombe & Riley, 2001).

The social and emotional outcomes at the three schools in this study differed greatly from each other, despite the fact that the staff at all three schools perceived that they were effectively catering to the needs of their gifted student populations. The types of coping resources and advanced extension programs provided by the school seem to have played a pivotal role in the types of social and emotional outcomes they created. Willowdale School directly provided for social connection and emotional support, leading students to perceive that they were part of a caring community of learners. Teachers at St. Anges School directly taught students to resolve social conflicts and modeled supportive behaviors for getting along and providing emotional support when needed. The girls in this school described themselves as well supported socially and emotionally. For Burkeston School participants there appeared to be no support provided and the somewhat anti-intellectual and pro-sport climate coupled with "every man for himself" seemed to be related to the gifted children interviewed not perceiving that they were in a safe or supportive climate.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the types of social contexts that these elementary schools created for their academically advanced student populations. Research in this area has been scarce, yet many educators in gifted education are aware of the powerful impact that some schools with special programs can make on the life-world of a gifted child (Coleman, 2001, 2005). That is not to say that all schools with specialized educational environments are able to provide optimal social contexts for their gifted students. Indeed, this study found that despite all schools providing advanced or gifted classes for their advanced learners, the types of social contexts they created were disparate.

The reason for the variety of social contexts may be twofold, because both the type of academic accommodation and establishment of a formal social emotional development program were found in this study to be powerful influences on the creation of social context in the school environment. The type of extension program, for example, was found to impact the participants' experiences of friendship, labeling, competition, high expectations from important others in the school environment, and grade orientation. The establishment of a formal social and emotional program, on the other hand, seems to have impacted the

participants' reactions to these stresses, as well as their acceptance by their mixed-ability peers on the school playground. This seems to have impacted the participants' needs to engage in social coping strategies; for example, whether they deemed it necessary or not to mask their ability from peers.

Participants at both St. Anges and Willowdale schools described school communities that worked purposefully to address the social and emotional needs of their students. In fact, many of the school initiatives put into place at the St. Anges and Willowdale schools have been shown generally to contribute to the creation of socially harmonious school environments (Weissberg, Resnik, Payton & O'Brien, 2003). The Burkeston School participants' perceptions of their school's social and emotional support system contrasted sharply with those described by the St. Anges and Willowdale participants. The perception that they were expected to face social and emotional difficulties on their own and had never learned effective social strategies for the playground suggested that the social context created at this school differed sharply from the other two schools. Being gifted at Burkeston School was seen as being socially stigmatizing by several of the participants at this school, and many of these participants disidentified from the label.

This finding resonates with previous research suggesting that gifted children in schools that are unaccepting of diversity are likely to hide their academic abilities (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Cross, 2004; Gross, 2001, 2002). The fact that these participants were elementary students and in some cases already "masking" their gifted identities (e.g., Burkeston School), however, differs from previous research that proposed that academically advanced learners under the age of 13 are usually respected by peers and therefore perceive no need to mask their abilities (Rimm, 2003).

The gender cultures of the three schools in this study were also likely to impact the male and female participants' perceptions of the social contexts of their schools. Participant gender roles were seen to be influenced by the school's adoption or rejection of traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The social contexts of the single-gender schools seemed to have reinforced certain traditional gender stereotypes more strongly than the coeducational school in this study. For example, though it was compulsory to play a musical instrument at St. Anges School, it was not compulsory to play a sport. This may have impacted playground behavior, because despite several visits to the school no ball game was ever observed on any of the school's playgrounds. It would be simplistic to perceive from these findings that all single-sex schools would have these results, because gender culture differed from school to school. Teachers at single-sex male schools that place a higher importance on athletic than academic accomplishment should, however, be aware of the culture created at their schools, because gender research has linked this type of school environment with the acceptance

of only one type of male identity (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Smith, 2007).

## CONCLUSIONS

The role of insider or outsider status for students in this study was found to be strongly influenced by the types of social, emotional, and academic support programs established at the schools. The phenomenological framework used in this study allowed the participants' perceptions to prevail and the researcher to gain an insider's perspective of the impact of social context on the lives of gifted students in the school environments.

It is the researchers' hope that by listening to the voices of these participants, educators will realize the important role social context plays in the talent development process. Not to do so ignores the voices and experiences of gifted children themselves and may impede their full development as individuals.

## NOTE

1. OC refers to *opportunity class*, also known as a self-contained gifted classroom.

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